



TOM HOGAN/Getty Images

RYAN GARCIA, right, jokes with mentor Oscar De La Hoya after a victory last March in Indio, Calif.

Garcia is ready for his close-up in boxing ring

‘There will be blood,’ up-and-coming fighter says ahead of Fonseca bout at Honda Center.

BY MANOUK AKOPYAN

Ryan Garcia made a promise for his fight Friday when he takes on Francisco Fonseca in the main event at the Honda Center.

“There will be blood,” said the 21-year-old touted boxing prospect from Victorville.

Garcia (19-0, 16 knockouts) won more than 200 amateur fights and national titles before turning pro but has heard people say his successful career outside of boxing will keep him from ever making it big in the ring.

Garcia, who has nearly 5 million Instagram followers, stars in his own scripted YouTube show, models for Abercrombie & Fitch’s ad campaign and fragrance, graces the pages of GQ Magazine and walks the runway for Tommy Hilffiger during New York Fashion Week.

He is adamant to prove he’s boxing’s newest breed, and the one who will be the quintessential star of the social and digital age.

“The hardest part is just hearing people saying that I won’t amount to crap, and that I’m going to be a bust. That I don’t have heart, or the chin [to fight],” said Garcia, steps away from the arena he’s been assigned to sell out. “I have to be patient, but I still have to grow, and get stronger and better.”

Before he walks into the big stage he was pleading for, Garcia is blocking out all of the noise by deleting the Instagram app off his phone. For a stretch last summer, Garcia was using social media to start verbal wars with Oscar De La Hoya, demanding his mentor properly promote his career as a main-event star — or to release him. Cooler heads, and a new contract extension, eventually prevailed.

“That situation was meant to be. It brought me, Oscar and Golden Boy even closer. It made us understand each other even more as a family,” Garcia said. “We have a good connection. I think Oscar sees himself in me a little bit. That’s why he goes hard for me now and is behind me 100%. After everything got cleared up, it’s been sunshine and rainbows.”

Garcia joined a group of world champions who included Canelo Alvarez, Jo-

seph Diaz and a since-released Andrew Cancio in taking shots at De La Hoya.

“We as promoters know what we’re doing,” De La Hoya said. “If a fighter wants to be treated like a business, then that’s exactly what I’m going to do. ... Right now is the perfect time for Ryan. His star is going to shine Friday night.”

De La Hoya said that Garcia is the most marketable prospect he’s ever signed and that his protegee’s skills are just as savvy.

“He has the charisma that we haven’t seen in a while. He’s very persistent, and I like that,” De La Hoya said. “He knows what he wants. He knows his market value. He knows what he’s capable of doing, and he’s chipping away. He’s almost there, and he’s knocking on the door. I think he can become world champion by the end of the year.”

Tasked with spoiling Garcia’s plans on a fight that will stream on DAZN is the 25-year-old Fonseca (25-2-2). The Nicaraguan’s two losses have come at the hands of titleholders Gervonta Davis and Tevin Farmer.

“I’m only going to fight top fighters now. I really have no fear,” Garcia said. “It’s sink or swim for me in 2020. Either I’m about it, or I’m not. I’m ready to test my skills with the best fighters. I want to fight Gervonta Davis.”

Garcia said he considers himself either being a main-event fighter, or a co-feature attraction to training partner and stablemate Alvarez from here on out. Garcia defeated Romero Duno in 98 seconds after months of pent-up frustration last November on Alvarez’s undercard.

“His maturity now is right where it should be, and he’s ready to face anybody,” De La Hoya said.

Garcia will attempt to cement his own main event status on the same grounds of which Alvarez won a world championship for the first time in 2011 at the age of 20.

He’s at the brink of officially breaking in through the door, hoping everything comes up roses.

“It’s starting to hit me. I didn’t really feel the magnitude of [Friday’s fight], but now I do. It’s exciting. I keep on reminding myself it’s just boxing,” Garcia said. “I don’t really want to look too much into it to feel the pressure. I’m going to give it a great performance. It’s annoying to wait, but now my time is here.”

DiBenedetto lands behind wheel of No. 21 race car

Out of a ride last August, he will debut with Wood Brothers in Daytona 500.

BY JOHN CHERWA

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — It’s difficult to imagine a week like Matt DiBenedetto had last August. On a Tuesday he was told he would not return as the driver on the NASCAR Cup Series for Leavine Family Racing.

He was a soon-to-be unemployed race-car driver.

Four days later, he had his best finish on the top racing circuit, finishing second at Bristol after leading most of the race. Race winner Denny Hamlin even apologized, saying: “I’m so sorry to Matt DiBenedetto. ... I hate it. I know it would mean a lot to that team.”

DiBenedetto was still a soon-to-be unemployed race-car driver.

But a relationship forged years ago, a retirement and a break of a lifetime have changed everything.

Less than month after being told he was no longer wanted, he was named to drive one of the most storied cars in NASCAR history, the Wood Brothers’ No. 21, a car franchise once driven by Cale Yarborough, David Pearson, Kyle Petty, Dale Jarrett and Bill Elliott, among others.

He makes his first start with his new team Sunday in the Daytona 500.

“The best way to describe it was through my wife, Taylor,” DiBenedetto said. “We were getting top 10s and top fives and then I find out that I was out of a ride. Then I almost won the race in Bristol and there was all the heartache involved with that. My wife was pretty much crying every day.”

“Fast-forward a couple weeks and Taylor is crying every day for the opposite reason, pure joy. That sort of sums up the roller coaster of



JARED C. TILTON/Getty Images

MATT DiBENEDETTO says his new team is “an opportunity beyond what I could have dreamed up.”

emotion this sport can put you through and doors opening when you don’t expect them. It’s an opportunity beyond what I could have dreamed up.”

DiBenedetto, 28, is one of the latest drivers trying to make his mark in a sport born in the South who happens to be from California. He was born in Grass Valley and used to race fellow NASCAR driver Kyle Larson at the dirt track in Chico. They join five-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson, who is retiring after this season, and Kevin Harvick, also a Cup Series champion.

But it was after DiBenedetto left Northern California and moved to the Charlotte, N.C., area to race Legends cars that he found some friends with the Wood family.

“He showed up in 2004 and my son was running Legends at the same time in

the same division,” said Len Wood, a second-generation co-owner who helps manage the team. “He was about 75 pounds and not as tall as he is now. My wife was running things because I was out racing. She was in charge of all the trailers and all the food and that’s what attracted Matt.”

DiBenedetto and the Wood family stayed in touch. Then 15 years later, Paul Menard announced he was retiring from full-time racing in the No. 21 and suggested that DiBenedetto was the right person for the car.

“It all kind of fit right in,” said Wood. “About that time the 95 [car team] told him they were moving on to a different driver. To top it off, he had a career make-or-break run at Bristol. It was the right thing for us to do.”

Wood Brothers Racing didn’t have to think very long about the move.

“He’s such a down to

earth guy,” Wood said. “What you see is what you get. There’s nothing fake about him. He’s done the right things to position himself in this sport. So far, hasn’t done anything wrong.”

If the history of the car isn’t enough, DiBenedetto’s first win on the circuit will be a milestone 100th win for the Wood Brothers.

“I would like to win No. 100 this week in the Daytona 500,” Wood said. “It’s one of the hardest races to win because there is so much pressure that goes with this race. ... We’ve been so close so many times. We’ve won five Daytona 500s. We’ve also had four seconds. Nobody remembers who finishes second. I’d like to get 100 this year. I’d like to get 104, but that’s not realistic.”

After Daytona, the NASCAR circuit moves to Las Vegas before landing in Fontana, for the Auto Club 400, the third race of the year.

“[Fontana] means a lot to me because I’ll have some family and stuff drive down to that race,” DiBenedetto said. “What sticks out to me is we only race there once a year. It’s crazy, because of the fan base there. They get so excited for us to come there one time a year. Maybe because I’m from the home state, but the support I get really sticks out.”

DiBenedetto has fans in a lot of places. He finished third in fan voting for the most popular driver behind Chase Elliott and Kyle Busch.

Busch has won 56 races and Elliott six. After five years and 176 races, DiBenedetto is still looking for his first win.

“That would be a legendary one for sure,” said DiBenedetto on the opportunity to win Wood Brothers’ 100th. “It’s neat to be in that position to have the opportunity to grab that. Hopefully that and many more. That’s the plan.”

The plan starts Sunday.

Logano and Byron win Daytona duels

Ford and Chevy dominate, taking a combined seven qualifying spots.

BY JOHN CHERWA

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — The Daytona 500 has an unusual system of determining its starting order. The first two spots in the field of 40 are determined by fastest laps on Sunday, the week before the race. The remainder of the field is determined by their finish in two 150-mile races on Thursday night.

It’s as much about allowing the drivers to learn more about their car before the first race of the year and in some cases a new pit crew. It’s also about the manufacturers teaming up to practice, helping each other out. And sometimes, all those angles play out at one time.

Joey Logano won the first duel in a dominating show by Ford, taking the first four positions with four teams. Aric Almirola was second, followed by Ryan Newman and Brad Keselowski. Rac-

ing was delayed more than an hour when a light rain fell at Daytona International Speedway.

William Byron won the second duel, which was a testament to Chevrolet, which took the top three spots. Jimmie Johnson, running in his final season, was second and Kyle Larson was third.

Byron and Johnson are teammates with Hendrick Motorsports.

Logano will be running in Sunday’s Daytona 500 with Paul Wolfe as his new crew chief. Wolfe had been with Penske teammate Brad Keselowski. Team Penske switched up all their pairings in the offseason.

“You know, each of the drivers have different strengths and weaknesses just like we all do as crew chiefs,” Wolfe said. “The last month has just been trying to spend a lot of time and understand kind of his approach to racing and the things he’s used to, what he likes, what he doesn’t like, and then really just kind of blending everything together. You take the strengths of each of us and

Daytona 500

This is the 62nd running of the Daytona 500, which opens the NASCAR Cup Series for 2020:

When: Sunday, 11:30 a.m. PST, Channel 11.

Where: Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla.

Course: 200 laps of 2.5 miles.

Pole position: Ricky Stenhouse Jr. (JTG Daugherty Racing).

2019 winner: Denny Hamlin.

hopefully put together a stronger package than we’ve had in the past.”

It was the second straight year that Logano was victorious in one of the duels. The key was in the final laps when he was getting a push, reducing the drag on both cars, from Almirola. At the time, Logano was running side by side with pole-sitter Ricky Stenhouse Jr., in a Chevrolet. But Stenhouse

had no one to help him.

“One Chevy can’t beat six Fords,” Logano said. “It’s not going to happen. And that’s what we saw here [Thursday]. We just saw a lot of good teamwork with Aric and also the other Fords behind all of us.”

In the second race, there weren’t enough Fords up front to beat the Chevys.

Byron is in his second year with crew chief Chad Knaus, so there was some familiarity. Knaus was previously in the pits for Johnson.

“It’s all about working with Chad and that I can go to him with any question I have, and I have any answers for him,” Byron said. “It’s all about the relationship here.”

Byron said the Chevys working together was natural.

“What you saw [Thursday] happened to be working with friends and drivers from the same manufacturer,” Byron said. “It’s not forced, it’s because they are your teammates.”

Come Sunday the co-operation may be slightly less as the stakes grow exponentially.

Pitcher Willis makes Norco the team to beat — again

Washington-bound pitcher went 22-1 with 0.82 ERA and hit .350 to lead her 31-1 squad.

BY ERIC SONDEHEIMER

Southern California is ground zero for the best high school softball players in the nation, and the 2020 season figures to be similar to 2018 and 2019 with one big question: How do you beat Norco?

In particular, teams must figure out how to deal with Sarah Willis, the winning pitcher for Norco in the last two Southern Section Division 1 championship games.



JEREMIAH SOIFER/For The Times

SARAH WILLIS has been the winning pitcher in the last two Southern Section Division 1 title games.

team.

“She’s a beast,” Orange Lutheran shortstop Victoria Frago said.

“She’s an amazing athlete,” Santa Ana Mater Dei coach Scott Brashear said.

Willis has signed with Washington, and Norco coach Rick Robinson needs to only make sure there’s a good supporting staff to keep the Cougars on top. Sophomore Abby Dayton

can provide help at the plate. As a freshman, she had 34 hits.

The Trinity League should offer several competitors. Orange Lutheran lost to Norco three times last season and graduated some key players, but Brigham Young signee Taryn Lennon will take on an increased pitching load. She is 16-4 in her varsity career.

Mater Dei returns three pitchers, led by Syracuse signee Jolie Gustave. Shortstop Marlene Friedman, who signed with Arkansas, is one of three softball-playing sisters. The oldest, Donna, is at Virginia. The youngest, Meredith, is a freshman at Mater Dei.

Santa Margarita has seven returning starters, led by infielder Angie Yellen, a junior who committed to Washington and is the sister of former Mission Viejo quarter-

back Joey Yellen.

Sherman Oaks Notre Dame could be a rising team with the arrival of freshman Ella Parker, a top hitter and the niece of Dodgers manager Dave Roberts.

Chino Hills, Los Alamitos, Cerritos Gahr and Corona Santiago are among the teams to watch in Division 1. Huntington Beach will be tough with pitcher Grace Uribe, who committed to Texas A&M. Woodland Hills Louisville has pitcher Grace Luderer, who led her team to the Division 5 title as a sophomore.

In the City Section, Chatsworth was an upset victim last season but could make a quick comeback behind pitcher Ava Justman, who signed with Wisconsin. Also back are All-City players Jasmine Wehn at third base and Isabella Paganini at first base. The Chancel-

lors added junior Rebekah Durazo, a catcher who committed to Long Beach State.

Woodland Hills El Camino Real and Granada Hills have picked up important transfers, and San Pedro should come out of the Marine League ready to make a title run. Brianna Talamates hit .554 for the Pirates with three home runs last season.

HIGH SCHOOL RESULTS

CITY BOYS' BASKETBALL
OPEN DIVISION
Quarterfinal
Birmingham 70, Gardena 58

SOUTHERN SECTION BOYS' BASKETBALL
OPEN DIVISION
Pool A
Ewands 71, St. Anthony 55

CITY GIRLS' BASKETBALL
OPEN DIVISION
Quarterfinal
Palmdale 45, Tolt 19
Granada Hills 45, Narbonne 29
Los Angeles Hamilton 59, Crenshaw 55
El Camino Real 64, Legacy 49