

Canelo Alvarez has evolved from a child prodigy to an elite fighter.

History in the Making: Behind the Scenes at Canelo–Jacobs

On May 4, 2019, Saul “Canelo” Alvarez successfully defended his WBC, WBA, and *Ring Magazine* titles against Danny Jacobs in Las Vegas and added Jacobs’s IBF belt to his wardrobe. With that victory, Canelo continued to build his legacy the way a fighter’s legacy should be built. Not by self-aggrandizing talk but by deeds in the ring, one fight at a time.

Elite fighters have self-belief. Alvarez believes in himself and radiates quiet confidence without the loud bravado often associated with boxing. He chooses his words carefully when speaking in public and keeps his guard up during interviews as he does in the ring.

Canelo has the mindset of a fighter. He’s goal-oriented and fundamentally sound with speed, power, and a solid chin. Now 28, he began boxing professionally at age fifteen and has compiled a 51–1–2 ring ledger. One of the draws came when he was fifteen years old. The other was against Gennady Golovkin. The loss was to Floyd Mayweather when Mayweather was at his peak and Canelo had yet to mature as a fighter.

Alvarez didn’t rest on his early success. He has worked hard to get better and tested himself at every level. He’s willing to fight quality opponents who are good enough to beat him. Three of his last four bouts have been against Golovkin (twice) and Jacobs. He embraces challenges.

There was a blip on the radar screen in February 2018 when urine samples that Alvarez provided to the Voluntary Anti-Doping Association tested positive for Clenbuterol, a banned substance. The amount of the drug in his system was consistent with the ingestion of tainted beef. But a boxer is responsible for what goes into his body. Canelo agreed to a six-month suspension and paid \$50,000 out of his own pocket for year-round VADA testing. Since then, he has been tested more thoroughly by VADA than any boxer ever, always without complaint and never with an adverse test result.

“There will always be critics,” Canelo says. “It comes with success.

But I love what I do. I truly love boxing. When I started as a young kid, I always dreamed of becoming a world champion. As I learned with experience, I started challenging myself more and saying, 'Why one championship? I can go on and win more.' I'm still growing and seeing this process. That's what motivates me, to continue writing history and to continue reaching those goals. I want to be remembered as one the greats in boxing. That's why I continue to work hard and continue taking on these type of fights, so I can continue writing history."

Danny Jacobs came into the ring against Canelo with 35 victories and 2 defeats. But despite being the IBF 160-pound champion and having held a WBA belt in the past, he'd never been The Man in the middle-weight division. Early in his career, he suffered a fifth-round demolition at the hands of Dmitriy Pirog. Two years ago, he was on the short end of a close decision against Golovkin.

"I'm more of a threat than a superstar," Jacobs says. "So sometimes, when they talk about big fights, I get left out of the equation. Controversy sells, but that's not who I am. That's not where I came from. I'm not sure if that's why I'm not a household name, but I can't concentrate on that. I stay true to who I am and how I was raised. I'll always keep that integrity and try to be a stand-up guy. Also, by having a son, I know he watches everything that I do, and I can't be acting up and being goofy to get more ratings."

Jacobs is a good representative for boxing. He also takes pride in being a symbol of hope for cancer survivors, having overcome a harrowing illness to get to where he is today.

Canelo-Jacobs was streamed live by DAZN, which hopes to become the Netflix of sports. There was skepticism when it was announced in May 2018 that DAZN would invest at least a billion dollars in boxing over its first eight years in the United States. That number now appears to be accurate in light of the \$365 million contract that the streaming service has entered into with Canelo and Golden Boy and its recent three-year, six-fight deal with Golovkin.

DAZN's entry into boxing sparked a bidding war with ESPN and Premier Boxing Champions that has seen purses for a handful of fighters rise to extraordinary levels. One would expect this to result in the best fighting the best. But overall, that hasn't been the case. Instead, fans have

been subjected to a plethora of one-sided fights and boring matchups. Within that milieu, Canelo–Jacobs was a welcome relief. Unlike the other powers that be in boxing, DAZN wasn't protecting its franchise fighter. It was putting him in tough. And Canelo was a willing participant.

The early buildup to Canelo–Jacobs was dominated by talk of whether Danny could get a fair shake from the judges in Las Vegas. Canelo had fought Golovkin twice in Sin City en route to a controversial draw in their first encounter and a majority-decision victory in the rematch. Jacobs offered the opinion that “the second fight was closer, but I thought Golovkin beat Canelo both times.” Then he added, “It’s a little annoying to have to keep talking about the judges and Canelo getting favoritism. But it’s also a fact in most people’s mind, so that’s why it comes up so much.”

Ultimately, the same three judges who worked the Canelo–Golovkin rematch—Dave Moretti, Steve Weisfeld, and Glenn Feldman—were chosen for Canelo–Jacobs. Moretti had scored Canelo–Golovkin I for Gennady and the rematch for Canelo. Weisfeld scored the rematch for Canelo, while Feldman had it even.

The Canelo–Jacobs promotion was marked by good will and mutual respect between the camps.

“He’s a complete fighter,” Canelo said of Danny. “He can box, punch. He’s tall, agile. It’s going to be a very difficult fight, especially in the first few rounds until I start adapting and imposing my style. In boxing, anything can happen. That’s why today I train harder than ever, so that it doesn’t happen.”

“It has never been my intention in the lead-up to any fight to create animosity to sell the fight or to bash my opponent,” Jacobs responded in kind. “Never have I ever wanted to do that. It has never been in my nature. So for me, this has been one of the best promotions that I’ve been a part of because I share the same ideas with my opponent, which is being professional and let our skills and what we bring to the table speak for itself. I’m grateful for that; that we don’t have to go out there and be goofy or go out there and be someone who we aren’t. That’s a breath of fresh air for me.”

But when fight week arrived, the promotion was struggling a bit.

Canelo–Jacobs was part of a nine-day feast on DAZN that saw a

super-flyweight championship rematch between Srisaket Sor Rungvisai and Juan Francisco Estrada, two World Boxing Super Series semifinal bouts, and Alvarez (the most bankable fighter in the world) against a dangerous challenger. As DAZN executive vice president for North America Joseph Markowski noted, “The only thing missing is the pay-per-view price tag.”

However, the days when Las Vegas stopped for a big fight are pretty much gone. The MGM Grand was the host hotel for Canelo–Jacobs, but the Billboard Music Awards were a higher priority. The fight week media center, traditionally in Studios A and B, was relocated to the Premier Ballroom on the third floor of the adjacent MGM Grand Conference Center, a twenty-minute walk from the heart of the hotel.

Another problem the promotion faced was that, while DAZN has some excellent public relations personnel, the subscription service isn’t wired into the minds of boxing fans the way HBO was and Showtime is, nor does it have the benefit of a promotional platform like ESPN or Fox.

Canelo had fought four times at the T-Mobile Arena—against Golovkin (twice), Julio Cesar Chavez Jr, and Amir Khan—generating almost \$70 million in ticket sales. Overall, he’d headlined nine fight cards in Las Vegas, grossing more than \$115 million in ticket revenue. But despite Canelo–Jacobs being on Cinco de Mayo weekend, ticket sales were falling short of expectations. Final numbers released by the Nevada State Athletic Commission later revealed 15,730 tickets sold, 1,388 comps, and a live gate of \$8,685,750.

The nights get longer for most fighters during the week of a fight. More than anyone else, they understand and feel the risks involved and the weight upon their shoulders. They sleep more fitfully as the big night approaches.

Canelo seemed immune to that. Throughout fight week, he seemed comfortable with who and where he was. The only irritation he showed was a residue of resentment toward Golovkin and trainer Abel Sanchez as a consequence of comments they’d made last year regarding performance-enhancing drugs and, in the case of Sanchez, Canelo’s Mexican heritage. But when asked for his thoughts about Golovkin’s recent dismissal of Sanchez as his trainer, Canelo answered simply, “I have no comment on that. To each his own.”

Jacobs, perhaps in an effort to lobby the judges, took advantage of several media sit-downs to voice the theme, “Canelo fights for thirty seconds a round. I’ll be much more active than that on Saturday night. Canelo likes to fight in spurts. I’ll be fighting for three minutes of every round.”

Taking stock of where he was in his ring career, Danny proclaimed, “I’m having a great time. This is what you dream of when you put the gloves on for the first time. Right now, Canelo is the face of boxing. I want that to be me.”

Then, at the weigh-in on Friday, the cordial relations came to an end.

Jacobs tipped the scale at the middleweight limit of 160 pounds, Alvarez at 159.6. The fighters were brought together for the staredown—boxing’s most idiotic ritual. And Danny stepped out of character, pushing his head forward into Canelo’s space. Maybe he was trying to intimidate Canelo. Maybe he was trying to send a message to the judges: “I’m a warrior; I’m coming to fight.” Canelo shoved him. They exchanged uncomplimentary words having to do with sexual intercourse and their respective mothers (with Jacobs again taking the lead). And the era of good feeling was over.

By the day of the fight, the odds (which had opened at 3-to-1) were approaching 4-to-1 in Alvarez’s favor.

“Jacobs can pose problems for anyone,” Canelo acknowledged. “He’s a strong fighter, a big fighter. That’s why I prepare for the fight.”

When it was pointed out that Jacobs was known for being strong-willed, Canelo responded, “He’s strong-minded. I’m strong-minded too. That’s only part of boxing.”

Canelo had the support of an entire country. Jacobs had the support of a relatively small boxing community in New York. But the fans can’t fight, and the outcome of the bout was by no means a foregone conclusion.

Mentally and physically, Jacobs is a better fighter now than he was in 2010 when he was knocked out by Pirog. And in some ways, the Golovkin fight (which Danny also lost) was a plus for him. He’d fought Gennady as competitively as Alvarez had.

Canelo has had trouble with slick boxers like Floyd Mayweather, Erislandy Lara, and Austin Trout. Even Amir Khan posed problems until he tired after four rounds. Jacobs was planning to outbox Canelo; the

fewer firefights, the better. Canelo, he hoped, would have trouble finding him. And when he did find him, Danny can punch.

“Canelo isn’t going to dictate the pace of the fight. I will,” Jacobs posited. “For me, it’s about establishing my style early. I’m a versatile fighter. I can do a lot of different things in the ring. Box, punch, go forward, go back. I go southpaw from time to time. As a fighter, you have to build. You have to get experience. This isn’t my first rodeo. In terms of my physical abilities and what I know, I’m a better fighter now than I ever was. I’m in my prime. I’m super confident. This is my chance at greatness.”

And there was another factor that weighed in Jacob’s favor—size. At six feet tall, he had a four-inch height advantage over Canelo, a comparable advantage in reach, and was expected to enter the ring with a ten-pound cushion in weight.

The contract for Canelo–Jacobs included a rehydration clause that required each fighter to weigh in a second time at 8:00 a.m. on the morning of the fight with neither fighter allowed to exceed 170 pounds (ten pounds over the official middleweight limit). The penalty for missing weight was \$250,000 per pound or any portion thereof.

Canelo weighed 169 pounds at the same-day weigh-in. Jacobs registered 173.6. That seemed like more than an innocent mistake.

The “official” purses for Canelo–Jacobs were \$35 million for Canelo and \$2.5 million for Jacobs. But ESPN.com reported that Danny was guaranteed a minimum of \$10 million for the fight. Coming in 3.6 pounds over the contractual weight limit—and with the likelihood that he’d gain at least five pounds more before the opening bell—gave Jacobs a significant advantage. If he’d won on Saturday night, it would have been a good investment. But he lost, which left him lighter in the wallet and with a bit of tarnish on his reputation.

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Wearing a white tracksuit with gold trim, Canelo Alvarez arrived at T-Mobile Arena on Saturday night at 6:00 p.m. The partition between dressing rooms #7 and #8 had been removed, leaving ample space for the substantial entourage that accompanied him. Black sofas, folding

black-cushioned chairs, and four long tables covered with black cloth ringed the room.

Chepo and Eddy Reynoso (Canelo's manager and trainer respectively) unpacked their bags, laying out the tools of their trade on two of the tables. Canelo sat on a sofa at one end of the room beneath a large Mexican flag, took out a smartphone, and began texting. From time to time, he looked at a large wall-mounted TV monitor that was displaying the DAZN telecast.

There were seventy people in the room. Crews from several Mexican television networks conducted interviews. Canelo's personal camera crew and a team from DAZN were also there. Ten more photographers took still photos. Chepo Reynoso watched it all with the look of a man who wished the interviews would end so the team could get down to business.

IBF supervisor Randy Neumann came in to get Canelo's signature on the sanctioning body's bout agreement. Neumann was wearing a tie emblazoned with images of John L. Sullivan.

"Who is that?" Canelo queried.

"John L. Sullivan," Neumann answered. "He was a great champion."

"Oh. I think it is Pancho Villa."

Canelo's longtime girlfriend brought their daughter, Maria Fernanda Alvarez, into the room. This was Maria's third pre-fight dressing room experience with her father. Her first appearance had been at Canelo-Golovkin II when she wasn't old enough to walk. Now she was able to navigate on her own and made her way to her father.

Canelo was handed a pink balloon and blew it up. Maria backed away in fear. Canelo let the air out slowly and she returned. The process was repeated several times. Finally, Canelo knotted the end of the balloon and handed it to Maria who embraced it.

Golden Boy matchmaker Roberto Diaz, who monitors Canelo's dressing room on fight nights, addressed the multitude.

"Guys, can we wrap it up with the cameras now?"

There was partial compliance.

"Cameras, please," Diaz urged.

Maria and her mother left. Thirty people remained, most of them wearing Team Alvarez tracksuits.

At 6:45 p.m., Canelo took off his shoes, socks, and tracksuit and

pulled a latex sheath over his left knee. Then he put on the socks, shoes, and trunks he would wear into the ring and tied a red weave bracelet over his left sock just above the shoe top. Ramiro Gonzalez (a Golden Boy publicist and friend) had brought the bracelet to a priest to be blessed, a ritual that he and Canelo follow before each fight.

Mike Bazzell (one of Danny Jacobs's cornermen) came in to watch Canelo's hands being wrapped. Eddy Reynoso worked quickly, right hand first. While the wrapping was underway, Nevada State Athletic Commission executive director Bob Bennett entered with assorted dignitaries, sanctioning body officials, and referee Tony Weeks.

Weeks gave Canelo his pre-fight instructions with NSAC chief inspector Francisco Soto translating into Spanish. Then it was Soto's turn to address the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said authoritatively, "I now need all of you to exit."

Canelo hugged a dozen entourage members as they left.

"Okay," Soto said to those who had stayed behind, "I need everybody to start moving. Please!"

Foremost among the departing were singers Usher and Maluma.

Eddy applied Vaseline to Canelo's face and arms.

A DAZN technician wired Eddy and Chepo for sound.

Andre Rozier (Jacobs's trainer) came in to watch Canelo being gloved up.

The final preliminary fight—Vergil Ortiz vs. Mauricio Herrera—came on the TV monitor.

Canelo's emotions rarely vary in the dressing room before a fight. He's always calm and low-key. Now he shadowboxed a bit and paced back and forth, looking at the fight on the monitor from time to time.

DAZN production coordinator Tami Cotel came in and announced, "After this fight ends, it will be twenty minutes before you walk."

Ortiz bludgeoned Herrera into submission in the third round.

Canelo sat on a sofa, alone with his thoughts.

"How do you feel?" Ramiro asked.

"I'm happy," Canelo answered.

Gennady Golovkin appeared on the TV monitor.

"He looks old," Ramiro noted.

“He is old,” Canelo said.

At 8:15 p.m., Canelo began hitting the pads with Eddy Reynoso, the first in a series of exercises designed to ready him for combat.

Cotel reappeared.

“The anthems are next,” she announced.

Canelo stood at attention, watching the TV screen as the Mexican and American anthems sounded.

Chepo draped a white-and-gold serape over his shoulders.

In a matter of minutes, Canelo would climb into a small enclosure that was both a stage and a cage. Seventeen thousand people in the arena would be focused on his every move. Millions more would be watching on electronic platforms around the world. Most would be rooting for him to succeed. Some would hope that he’d be beaten into unconsciousness. Only a handful would see or feel the humanity in him. He’d be a symbol, a commodity, an action video game figure come to life. That’s all.

If Canelo were to be knocked flat on his back, he’d find himself staring up at the cupola of the video board suspended above the ring. The inside of the cupola is black, as dark as the nighttime sky when the moon and stars are in hiding. The referee would flash fingers in his face. Optimally, he’d recognize the numbers from the start of the count. If the first number he heard was “seven,” he’d be in trouble. As he rose, the black above would give way to a swirling image of the crowd. The roar would be deafening.

He wouldn’t think about whether or not he was fit to continue. It wasn’t his job to assess that. Maybe he’d be hurt. Hurt as in physical pain. Or worse, hurt as in being unable to fully control the movement of his body. If the referee asked, “Are you all right? Do you want to continue?” he’d answer yes even though some part of his mind and body—his instinct for self-preservation—might be shouting “No!”

If the fight continued, the same man who’d knocked him down would try to destroy him. The roar of the crowd wouldn’t stop. Canelo would be in the fire. And when it was over, the people who’d been watching would go on with their lives. They might talk about the fight, but they wouldn’t have bumps and bruises and swelling and pain. If their thoughts were fuzzy, it would be from too many beers, not punches they’d taken.

Canelo had never been knocked down in his ring career. But he