

De La Hoya and Hopkins could fight on Sept. 18

By Tim Dahlberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAS VEGAS — The dates are set and so is the site. Now all promoter Bob Arum needs to do is get a signature from middleweight champion Bernard Hopkins to complete his two-fight deal with Oscar De La Hoya.

Arum said he finalized a handshake deal Monday for the MGM Grand hotel-casino in Las Vegas to host a June 5 fight card featuring Hopkins and De La Hoya in separate bouts. If the two win as expected, they will

meet Sept. 18 at the MGM for the middleweight title.

Arum said Hopkins has already agreed to terms and is coming to Las Vegas on Wednesday to sign his contract. The first news conference promoting the fights will be next Tuesday in Los Angeles.

"It's going to be the biggest non-heavyweight fight in history," Arum said. "I'm looking to make this another (Marvelous Marvin) Hagler (Sugar Ray) Leonard."

Though Arum declined to discuss figures, he did not

dispute previous reports that De La Hoya could make up to \$30 million for the two fights while Hopkins will make at least \$10 million.

De La Hoya, who lost his 154-pound title fight to Shane Mosley in September, will move up to middleweight to take on Felix Sturm of Germany on the June 5 card while Hopkins will defend his undisputed titles against Robert Allen, who he has fought twice already. Assuming De La Hoya and Hopkins win, they would meet in September at

157 pounds.

Arum said the two-fight series came together after De La Hoya couldn't get rematches with Shane Mosley and Fernando Vargas, while it is still unclear whether Felix Trinidad has come out of retirement.

"Oscar wanted to fight Hopkins last but everybody else was pricing themselves out of the market," Arum said. "Rather than wait and fight Hopkins at the end, he put him up front instead."

De La Hoya, who in the

past has been criticized for picking his opponents carefully, will likely enter the ring as an underdog for the first time in his career in September.

Hopkins is 39, but he shows no sign of age and has defended his middleweight title 17 times. Hopkins stopped Trinidad in the 12th round in 2001 in his biggest fight to date, but complained before his last fight in December against William Joppy that De La Hoya was ducking him.

"Am I being a bully by call-

ing Oscar out?" Hopkins asked. "Why is the media treating Oscar like a prima donna? I beat the man (Trinidad) who beat Oscar, so why wouldn't the public want to see me fight him?"

Arum predicted the fight could top not only the biggest pay-per-view sales of a non-heavyweight fight, but the biggest pay-per-view of any fight. That mark was set in 1997 when the second fight between Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield was bought in 1.99 million homes.

World Series champions open spring training as underdogs

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JUPITER, Fla. — The Florida Marlins returned to the field Saturday for the first time since winning the World Series and found themselves in a familiar position: as underdogs.

This time, though, the cost-conscious team is trying to repeat.

"All the talk is about the Yankees losing the World Series, not that we won it," center fielder Juan Pierre said. "People are still not giving us credit. But I think it's possible (to repeat)."

No National League team has won back-to-back championships since the 1975-76 Cincinnati Reds.

The Marlins will have to do it without two key hitters from last season. Catcher Ivan Rodriguez signed with

Detroit, and first baseman Derrek Lee was traded to the Chicago Cubs.

Some of Florida's toughest competition — the Philadelphia Phillies in the NL East and the New York Yankees in the American League — stocked up on talent.

"Look at who (the Yankees) got. You'd be stupid not to pick them," World Series MVP Josh Beckett said. "We're not a large-market team, but we're still fielding a very good team. We're young, but experience doesn't win anything. You don't play baseball on paper."

Still, manager Jack McKeon has a speech prepared for his players when the full squad reports Tuesday.

"It's going to be hard work,"

he said. "You can't take anything for granted. What we did last year was history. The record books are full of one-year phenoms. We want consistency."

McKeon hopes that message will spur some healthy competition among the 64 players in camp for what looks like eight spots up for grabs on the major league roster.

Closer Armando Benitez and setup man Chad Fox appear to be the only relievers with guaranteed jobs on opening day.

That leaves four middle relief spots available, with the early edge going to right-handers Nate Bump and Mike Neu, and left-handers Tommy Phelps and Michael Tejera.

The Marlins also aren't

ready to commit to a starting catcher, saying it will come down to Ramon Castro or Mike Redmond.

"We'll let Jack filter out the playing time, and maybe somebody will step up and take something away from the other," general manager Larry Beinfest said.

Three other bench jobs also are up for grabs, assuming veteran utility man Mike Mordecai and infielder Wil Cordero are locks along with

either Redmond or Castro as the backup catcher.

That leaves Brian Banks, Abraham Nunez, Damion

Easley, Lenny Harris, Gerald Williams, Wilson Valdez and others vying for the final three spots.



PHOTO/PAUL WILLIAMS III

Darius Walker of Atlanta (kneeling) earned the Franklin D. Watkins Memorial Award as the top black male scholar-athlete in the U.S. Walker beat out finalists Douglas Dutch of Bowie, Md; Theodore Ginn of Cleveland; Darryl Richard of Destrahan, La. and Allen Smith of Tempe, Ariz., for the honor.

U.S. teams expect hostile Athens reception for Olympic Games

By Tim Dahlberg
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. baseball and soccer teams are out, and the basketball team is no longer a lock. Hostile crowds await, the threat of terrorism lurks, and other countries are catching up everywhere.

Six months before the Olympics, U.S. team officials should have every reason to be worried about medal hopes in Athens.

Instead, they believe American athletes can do even better than the haul of 97 medals they brought back from Sydney in 2000. And they're bringing everything from sports psychologists to home cooked meals to Athens to get it done.

"We think it's important to win the medal count," U.S. Olympic Committee chief executive Jim Scherr said. "It drives our efforts on a daily basis."

The USOC has set an ambitious goal of winning 100 medals in Athens, which on the surface seems rather unlikely considering the challenging environment U.S. athletes will face in Athens and their recent performances around the world.

"It's not going to be a warm and friendly

environment," said Steve Roush, the USOC's director of sports partnerships. "We're preparing for a hostile environment."

If the experience of the U.S. soccer team in Mexico earlier this month is any indication, American athletes have every reason to be concerned about Athens.

The boos and whistles nearly drowned out the national anthem in Guadalajara, but that was just the beginning. Midway through the Feb. 10 match, the home fans taunted the American players with chants of "Osama! Osama!" as Mexico knocked the U.S. team out of the Olympics.

"You have to realize that people hate Americans," said Stacy Dragila, who won the women's pole vault gold in Sydney.

Because of that, the most important members of the U.S. Olympic team may not know the difference between a javelin and a shot put, or how deep the swimming pool is.

They are the sports psychologists who will accompany the American team to Athens. There will be up to 10 of them for the 560 or so athletes, and their mission will be to calm fears and insulate athletes from outside distractions.

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