

Manny Pacquiao running out of time

Written by Matthew Aguilar
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We had seen Manny Pacquiao before. And he looked good, for sure.

He destroyed Lehlo Ledwaba for the IBF super bantamweight title on the Oscar De La Hoya-Javier Castillejo undercard in June 2001 in Las Vegas. Those slashing fists made the formidable Ledwaba seem utterly ineffective, and, after six rounds, Ledwaba wanted no more of this whirlwind power-puncher from the Philippines.

Then he did the same number on Jorge Eliecer Julio on the Lennox Lewis-Mike Tyson undercard a year later in June 2002 at Memphis. Pacquiao's hair was dyed blonde back then, and the streaks made him look somehow even more vicious, as he tore into Julio with abandon and a mischievous, chilling grin.

Finally, he dominated woefully overmatched Emmanuel Lucero on the Fernando Vargas-Fitz Vanderpool card in August 2003, finally putting Lucero out of his misery in the third round at the famous Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles.

Yes, this Pacquiao looked like some kind of fighter, a southpaw with fast hands, TNT in both fists and an itch to brawl.

But, on one night – Nov. 15, 2003 – he was fighting a legend in Mexico's Marco Antonio Barrera. Sure, Ledwaba, Julio and Lucero were good, decent, capable fighters. But they were arena league to Barrera's NFL. The "Baby-Faced Assassin" was one of boxing's elite fighters, an icon in his homeland and a budding star in the United States.

This Pacquiao kid might think he has the stuff to stand and trade with Barrera. But, after tasting the fists that dominated the best of three divisions – bantamweight, junior featherweight and featherweight – the Filipino would surely be reconsidering a new route to the championship next time out.

So imagine the boxing world's surprise when Barrera hit the deck early with a look of disbelief. It was as if he had been hit for the first time in his life, a wide-eyed, bug-expression that indicated pure surprise.

There was also a look of pain. As in, "What does this guy have in his gloves?" And "Can he really be hitting me this hard?"

The answers to the questions were: 1) Dynamite and 2) Yes.

By the end of it, Barrera was every bit as defenseless and humbled as Ledwaba, Julio and Lucero. It was domination, as Barrera wilted under Pacquiao's relentless assault.

Those watching had to believe that boxing had a new star on its hands. A bright, exciting,

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perhaps unbeatable new star who dished out punishment for the sheer joy of it.

Barrera finally succumbed in the 11th round, and it probably shouldn't have gone that far.

In the end, the pride of Mexico had won maybe two rounds. He had dropped Pacquiao early, but that was more the result of a slip than a punch.

Barrera seemed almost relieved at the end. He had no way of stopping the volley of punches that were being fired his way. So, when the fight was halted, he took a deep breath. In his thoughts, he probably thanked the heavens.

And boxing had a new, thrilling featherweight champion.

In those 11 rounds, Pacquiao went from semi-celebrity to a god in his native Philippines. In the boxing world, he shot up the pound-for-pound ratings, as some wondered whether anyone could beat him.

And, soon, Pacquiao's hit list was revealed. He wanted to clean out the division, and he wanted to dethrone the remaining Mexican fighters the same way that he dethroned Barrera.

That meant Erik Morales and Juan Manuel Marquez.

And the boxing world salivated.

Fast-forward some two-and-a-half years later, though, and you have to figure that Pacquiao has fallen decidedly short of his expectations immediately after the Barrera shocker. And you have to wonder whether he'll ever get that mojo back.

Six months after besting Barrera, Pacquiao was held to a draw by Marquez in perhaps the best fight of 2004. It started out spectacularly enough for "Pac-Man," as he picked up where he left off in the Barrera fight. A shell-shocked Marquez was dropped three times in the first round, courtesy with pinpoint counter lefts. The first two times, Marquez easily got up. But, the last time – after Pacquiao nailed him as he was sitting groggily on the mat – it appeared as though Marquez was through.

Had the fight been stopped – and it almost was – Pacquiao's reputation in the boxing world have been enhanced to ridiculous proportions. He would have been the new king of the sport, his face on every boxing magazine in the world.

He might have even become a mainstream sports figure in the United States.

But a funny thing happened as Pacquiao was marching toward boxing immortality: Marquez got up.

He got up, shook off the knockdowns, and proceeded to issue Pacquiao a boxing lesson. He confused Pacquiao with his skills, and swept most of the remaining 11 rounds. It was an

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incredible comeback, and it earned him a controversial draw.

There were those who thought Pacquiao should have still won – and they probably had a point. But there was little doubt that Pacquiao's monster reputation took a hit. He appeared vulnerable as the fight wound down – hardly the invincible machine that took apart Barrera bit by bit.

The Pacquiao publicity machine deemed the Marquez fight an aberration. So they moved on to bigger fish.

Ten months later, Pacquiao tackled Morales – much more accomplished than Marquez and already a shoo-in for the Hall-of-Fame.

But if Marquez competed evenly with Pacquiao, Morales did him one better: He beat him.

Morales out-punched him. He outworked him. He out-jabbed him. He out-slugged him. And while Pacquiao was the picture of desire and courage as blood streamed down his face after sustaining a massive cut in the early rounds, in the end, it was obvious who won this one.

"El Terrible" was bigger, faster and stronger. And he won a unanimous decision.

Not that Pacquiao hasn't had legitimate excuses for the draw and loss since the Barrera fight.

Against Marquez, he blamed his performance on a bum calf injury that prevented him from obtaining proper leverage. In the Morales fight, he said the choice of gloves made it difficult for him to punch with his usual force.

Both are believable. But maybe – just maybe – Marquez and Morales were better fighters. After all, he was outboxed most of the way by Marquez, and shoved around at will by Morales.

Whatever the case, it appears that the legend of Manny Pacquiao, in boxing circles anyway, is starting to fade. He was like a bottle rocket – with a quick, colorful ascent. But is an almost invisible descent inevitable?

Like most vicious punchers, his prime will probably be remembered as explosive, but short. Mike Tyson. John Mugabi. Pipino Cuevas – all exciting bombers who flamed out sooner than expected.

There is a chance that Pacquiao will rebound, and realize all the mammoth promise of that Barrera fight. He could come back and knock out Morales Saturday when they meet in the long-awaited rematch. But that likely won't happen.

And, even if it did, wouldn't people just say that Morales was washed up?

For a time, Manny Pacquiao was the most exciting thing going. Unfortunately for "Pac-Man," that time might soon be up.