The mother of all fires burned up and down the state of California with a rage never seen before and Big Bear Lake was one of the prime conflagrations that chased boxer Marco Antonio Barrera from his training camp.

That was 2003.

Every year a forest fire starts in the San Bernardino Mountains located about 65 miles from downtown Los Angeles. But this was like watching an atomic bomb as smoke filtered the air for hundreds of miles.

Barrera and his team filed down the mountain knowing they had to prepare for the rising contender Manny Pacquiao who had destroyed a Mexican fighter four months earlier in Los Angeles.

That wasn't the only problem. His former team ratted on him and divulged that Barrera had a metal plate inside his skull from a previous injury. Now he had to be checked by numerous doctors to get approved to fight. It took weeks to get it squared away.

He couldn't even find sparring partners.

On Nov. 15, the Filipino bomber ambushed Barrera in the Alamodome of all places. What irony.

After the fight Barrera looked impotently into the camera with little explanation of his demise.

"That wasn't me," he said that night in 2003.

Now Barrera (63-5, 42 KOs) returns to face an even better version of the fighter that beat him when he meets Pacquiao on Saturday Oct. 6, at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas. The non-title 12-round fight will be shown on HBO pay-per-view.

Barrera thinks he can win this time.

"I'm ready to show the critics and the media they're wrong," said Barrera.

If history proves anything in professional boxing it's that a fighter like Barrera can provide boxing wizardry and make almost invisible changes that can change a fight. Even against a hurricane like force such as Filipino superstar Pacquiao (44-3-2, 35 KOs).

But can he win?

Barrera believes it and has a history of fights to prove it.

After losing for the first time in his career against Junior Jones by knockout, he returned and fought a furious battle against Jones that went the distance. To some it seemed Barrera won the fight.

When Erik Morales and Barrera met in one of the greatest fights of the 21st century at the Mandalay Bay Resort on February 19, 2000, it was the Tijuana fighter who emerged victorious. It was a razor slim decision. But their next fight in 2002 saw Barrera basically walk away with the victory by out-boxing Morales. The third fight resulted in another unanimous decision in 2004.

Last year Barrera met Rocky Juarez and edged the young Texan by split-decision. Their second fight four months later was a unanimous decision victory.

Barrera wasn't considered one of the best fighters Pound for Pound for many years just because of his looks. He's a master fighter who excels in boxing strategy.

But can his legs last 12 rounds against the lightning punches of Pacquiao?

Last March, Barrera seemed ahead after the seventh round then lost that spring in his legs. Maybe he didn't train hard enough or perhaps at 33 the stamina is gone.

The last time he faced Pacman his legs were gone and the Filipino knocked him out of there in 10 rounds.

"I couldn't do anything I wanted to do," said Barrera who looked slower and fleshy before the fight. "It was a total melt down. He took it to me that night."

Before his fight with the Mexican icon, Pacquiao was not only confident of victory, but boldly predicting a clean sweep of the other Mexican champions too. That opened the eyes of boxing observers.

Before the Alamodome ambush Pacquiao was verbally brushing aside a sure Hall of Fame fighter like Barrera as a mere steppingstone and predicting wins over Morales, Marquez and others.

Pacquiao put a beating on Barrera much like Jones did in 1996.

Though Barrera scored a first round knockdown of Pacquiao, that later looked like a slip, the rocket jab the Mexican usually employed against opponents seemed more like a sputter. That spelled doom as Pacquiao walked through everything Barrera tossed his direction and countered with booming lefts all night long.

"I know he's a better fighter than that night," says Pacquiao, diplomatically. "Barrera is a good fighter."

Pacquiao on the other hand has rumbled on the last three years gaining more momentum like

the human hurricane he is. After the draw to Marquez, the loss to Morales, the Filipino buzz saw has ripped through opponents with ease. Even when he was busy campaigning for Congress in the Philippines he still had far too much firepower against Jorge Solis.

Trainer Freddie Roach laughs when people ask if Pacquiao has improved.

"Now Manny uses his right hand more and goes to the body," said Roach, who constantly works on alternatives to the left hand knockout. "He's a more complete fighter now."

Recently, doomsayers proclaim that Pacquiao's superstar status has caused him to forsake the same methods that shot him to the top. In fact, some say it's a role reversal where Barrera has been diligently preparing in Guadalajara while the Filipino champion is busy with business affairs and other distractions.

"I don't want to be over confident and give him a chance to win," says Pacquiao. "That's why I trained hard."

Rumors have crossed the Pacific Ocean and boxing fans are worried that the Filipino star has not prepared 100 percent.

Barrera doesn't care.

"We're just working to win," says Barrera who hates that experts pick him to lose and uses that as motivation as well. "All those saying I'm going to lose, I'd like to shut their mouths."

It won't be easy for the Mexico City boxer who began his pro career at age 15 and worked his way to becoming a popular fighter at the Inglewood Forum. Now at 33, he's holding on to the last semblance of his once formidable physical skills.

"Fighters with experience have beaten a fighter in his prime before," Barrera says. "I also have motivation to beat him because he's been a thorn on the side of Latinos. He's beaten so many Mexicans."

Pacquiao takes it coolly. He's faced and beaten seven top Mexican fighters including Barrera since arriving in the United States. It's just another notch on his belt.

"I know he's going to box me we're prepared for that," Pacquiao says confidently. "We're prepared for everything."

For this fight Barrera trained in Guadalajara under the guidance of his brother Jorge Barrera and long-time assistant trainer Sendai Tanaka. One marked difference was using WBA junior lightweight titleholder Edwin Valero, a speedy left-handed power puncher just like Pacquiao.

Barrera wants every edge possible.

"I see him in my sleep," Barrera says. "I know exactly how he fights."

Pacquiao seems in remote control as he goes through his paces in the gym. He seems almost serene in front of the vast media that follow his every step.

"I'm not going to predict a knockout but I am going to predict a victory," said Pacquiao coolly.

Here comes another forest fire.