

Pacquiao Distracted, Will Still Win

Written by Mike Lynch

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Manny Pacquiao is spreading himself way too thin. Matter of fact, he's involved in so many extra-curricular activities that he'd be an awful professional boxer if he were anyone other than Manny Pacquiao.

When I spoke with Freddie Roach over the summer, he was expecting Manny to start training at his Wild Card gym in Hollywood sometime in July. According to Roach, Manny said he would be ready to fight in September, even if he didn't need to lace them up for real until October. As it turns out, Pacman's slated to fight on Saturday night, October 6. As it also turns out, Manny was not training at Wild Card in July.

Why?

Where do I start?

Manny is a bigger star in his native Philippines than any American athlete since Muhammad Ali. Tiger Woods might seem to be big in America, but I've never met anyone that feels passionately about him. Personally, I would go as far as to say that he's more of a testament to American capitalism, consumerism, and marketing than he is an example of American athletics at its peak. He's a construction of corporate America. He's popular on the surface, but real Americans know that real athletes don't compete while dressed for dinner.

Pacquiao transcends that gap in the Philippines, though. In the past 12 months he has worn the hat of politician, huckster, movie star, pop star, tabloid fodder, and oh yeah---the most electrifying boxer in the world. There's no faking it in the boxing ring, as Jermain Taylor recently discovered (detract a point for that low blow!). Pacquiao has long been distracted but has always brought the goods on fight night.

But here's the question: Can he keep it up? How long can Manny burn that candle from both ends before he runs out of wick? The stories of him surfacing from across the Pacific are certainly absurd. He's fighting a legend on Saturday. And yet, at times, beer commercials and romantic comedies were reportedly taking precedence over his training. Will he have the legs to stand in? Will he have the wind to throw 800+ punches if necessary? His training regimen leaves more than just traces of doubt. But your eyes and your instincts tell you that Manny is different from other fighters. No level of training would produce a fighter like Pacquiao. The task is to separate the dosages of nature and nurture and to decipher what remains. That is not an easy task.

Meanwhile, Marco Antonio Barrera was training in high altitude mountains and reportedly getting himself in his best shape ever in preparation for a fight with huge implications for him: it's not just a revenge fight for MAB (who lost to Pacman in 2003); it's also possibly the last fight of his Hall-of-Fame career. Clearly, the Baby-Faced-Assassin has left no stone unturned in his preparation for this fight. There will be no excuses, other than old age, in his corner on fight

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night.

Pacman, though, seems to have approached training for this fight like a doctor treating a patient without insurance: Ignore it for long enough and perhaps it will go away. But it will not. Even if he beats MAB, fans and doubters alike will question his devotion.

Pacquiao is lucky, though. His trainer was willing to fly to the Philippines and train him there. Roach thought that Manny was perhaps testing him. He was well aware that Dedham Freddie went to Puerto Rico to train Oscar de la Hoya for his showdown with Floyd Mayweather, Jr. So perhaps he wanted Roach to prove he would go that extra mile for him as well. Well, he did. And he wasn't too happy about it.

Pacquiao's overwhelming popularity in the Philippines made it difficult for Roach to train Pacman in private. Roach noted that he was wary of all of the distractions and pleaded with the fans to stay away from training sessions for Manny's sake. In the wake of it all, he claimed to be happy with Manny's progress. He was confident that Pacman was well prepared for the fight. They would continue training at Wild Card before heading to Las Vegas for the fight.

Reportedly, when Roach was able to get Pacquiao's undivided attention, he saw the same amazing qualities that he's always seen in the southpaw whirlwind. He saw a guy that, when driven, was able to give more than anyone he's seen. There is not another fighter in the business like Pacquiao. Lack of focus is not a new phenomenon for Pacman. Perhaps it was a bigger issue for him than in the past, but he has dealt with it before. Nature overcoming nurture.

Speaking of nurturing your gifts: Allen Iverson hates practice. Yet he is perhaps the most well conditioned athlete in the NBA. He perpetually leads the league in minutes played and plays at a breakneck pace that no one else on the floor can keep up with. Manny Pacquiao is very much like that. Both are easily distracted free spirits whose interests are spread thin at times. Yet, in "game" situations they are flurries of activity that the opposition cannot be prepared for. They compete with passion that opponent cannot match. They approach other activities with the same passion and thus easily distracted. But it would be foolish to look past what they actually bring to the table in the heat of the moment. There is no way to recreate fighting Pacquiao (or guarding Iverson) with any kind of sparring. MAB has trained in mountains and gotten himself in great shape. That does not prepare you for Pacman. Not by a long shot.

MAB has a chance, sure. But give me Pacman in this one. The lesson that's never taught in school, but is reinforced on the playground (and in the White House) every day is that doing your homework doesn't give you all the answers.

Sooner or later, Pacman's ways will catch up to him. But not yet.

Readers, what do you think? Does Marco Antonio Barrera have what it takes to defeat a somewhat off-task Pacquiao? Did Pacman make a mistake training in the Philippines?