If not for the cool, collected manner of Joe Cortez, Manny Pacquiao could easily have stopped Juan Manuel Marquez in the very first round when they met in Las Vegas way back in 2004, when Pac Mania was in its infancy, and Marquez was an underrated technician stuck behind the tall shadows cast by the legends Barrera and Morales.

Marquez, today among the pound for pound best in the sport, an ace dissector who places punches as well as anyone in the game, had no answer for Pacquiao's straight left hands in the first, disastrous round of their meeting at the MGM Grand.

But he maintained a clear head, finished the first round, listened to his corner, and made adjustments that earned him a draw.

It was a remarkable comeback, made possible by the absence of the three-knockdown rule, and the sharp eyes of Cortez.

The first knockdown, via a straight left, came at the 1:30 mark. Marquez popped up quickly, his eyes clear.

The second knockdown, at the 1:06 mark, came again via a straight left. Again, Marquez' eyes were clear as he quickly hoisted himself off the deck.

The righthander got caught again with a straight left from the southpaw Filipino at the :43 mark, and this time, he was on his back.

He lay there for a couple of seconds, his head buzzing a bit more than before.

But he got up, and Cortez checked his eyes more intently. The ref wiped his gloves, and let him continue. From then on, he blunted Pac Man's rushes, and became the counterpunching ace we know today, who owns the WBC super featherweight strap. Marquez (48-3, 35 KOs), the older of the Marquez brothers by 1 ½ years, took the belt (UD12) from Marco Antonio Barrera, in a pass-the-torch fight in March 2007.

Pac Man, for those who don't know, is a certified slayer of Mexican boxers, having faced down six straight challenges from Mexican hitters. Marquez, though, believes that he's the man to break that winning streak. On a conference call, the former IBF and WBA featherweight titlist, and former WBO featherweight champ, said that he was too confident and relaxed against Pacquiao in 2004. This time, on March 15 at the Mandalay Bay, that won't be the case.

"I was pretty confident, I was connecting well in the first round," Marquez said through an interpreter. "I thought it would be an easy fight."

Apart from the first, it did indeed get easier.

Was there any danger of him staying on the floor after the third knockdown, the fighter was asked.

"Defending two titles, I was not letting them go in three minutes," he said. "Staying down or losing never crossed my mind. Training so many years and having two titles, to lose in three minutes, I was pissed, angry. Plus, Manny punched me while I was down (on the third knockdown) and the ref never said anything."

Almost four years later, the 34-year-old still insists that he deserved the nod on that night.

"You saw it, I won it, I won that fight. One or two other rounds he won. You cannot lie to people, they saw I won it."

This time, there will be no first round follies, he said.

"People will see a great fight," he said. "I will put everything in the ring. I will be ready when the bell rings until the end of the last round. I promise I won't disappoint you guys. I will be alert, I won't be overconfident."

Marquez is even more amped than he would've been, after seeing Israel Vazquez break the tie, and defeat brother Rafael on Saturday, he said.

Marquez acknowledges that Pac Man has improved since 2004, but he says that he too has bettered his game. "I've become a better boxer and fighter," he said.

Being 34 hasn't brought on a diminishment of skills, he insists. "The age won't be an issue," he said. "I feel better than ever. I feel so strong, so prepared. The time is coming at the right time."

Marquez said that he is better technically than Manny, and will be in better condition, to boot. "I proved that in the first fight," he said. "He was getting tired. That's why I consider myself better.

But, he says, Pacquiao is no slouch. "He's very fast, very quick, very strong. All I can say is that I'm prepared for that.

Almost four years is a lengthy time for a rematch of such a controversial, compelling bout. Marquez explained that it didn't occur earlier because he didn't see eye to eye with his former promoter, Top Rank. There were money issues, and to this day, Marquez harbors ill will towards Bob Arum. Marquez is now aligned with Golden Boy, while Arum now works with Pacquiao, after fending off Golden Boy, which tried to sign Manny up late in 2006.

Marquez' trainer, Nacho Beristain, said that for the first fight, they were promised lefty sparring partners that were not delivered. This time, Marquez has been scrapping with lefties in camp.

Marquez isn't buying it that Pacquiao has a secret formula to take down Mexicans. "More than pressure is pride and motivation I have to win," he said, when asked if he feels weight on his shoulders to represent Mexico properly. "I have to win. It's a big responsibility, I've been doing a

good job in the mountains on conditioning. I'm going to come with my belt back home."

Beristain will see to it, he says, that Marquez respects Pacquiao as much as possible. "He was fighting so relaxed, so loose, like he had an easy opponent in front of him," Beristain said.

Marquez has no chip on his shoulders regarding comparisons with the boxing royalty, Morales and Barrera, he said. "I know what I've done and the people know," he said.

So, how will it end? Marquez said he will win, but how?

"I don't know how it will end," he said. "I'm confident what I've done in the gym. Mentally, physically, I'm ready, I know I will beat Manny Pacquiao."

SPEEDBAG Marquez' promoter Gary Shaw would like to see Rafael and Israel Vazquez glove up a fourth time. He'll be talking to Rafael shortly, to see if he wants to do "Four To Settle The Score." Shaw will know in the next week or two if Marquez and Vazquez are game.