

## Pacquiao: I Have Never Worked Harder

Written by Michael Woods  
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In the Philippines, Manny Pacquiao gets mobbed by fans like Britney Spears gets mobbed by paparazzi.

Pac Man, when at home, gets pulled in a thousand different directions, by friends, and fans, and leeches, and ladies looking for a smooch, and weebegone types looking for a loan to bail out their failing business, or money so their kid can get an operation.

The tug on the icon can result in an atmosphere that is not conducive for the sort of preparation needed to face down a challenge from a hungry pound-for-pound hitter who is among the game's best at placing punches.

Trainer Freddie Roach knows this full well, so before every Pacquiao bout he crosses his fingers as tight as he can without losing circulation, and hopes that he'll have Manny in camp in the US for a good long spell.

See, Pac Man get get away with subpar prep, and less a than superlative conditioning regimen for fighters like a diminished Oscar Larios, or the solid but unexceptional Jorge Solis, or even against a on-the-cusp of retirement Marco Antonio Barrera. But a so-so camp could be the prescription for disaster against Juan Manuel Marquez, the 34-year-old Mexican who managed to steal a draw from Pacquiao in 2004 after being sent to the canvas three times in the first round of their first bout.

For this reason, Pac Man fans have to be ecstatic to hear that their guy is treating the Marquez rematch, which unfurls on Saturday evening at the Mandalay Bay, with the seriousness it deserves.

The fighter said that he realizes that Marquez will be fired up to stop Pacquiao's streak of mastery over Mexican fighters (six fights, going back to Sept. 2005), and will be looking to show the world that he's improved since 2004.

"That's why I came here two months before the fight and I'm training hard because I am still hungry," Pacquiao said. "I have never worked harder than in this training camp."

Those are strong words.

Never worked harder.

Should we allow him some leeway for hyperbole, which is inevitable in some camps counting down to the big day, as the jostling for a psychological edge occurs? Or should we take Manny at his word, and believe that in his fifth year of being a household name in the boxing community, he has summoned the conviction to push himself in training more than ever before?

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If that is the case, then I'm leaning towards saying the fabulous Marquez brothers are going to be 0-in-2 so far in 2008. Because this version of Manny, less frenetic, more ambidextrous, far wiser as a technician than the one who let Marquez take the momentum in 2004, if he's in stellar condition, will have too much energy for the 34-year old.

Roach, it seems, is genuinely pumped that Manny's mind is as sharp as his body.

He said that Pacquiao called the shot, and told him he'd be coming to Camp Freddie for an elongated session.

"It was actually Manny's choice," Roach said. "Manny told me he wants to come eight weeks before, I told him great, and he showed up on time and he knows how tough a fight this is and we're taking this very seriously. There have been no distractions in this camp whatsoever. He's really, really been a great student and for Manny, I think training for eight weeks he'll be at his best and that's what it's going to take to beat this guy."

Freddie didn't have to play the 'what plane is he on' game as he's had to before. He didn't have to hear the explanations why Manny wasn't on a plane to the US, and that has him breathing easier.

The more I hear from the 29-year-old Pac Man, the bigger the edge I give him going in to Saturday's fight.

He explained why he is so on message for this rematch.

"First I realized Marquez is not easy opponent and second one is I realized that I had not been as hungry as I had been before when I started boxing. I'm hungry now, hungry enough to win. But I also realized myself that before I was 50% or 60% dedicated to boxing. Now I am 100% dedicated to boxing and to the training. Boxing is my career."

OK, I'm not ready to think Manny could be 50% better this time than we've seen before, so maybe he can occasionally lapse into hyperbole. But to hear him admit that in the past, he hasn't given it his all, that's important.

You are only as sick as your secrets they say. To make that admission to the world means that Pac Man is truly ready to ditch that stinking thinking that made him think he could train half-heartedly and still perform to his peak ability.

Roach too has been telling all that Manny is dialed in this time.

"I know that this is the most focused that I've ever seen him," said Dedham Freddie.

And I know this—that would be bad news for Marquez.