

Last Mexican Standing For Pacquiao Is Marquez

Written by David A. Avila
Sunday, 09 March 2008 19:00

Back in 2003 a little-known Filipino boxer with shocking black hair and an almost shy smile made an appearance at the historic boxing venue the Olympic Auditorium and quickly knocked out a Mexican featherweight with a vicious left uppercut.

That fighter was Manny Pacquiao and later that night made a somewhat wildly outrageous promise to eventually knock out all of the Mexican champions one-by-one.

More than a few boxing writers including myself thought it was an amusing goal and that if he passed even one of the big three Mexican boxers who held a world title he would be very fortunate.

Here we are five years later and only one Mexican champion remains standing since the Pacquiao journey began.

WBC junior lightweight titleholder Juan Manuel Marquez (48-3-1, 35 KOs) is the last Mexican standing when he steps in the ring at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino to stop Pacquiao from fulfilling his quest. The final chapter takes place Saturday March 15 in Las Vegas. The fight will be televised on HBO pay-per-view.

"I know he is a great champion but I will beat him," said Pacquiao (45-3-2, 35 KOs).

Today many in the boxing world see Pacquiao as unbeatable. But five years ago the Filipino boxer was just another good fighter from Asia with a big punch. His win over Emmanuel Lucero was not that big a win. But his next fight against the great Marco Antonio Barrera was supposed to end his plans rudely and abruptly.

But we're going too fast. Let's digress and explain just how big an achievement it would be for the Filipino buzz saw to vanquish Marquez.

Mexican birthright?

Mexicans have dominated the featherweight division for more than 100 years. The very first prizefighter of Mexican heritage to capture the featherweight championship was a boxer named Solly Garcia Smith from Los Angeles in 1897.

After Irish-Mexican Smith the damn really broke in the 1920s when fighter after fighter crossed the border from Mexico and took aim at earning a living in the United States.

"There's a long tradition of Mexican world champions," said historian William Estrada curator of El Pueblo de Los Angeles museum.

Fighters like Bert Colima, Baby Arizmendi, Chalky Wright, Richie Lemos, Manuel Ortiz, Carlos

Last Mexican Standing For Pacquiao Is Marquez

Written by David A. Avila
Sunday, 09 March 2008 19:00

Chavez, Vicente Saldivar, Salvador Sanchez and Julio Cesar Chavez are just a few of the Mexican warriors who trekked north to win world titles and stamp their brand of fighting and create a dominance of the featherweight division.

Today there is a junior featherweight and a super featherweight division to go along with the true featherweight weight class, but it didn't matter to the Mexican fighters who captured world titles in all of those divisions. They acted as if it were their birthright to be featherweight world champions.

Even bantamweights like Ruben Olivares found success after outgrowing the 118-pound division and keeping in step in the featherweight plateau.

Sure featherweights from other countries won titles in the featherweight divisions, but chances are that they would have to go through a gauntlet of Mexican fighters to keep it. Few were able to hold on to the title for long.

Now, here is Pacquiao, perhaps the greatest obstacle to Mexican hegemony ever seen. He's like a nuclear warhead ready to drop on the Mexican featherweight blockade.

The Pacman voyage

Pacquiao began his incredible journey by sneak attack on Barrera in 2003. At the time Barrera was considered nearly unbeatable and had conquered many speedy power punchers including Britain's Prince Naseem Hamed.

Few gave pause that Pacquiao could outbox Barrera. He didn't.

Pacman tore into Barrera like a September hurricane hitting the Florida coast. It was nonstop relentless pummeling. For 10 rounds Barrera used all of his guile to keep the human torpedo from taking his head off. Finally the Mexico City fighter's corner threw in the towel in the 11th.

From that moment on there was that name Pacquiao that was whispered on the lips of Mexican fighters everywhere like little Mexican kids whisper la llarona their version of the boogiemán.

Next came Marquez, a feared counter-puncher with remarkable fighting skills and textbook precision.

Pacquiao tore into Marquez like a rabid pitbull.

The left-handed rocket puncher dropped Marquez three times. It happened with such swiftness and power that fans and the Mexican fighter were caught by surprise.

"He was too relaxed," said Nacho Beristain of his fighter Marquez. "He might have been listening to friends telling him it was going to be easy."

Pacquiao launched into Marquez with that left hand that comes so suddenly that many

Last Mexican Standing For Pacquiao Is Marquez

Written by David A. Avila
Sunday, 09 March 2008 19:00

opponents remain baffled it connects. Though almost all of the Filipino's opponents step into the ring aware of the southpaw's power hand, few can effectively evade it.

"We know Manny Pacquiao's left hand is like a bullet," Marquez says. "It's very powerful and very fast."

That night the Mexican endured three punishing knockdowns before figuring out how to slip or block that daunted left hand. It ended in a majority draw but a formula was devised to beat Pacquiao.

Ten months later it was Tijuana's Morales who fought Pacquiao and using Marquez's recipe, beat the Filipino by decision.

Reliance on the left hand by Pacquiao proved to be a crutch too crippling against the elite fighters.

But that was four years ago.

"I've learned a lot since that fight," says Pacquiao of their first meeting on May 8, 2004. "I'm better and he's better."

Right hands

Freddie Roach, who trains Pacquiao, began shifting his fighter's reliance on the big left hand bomb to increased usage of his right hand. It was slow in effectiveness, but after four years most observers see a marked difference, including Marquez.

"He's no longer a one-armed fighter," said Marquez. "He has more boxing skills."

But that doesn't stop Marquez from believing his in own abilities.

"It's now four years later and I have acquired more experience and I'm stronger now," said Marquez, 34. "I think I now have more speed."

It was narrow thinking by Marquez that enabled Pacquiao to viciously knock down the Mexican fighter three times in the first three minutes of their fight. It was also narrow thinking by Pacquiao that enabled Marquez to turn things around and out-box the Filipino.

"When I knocked him down three times I thought the fight was over," said Pacquiao. "It was a mistake."

This time Pacquiao intends to put forth full concentration on out boxing Marquez for all 12 rounds if needed.

"I won't underestimate him in this fight," Pacquiao vows.

Last Mexican Standing For Pacquiao Is Marquez

Written by David A. Avila
Sunday, 09 March 2008 19:00

One other thing, Pacquiao realizes is that an entire country pins their hopes on Marquez to keep the Mexican featherweight tradition alive.

Since arriving on American shores Pacquiao has beaten Mexican fighters Emmanuel Lucero, Barrera twice, Morales two out of three, Hector Velazquez, Oscar Larios and Jorge Solis. He vowed back in 2003 to beat every Mexican champion.

Pacman is like a hot dice shooter who's running the table.

Now it's Marquez who's seen as Mexico's last hope to stop the dreaded Filipino slugger from disparaging the good reputation of Mexican fighters. A whole country is praying for Marquez to land the one good blow needed to turn away the fists of Pacquiao the way a divine wind blew away the Mongol hordes from Japan many centuries ago.

It's a challenge that Marquez takes to heart.

"Winning against Manny Pacquiao would be great. I'm doing this for me and for my people because I know that they understand the importance of this fight," said Marquez. "They call him the Mexican killer but he's not the Mexican killer because he has not beaten me."

Pacquiao briefly smiles when he hears Marquez's words. He's one win away from attaining his goal.

"He's the only Mexican left who has a chance to beat me," says Pacquiao.

Yes indeed. Marquez is the last Mexican standing.