

Pacquiao Vs. De La Hoya: Could It Happen?

Written by Ron Borges
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For Manny Pacquiao, the options are many and the obstacles are few. At least that's how Bob Arum sees it.

Pacquiao's promoter was sitting in his Las Vegas office Wednesday pondering the future for his brightest promotional product and everywhere he turned he saw the same thing. He saw golden opportunity, which isn't something you hear a lot about too often these days on the American business front.

Pacquiao, of course, is more international business than local, which seems to be where the future lies on all fronts, including the fistic one. He is a national phenomenon in the Philippines, where he is not only the most popular boxer in that country's history but arguably its most popular athlete, while back in the States he is a guaranteed hit (literally and figuratively as Arum and Juan Manuel Marquez can each testify) both at the ticket window and on pay-per-view.

So while Pacquiao's next move was long ago decided – a June step up to the lightweight division to challenge WBC 135-pound champion David Diaz – Arum is planning ahead. He is not only discussing the possibility of matching Pacquiao with unified champion Nate Campbell if Pacquiao prevails as expected against Diaz, but the promoter believes he can go in a multitude of other directions, including towards Oscar De La Hoya, if he chooses to.

Last week Pacquiao's trainer, Freddie Roach, dismissed such De La Hoya talk, although admitting Oscar had expressed both an interest in facing Pacquiao and a distaste for him, an enmity which Roach said Pacquiao shares for boxing's Golden Boy. Yet Roach said the obvious size difference (De La Hoya is nearly five inches taller and outweighs Pacquiao by 20 pounds at normal fighting weights) was simply too much to overlook, unless De La Hoya was prepared to do a lot more dieting than he has in years. Wednesday, Arum disagreed.

"I would not be opposed to that fight if Manny shows he can handle 135 pounds because I don't think Oscar can fight any more," Pacquiao's bombastic promoter said. "I think he'll struggle with (Steve) Forbes. He'll beat him but he'll struggle because Oscar's a six-round fighter now.

"Would I put Pacquiao in with the old Oscar? Of course not, but he's not the old Oscar. He can't go more than six rounds. He won't pay the price to condition himself any more. He thinks he's doing it, but he isn't. Look at how many fights he's run out of gas.

"How serious are you when you insist on living at home when you train? (Bernard) Hopkins is super serious. He would never stay in Philadelphia to train for a fight. He'd never think of training at home. Oscar insists on it.

"Oscar never liked to train, but when you're young, youth overcomes it. Not any more. I wouldn't have put Manny in with the old Oscar but I'd put him in with an old Oscar. Sh-- yeah. If he can handle 135 pounds, I think he'd have a real good shot to win.

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“We’ll fight him at any weight he wants. Who gives a sh--? If Manny beats him, it’s not because of the weight. It’ll be because of the speed.”

Speed is a gift Pacquiao possesses in large measure, and it is the one Arum believes will hold him in good stead as a lightweight, as long as he doesn’t find the fighters at 135 pound simply too strong to handle.

Pacquiao, you may recall, began his career at 106 pounds and has won world titles at flyweight, super bantamweight and super featherweight. What that means is he’s already fighting at 30 pounds above his original weight as a professional and to face De La Hoya he’d very likely have to move to welterweight, give or take two or three pounds at best.

Still, Arum was adamant that he would be willing to risk Pacquiao against De La Hoya, although he was quick to point out that his fighter didn’t really need him.

“The most important direction for Manny to go is to build on his legacy,” Arum said. “If he beats Diaz and wins a fourth world title then we’ll decide who he fights next. He has a plethora of options and opponents to choose from.

“He could fight Nate Campbell to unify the lightweight title. He may want to fight (Edwin) Valero (the WBA super featherweight champion). Since Valero got licensed in Texas we could do that fight in Macau (a Portugese gambling colony on an island not far from the Phillipines).

“He could fight Joan Guzman (the undefeated WBO titleholder at 130 pounds). He could have another fight with Marquez. He has a whole field to choose from. So I really think it depends on how he does against Diaz. How he handles that weight. If he dominates Diaz, maybe we go to Nate Campbell for the unified title. I think that would be a huge fight. A unification is a bigger fight than Marquez.”

That seems difficult to believe, but if Pacquiao defeats Diaz he will have 15 days to decide if he intends to remain at that weight and defend the title or reclaim the WBC’s 130-pound title he now holds. That would obviously preclude a showdown with De La Hoya but it would not change his money making possibilities.

“The guys at lightweight will be bigger and stronger but Manny’s speed and power can negate that,” Arum said of Pacquiao. “What’s important is that he does what’s best for him.”

Arum seems to believe that might be trying to become the first unified lightweight champion since Roberto Duran held all the titles back in 1978. While much of the boxing world has grown weary of the alphabet organizations that have so often polluted the sport and served as obstructionists at best and assassins at worst, Arum insisted they remain the only measuring stick there is.

He once again loudly rejected out of hand the RING magazine belts which have begun to grow in prominence. Although RING insists that anyone holding its belt only loses it in the ring or by retirement or abandonment, Arum has railed against them ever since De La Hoya’s company

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bought the magazine a year ago. However, Wednesday he insisted that wasn't his problem with recognizing the RING belt holder as the true champion.

"Maybe I'm an old fart," Arum said with a laugh. "Maybe I'm old fashioned. But to me the unified title is significant. The RING belt is all b.s. If Manny defeats Diaz will he be considered the best lightweight in the world? No, because Nate Campbell is out there with the other belts (WBA, WBO, IBF. Joel Casamayor holds the RING belt).

"He could fight Casamayor after that. That's an alternative but the RING magazine belt is flawed. Why is it flawed? They got a guy like Floyd Mayweather as their welterweight champion and he hasn't defended that title against a legitimate welterweight since he won it 15 months ago.

"Who cares when they allow that? What does it all mean? Nothing! There's gotta be some rules and regulations. Obviously sometimes the sanctioning bodies violate their own rules but there has to be some kind of structure."

Not for Pacquiao, who doesn't need anyone's belt to define him. He is one of boxing's hottest properties today whether he's wearing a champion's belt or he isn't, and the proof of that is that he wore no title belts in any of his high grossing fights with Erik Morales and Marco Antonio Barrera and nobody cared. They still don't, a fact not lost on Arum and one that gives Manny Pacquiao what few fighters have these days: options and opportunities not controlled by anyone else.

"Manny is a unique individual in boxing," Arum said. "He has an entire country behind him. The people in the Phillipines live and die on his every move. It's phenomenal."

It would be even more phenomenal, and frankly phenomenally unlikely, if one day they were cheering him on as he stood inside a boxing ring facing Oscar De La Hoya.