*photo courtesy Chris Farina/Top Rank

On Saturday night, Manny Pacquiao will make his long-awaited lightweight debut against the man whom many consider to be the safest of the 135-pound champions, David Diaz. Many wonder if Pacquiao, (46-3-2, 35 KO), who turned pro as a junior flyweight, will outgrow his effectiveness with the addition of five pounds. Meanwhile, others wonder if the relatively unheralded Diaz, (34-1, 17 KO), can make the most of this extraordinary opportunity. The hope is that all questions will be answered conclusively in a fight that could produce fireworks.

Diaz' Gameplan

For the underdog Diaz to win, he needs to utilize a very cerebral approach against Pacquiao. While he's a big lightweight, he's not exactly a big puncher. With only 17 knockouts in his 34 wins, he's likely going to be the second hardest puncher in the ring. Since he'll have difficulty hurting Pacquiao, he won't own the usual advantages held by the bigger man.

As a result, David Diaz will have to make his size a factor in the fight. He will need to pressure Pacquiao and let him know what it's like to have a true lightweight leaning all over him for twelve rounds. This won't be an easy task. In his biggest fight to date against a faded Erik Morales, Diaz was able to muscle up on Morales largely because he had an opponent who was willing to remain stationary. He won't find that against Pacquiao.

This is where a disciplined fight plan comes into play for Diaz. He needs to work behind a steady jab, maintaining constant contact with Pacquiao. Utilizing a consistent jab has never been a strong suit for Diaz, who often wades in with lead lefts and wild combinations. Sloppiness just won't do on Saturday. Diaz will need to cut off the ring, use his jab to get close, and make then fight as rough and physical as possible. His skills simply aren't at Manny's level, so he needs to make his heart and fighting spirit compensate instead.

Pacquiao's Gameplan

Going in against Diaz, Pacquiao's strategy is simple: prove that he is out of Diaz' league. Not surprisingly, the former super featherweight king brings with him a significant edge in speed. Perhaps even more notably, though, is the fact that the Pacman also appears to possess the advantage when it comes to punching power. He was able to blitz his opponents at 130 pounds with his slashing punches, so it stands to reason that his punches will still carry some authority at 135.

Even though he hits harder than David Diaz, Pacquiao must resist the temptation to charge through Diaz. Harsh reality might slap Pacquiao when he finds it takes a little more to chop down a big, strong lightweight than past opponents. It would behoove Manny to exploit his speed advantage, choosing his punches wisely as Diaz is certain to give him numerous

openings. With his quicker hands, Pacquiao needs to get his punches off and get gone. Though he could probably be successful trading against Diaz, it seems illogical for Pacquiao to remain still and give Diaz his only hope for victory.

If Pacquiao can frustrate Diaz with movement and crisp combination punching, things could get easier for the Filipino superstar as the fight wears on. A frustrated Diaz will likely get desperate and sloppy, making the targets even easier for a sharpshooting Pacquiao to find. If Pacquiao chooses to fight intelligently, it could be an easy night's work.

How It Will Go Down:

Experts have made much about the difficulties Pacquiao will experience by going up in weight, but one of the first things Pacquiao will notice at the opening bell will work to his advantage. Judging from Diaz' most recent fights, the pace of the action will be noticeably slower for Pacquiao. As compared to the high speed chess he participated in with the likes of Juan Manuel Marquez, Pacquiao will find Diaz more lumbering and methodical than his previous opponents. For Diaz, this spells trouble, as Pacquiao will make good on the split-second differences in speed.

What could also prove disastrous for Diaz is his propensity to eat punches, particularly when he is in close. Against both Erik Morales and Kendall Holt, Diaz demonstrated plenty of bad habits on the inside. His worst habit comes when trying to find a home for his left hand. When throwing the left in close quarters, Diaz steps forward with his left foot, squaring himself up to his opponent. This is problematic on three fronts: he compromises the impact of his left hand, he creates a bigger punching target for his opponent, and he has no balance should he absorb a counter in return. Morales and Holt both exploited this habit, as both men dumped Diaz on the seat of his pants with a well timed counter as he rushed forward. No doubt Pacquiao and trainer Freddie Roach have noticed this in preparing for Diaz. Expect this to become a factor on Saturday night.

When it comes down to it, Diaz just doesn't appear to possess the chops to perform at the level required for success against a fighter like Pacquiao. His lack of speed will limit him if the bout is fought at range. If he can get the fight on the inside, which is where he needs it, Diaz could prove to be his own worst enemy as mentioned above. This pretty much leaves him in no man's land against Pacquiao.

From this perspective, here's the best guess as to how Saturday night will unfold:

Diaz and Pacquiao will fight on fairly even terms early, as Pacquiao adjusts to fighting a larger foe as well as his first southpaw opponent in several fights. A tenacious and adrenaline-filled Diaz might even have some success crowding Pacquiao and making things ugly. As the fight wears on, though, Pacquiao's greater speed and sharper punching will create more distance, as Diaz struggles to find Plan B. With no answers, Diaz will be reduced to plodding forward, lunging in with the occasional ineffective lead left hand. Pacquiao, meanwhile, will continue to pepper the outclassed Diaz. While it wouldn't be surprising to see a stoppage late, it might be even more likely to see Freddie Roach advise his fighter to cruise down the stretch with the fight

well in hand.

Manny's lightweight debut will be a smashing success.

The Pick:

Pacquiao UD 12 Diaz