

Written by Ron Borges
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Manny Pacquiao isn't the only one who wants to see himself in the ring with Oscar De La Hoya. Surprisingly, so does his trainer, Freddie Roach.

Roach is never one for overstatement. When he speaks people listen not only because he is one of boxing's finest trainers but also because he has never been much for hype or hysteria. When asked a question he does his best to answer with the unvarnished truth. So when the subject of the newly crowned lightweight champion's name being prominently mentioned as a possible opponent for the five-time world champion came up recently in conversation, Roach didn't hesitate.

"That fight's makeable," Roach said last weekend in Las Vegas. "We'd need some things in our favor. It can't be all one way. Oscar wants to fight at 150. We want to fight at 147. I'm pushing for a same-day (as the fight) weigh-in. So we'll see, but we want the fight.

"It's a risk and reward type fight. If we can make a fair deal, moneywise and otherwise, then we'll take it."

Roach's enthusiasm for a fight in which he's willing to pit his 135-pound champion against a man who once held the middleweight title and who is for all intents and purposes finishing his career as a junior middleweight is surprising because we're talking about a guy who started fighting at 106 pounds facing a former 160-pound world champion. But Roach knows Pacquiao better than anyone and he is also the trainer who prepared De La Hoya for his razor-thin loss to Floyd Mayweather, Jr. so he has insights into where each man stands at this stage of their careers. What those insights tell him is that the time is right for Manny Pacquiao to strike.

"I don't feel Oscar can pull the trigger any more," Roach said. "If Steve Forbes can hit him and mark him up (as he did in May) I feel Pacquiao can hit him at will.

"Bob (Arum, who promotes Pacquiao and at one time promoted De La Hoya but now seems to bear a deep-seated grudge against his former fighter for leaving him to start his own promotional company) said he didn't want to see Manny get hurt. I told him I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't put one of my fighters in a fight I didn't believe he had a chance to win.

"Oscar trains hard. I've worked with him. I know how hard he prepares. He was as good as he can get for Forbes and look at the way his face looked after the fight.

"Timing is everything in sports. Oscar is 36. Manny is in his prime. I don't see Manny getting hurt. I see Manny putting it on him."

Roach said Arum had been begging him to tone down such rhetoric out of concern that De La Hoya might take his comments to heart and hence refuse the fight, but with Miguel Cotto now out of the picture as a possible Dec. 6 opponent for the Golden Boy's fistic swan song, De La

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Hoya is running out of options.

It is unlikely he wants any part of Cotto's conqueror, the lanky and lethal Antonio Margarito, and 5-6 Ricky Hatton long ago made clear he wasn't going to put himself in with a guy who is now a natural 154 pounder because he learned the hard way he's a natural 140 pounder.

Felix Trinidad is more a light heavyweight these days than a guy who could make 150 and so here alone it seems, stands Pacquiao.

One fight into a term as WBC lightweight champion, Pacquiao is the littlest man standing but one willing to stand up to De La Hoya and move up two weight divisions to do it. The problem however may not be Pacquiao's weight, according to Roach. It may be De La Hoya's.

"If he insists on 150 I say no," Roach said. "I think 147 is Manny's upper limit. After the weigh-in for (then WBC lightweight champion David) Diaz, Manny was 134 ½ but he had to lose a pound that day. He told me after, 'Next fight is at 140.' By fight time, he was 146, 147.

"That's a weight he could make but he'll need speed to beat this guy and at 150 he might lose some of that. Food slows you down. We have to keep the advantages we can because Oscar will have a lot of physical advantages already in height and reach and the fact he's naturally bigger and stronger than Manny.

"That's why I want the fight at 147. Oscar struggled to make 147. He was supposed to be 150 for Forbes and he couldn't make it. He came in a pound over but they let it go. We want the fight but we can't give him every advantage he wants."

At 147, Roach believes Pacquiao will be too fast and perhaps too powerful for the aging De La Hoya, who was unable to hurt Forbes even though he won a lopsided decision from him when they met at the Home Depot Center in May.

What was most important to Roach was that De La Hoya's face was swollen and marked after the fight despite Forbes' reputation as a light hitting junior lightweight. Roach looks at that and thinks of Pacquiao, who is presently viewed as the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world, and salivates at the thought of his fighter squaring off with De La Hoya in what it supposed to be the final fight of his career.

"Bob keeps telling me, 'Don't say Oscar can't pull the trigger!'" Roach said. "He says, 'You're scaring him by saying he's shot,' but it's not a secret any more. You think Oscar doesn't know? Oscar was a great fighter and a great athlete but his best years are behind him.

"It's amazing to me that a guy with all his experience still gets so tense in the first five rounds of a fight. That's the reason he stopped jabbing against Mayweather. He wears himself out. I wish I'd known him better (before the Mayweather fight) but it was my first time working with him. If I had I would have slapped him in the face in the corner and told him to get back on the jab because Mayweather couldn't do anything when he was using it.

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“I did that once with Johnny Tapia and it worked beautifully but I knew Johnny a lot better. I didn’t know how Oscar would react. When I did it with Johnny he snapped out of it, won the fight and then slapped me in the locker room and told me he owed me one. That’s Johnny. With Oscar, I didn’t know how he would react.”

Roach doesn’t know how De La Hoya will react to the idea of fighting at 147 again after struggling to get down to 150 for Forbes either but with a six-inch advantage in reach and nearly as much in height Roach believes De La Hoya will look at the matchup and conclude he is simply too big and too powerful a puncher for Pacquiao to handle, even at the welterweight limit.

Roach understands why he might come to that conclusion and part of it is the blinding effect of one last massive payday on the biggest stage. De La Hoya is one of the most popular fighters in boxing history and Pacquiao is fast becoming one of the sport’s biggest box office attractions. Together they might well shatter every pay-per-view record in existence, a fitting way for De La Hoya to leave the sport he has all but single-handedly kept alive.

Roach hopes De La Hoya eventually sees things their way because that would lead to the fight he wants more than all but one of the possibilities out there for Pacquiao.

“If we could get Hatton at 140 that’s the No. 1 fight for Manny,” Roach said. “Financially it would be huge because of the following the two guys have and it couldn’t help but be a great fight because of their styles. I just think Manny is too fast for Hatton and has too much power.

“But Hatton is fighting in November (vs. Paulie Malignaggi) so that’s out until next year. If we have to fight (Humberto) Soto in November I’d rather just wait for Hatton next year or challenge Oscar.

“Oscar has that great hook but Manny naturally moves away from that as a southpaw. Stylewise it’s a good fight for Manny.”

Now all Bob Arum has to do is convince Oscar De la Hoya that Freddie Roach is wrong about that. Considering the respect he has for Roach as a trainer that may be more easily said than done but Manny Pacquiao comes with the two things De La Hoya seems to be looking for in a final opponent – the presence of marketability and the absence of size.

At 147 pounds Pacquiao has both, but in Freddie Roach he has more than that. He has in his corner someone who believes he has all it will take to make Oscar De La Hoya’s retirement party a tear-jerker, not a triumph.