Apparently, Oscar De La Hoya believes in magic.

“I have to improve my speed,’’ the soon-to-be 36 year-old, six-time world champion said Thursday afternoon while discussing his now finalized Dec. 6 showdown with pound-for-pound champion Manny Pacquiao in Las Vegas.

“I have to figure out quick how we’re going to neutralize his speed. I do have to adapt to his speed. I know he’s a very powerful puncher with both hands but the tricky part is his speed. I have to find a way to pull the trigger, the way Freddie Roach said.’’

Actually, what Pacquiao’s trainer said was that he no longer believed De La Hoya could pull the trigger. This was not idle speculation on Roach’s part or the rantings of some television talking head. This was one of the world’s best trainers speaking after having worked with De La Hoya to prepare him for his fight with Floyd Mayweather, Jr. last year.

What Roach believes he saw then, and what was reaffirmed for him during De La Hoya’s less-than-impressive victory over former junior lightweight champion Steve Forbes in May, was a fighter in the midst of the slow slide they all must face. He saw openings that closed before De La Hoya could get to them. He saw punches land that should have been slipped. He saw a guy, his guy at the time, fade in the late rounds against Mayweather when a sterner mental and physical resolve to keep using his jab might have brought him a victory. He saw, in other words, an old fighter starting to emerge.

None of those things guarantees Pacquiao, who Roach has long trained, will hold up against the punches of a far bigger man. It doesn’t guarantee that when he lands what were devastating power punches when they hit 122-pound and 130-pound opponents will carry with them the same effect against a guy who at one time was middleweight champion of the world.

But one thing that is guaranteed is that you don’t get faster as a fighter at the age of 36. You don’t get faster as a fighter when you agree to move down to 147 pounds for the first time in seven years, eight months and 13 days either. And you don’t get faster facing an unfamiliar southpaw style that has always given you fits in the past.

So if De La Hoya is relying on speed, rather than his superior size and his longer jab (five to six inch reach advantage), he is making another in what has become a string of bad choices in the lead-up to this match.

De La Hoya was looking for one last, shining moment, one final big payday when all the lights would shine on him. At first he hoped to make Ricky Hatton, the squat, 140-pound champion, his foil but Hatton wisely declined, perhaps realizing it’s one thing to be stopped by a 147-pound Mayweather but quite another to take on a guy who has most recently held titles at 154 and 160 pounds.

He spoke of perhaps fighting then welterweight champion Miguel Cotto, over whom he would also have held a sizeable advantage in height and reach, but Antonio Margarito beat him to beating up Cotto and De La Hoya apparently wanted no part of the winner. Had he opted for Margarito it would have been a very big night for boxing against a guy who stands the same height as De La Hoya and has the same 73-inch reach.

Instead he opted for a big night against a little man, challenging the 5-foot-6, 135 pound Pacquiao, whose reach extends only 67 inches and who began his career fighting at 106 pounds, a 24-pound advantage over where De La Hoya began his.

However, why De La Hoya opted for Pacquiao had little to do with his obvious size advantages, although that was part of it, and it had nothing to do with the supposed challenge he began to feel after Roach opined that Pacquiao would beat him. He sought the fight for the same reason he is still in boxing – it carried with it a projected record-breaking $100 million payday.

One can certainly see why that would be attractive because De La Hoya has been about setting records at the gate and on pay-per-view for years. To go out with one last such mega-attraction surely carried great allure. But the biggest question may prove to be whether that allure blinded De La Hoya to harsh realities.

The first is that you don't get faster at 36, no matter how hard you train. At this stage he is a part-time fighter and one who is 3-3 in his last six fights, 0-5 in the biggest ones of his career and clearly beginning to slip. A few years ago, De La Hoya would have rid the ring of Forbes in five or six rounds. Last May he was forced to go the distance with him and left the ring with a bruised and swollen face from an opponent not known for his punching power.

Pacquiao and Roach both saw those things and viewed them in the same way Sugar Ray Leonard viewed Marvin Hagler the night he struggled with John Mugabi. They saw slippage of a kind that would create an opening for them.

"I saw his last performance,'' Pacquiao said from Manila, where it was 2:30 a.m. when he joined De La Hoya on a conference call to announce the fight. "I think I'm faster and stronger than him. And I'm younger. I believe I can beat him the way I beat (David) Diaz (to win the lightweight title in his first fight at 135 pounds).

"The point is my speed is going to be effective in this fight. He's taller than me but I believe I'm stronger than him. I think this is a blessing from God.''

De La Hoya (39-5, 30 KO) may feel the same way and he may prove to be right but agreeing to go down to 147 when he struggled to make 150 in May and accepting Pacquiao's insistence upon eight ounce gloves rather than 10 ounces seem unwise decisions designed more to force Pacquiao to accept a smaller split of the purse than he wanted.

Choosing to seek out perhaps the best left-handed fighter in the world was another unwise choice, one De La Hoya even felt it necessary to acknowledge.

"I have to keep in mind Manny Pacquiao is a southpaw,'' De La Hoya said. "The ones I've fought in the past I haven't done very well with. He's the strongest, fastest southpaw fighter I've ever faced.''

So not only is De La Hoya expecting to become faster at an age where all athletes begin to slow down, he's also acknowledging that he must fight better against a left-handed opponent than he ever has before while at the same time conceding this will be the best southpaw he's ever been in with. Are we missing some logic here?

Hagler made similarly unwise choices before the Leonard fight, becoming the only Leonard opponent to earn more than he did but giving away the edges he needed in rounds and ring size. Those conspired against Hagler and led to his demise. Whether the same will be true for De La Hoya only time will tell but Las Vegas oddsmakers opened the fight at a surprising 8-to-5, a much closer margin than many expected.

The other point that seems to have eluded De La Hoya was his contention that "This is not going to hurt my legacy. My legacy is already cemented. They can't take back what I've accomplished in the ring.''

That's true but the question more and more becomes what exactly was that? De La Hoya became the most popular fighter in history, the largest grossing fighter ever, a guy who combined with Mayweather to earn more on pay-per-view in one night than even the great heavyweights. But his record is 0-5 in his biggest fights unless one wants to include the first fight with Julio Cesar Chavez, which would make him 1-6.

That translates into Thomas Hearns numbers, not Ray Leonard numbers. If Pacquiao were to find a way to beat him De La Hoya would be in danger of becoming what his business associate and friend Richard Schaefer once called his rival, Fernando Vargas.

The CEO of Golden Boy Promotions once said if Vargas did not win a particular fight he would "simply be a guy who sold a lot of tickets.'' Sadly, if De La Hoya loses to the undersized Pacquiao the same may be said of him.

So then what? Where would he go from there?

Back to the board room or back into the ring at a time in his life when it has become a more dangerous environment than it once was for him? Thursday De La Hoya hinted he might do just that only months after saying in April "There's not going to be no 2009, no fights after December…I know it's the last time I'll step in the ring in December.''

That may still be his plan but regardless on Dec. 6 he will step in the ring at the MGM Grand Garden Arena to fight a smaller, younger, left-handed opponent hoping, he says, that he'll be faster than he was six months ago or a year ago or two years ago.

If he is, he'll be the first aging fighter who got faster after getting his orbital bone broken in his last fight.