

Thunderstruck

Written by Springs Toledo
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“Thunderstruck” by AC/DC blared as Manny Pacquiao made his way to the ring with his entourage. Two men who looked like giants walked behind him. On the left was Michael Moorer, former light heavyweight titlist and history’s first southpaw heavyweight champion who is now operating as the chief assistant trainer at the Wild Card Gym in Hollywood. Moorer knocked out his first 26 opponents. On the right was the professional wrestler David Batista –a half-Filipino man-mountain known as “The Animal.” Trainer Freddie Roach’s prediction that Manny would stop Ricky Hatton inside of three rounds was a whisper on everyone’s mind.

Pacquiao himself provided the contrast to these ominous sounds and images. He smiled his boyish smile, stepped into the ring, and went immediately to the corner to get down on his knees and pray.

As it was, the fanfare was entirely appropriate. And Roach was right. With exactly eight seconds left in the second round, Pacquiao threw a dummy right jab, got low while weaving slightly to his left and launched a left hook that slammed into the side of Hatton’s chin. It landed at the short angle where the receiver turns into the Scarecrow collapsing on the yellow brick road. The chin is forced into the raised left shoulder, unconsciousness is immediate, the head hits the canvas, the lungs heave for breath, and the eyes stare at something far away. We’ve seen it many times. It ain’t pretty.

However, there are two sides to every great knockout. The receipt can be morbid or even frightening. The delivery can sometimes approach the aesthetic. The execution and effect of Pacquiao’s punch makes it about as devastating as any shot that we’ve seen in a heavily-promoted fight since Hearns’ lullaby lasers. Indeed, round thirteen in Marciano-Walcott I and round five in Robinson-Fullmer II may have competition for their respective claims of “the perfect punch.” At the very least, from this point forward no “boxing’s great knockouts” compilation will be complete without round two of Pacquiao-Hatton.

At the first bell, Hatton came out of his corner like a landlord coming out of his house with a shotgun. For a few seconds, Pacquiao behaved like a trespasser caught in the line of fire. He backed off, stepped away to the side and out of range, and threw tentative punches. He seemed a bit jittery. Strategy soon declared supremacy over the nerves as right hooks (not straight lefts, as expected) started looping out at Hatton’s chin.

Like an agitated landlord, Hatton’s aggression wasn’t quite the thinking type. He came out of his house armed, but in a straight line. And that wasn’t the least of his errors. Hatton was dropping his hands despite Floyd Joy’s exhortations to keep his hands up, and his head was almost statue- still. Hatton’s most elemental fault is that he tends to fight tensely. He grits his teeth and clenches his muscles and has never learned to fight with fluidity, to be loose. When he tries, it’s forced and lasts only as long as stress is low. Fighters like this are prone to shatter. This is why we pack cookie jars in bubble wrap. It’s why your car has shock absorbers. We can’t wrap our chins in bubble wrap or attach shock absorbers to our necks, but we can roll with

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punches and fight in a relaxed manner so as to decrease the risk of a knockout.

Meanwhile, loose and fluid Manny was throwing arcing shots from a crouch and he was timing and finding the ostensibly stronger man. Five of the southpaw's right hooks landed in the first two minutes.

The sixth right hook that connected in the first round was thrown by Pacquiao as Hatton was throwing his left hook. Manny landed it while beginning a weave, got under the hook, and then immediately spun off to his right and resumed position to punch. Hatton's whizzing left hook looked like the propeller of a crashing helicopter, accelerating him downward while birdies flew around his head. He got up at the count of eight. At the end of the round, he went down again from a straight left. He was trained to expect straight lefts, but was taking so many unexpected shots from unexpected angles that he may have forgotten about it or was too cloudy to even think about it. Pacquiao had found his rhythm and his range and was landing hard shots.

Pacquiao, as Manny Steward observed, demonstrated the ability to combine offense and defense simultaneously. This is rare for an aggressive fighter. It is less rare for a great fighter. In his prime, Roberto Duran was able to do this masterfully due to superb training and surprising agility. Neither Manny's technique nor his beard is as full as Duran's, but his agility, ferocity, and use of angles are indeed comparable. His resume is on track to do the same. Incidentally, Duran had a timeless nickname –Hands of Stone. Perhaps Manny should get his nickname out of the eighties. If he cannot get timeless he can at least get modern; after all, he doesn't just eat up his opponents like Pacman, he gets downright "Matrix" in how he does it.

Dropped twice and stunned more than a few times, Hatton was glassy-eyed but kept on coming. I kept thinking of the metaphorical landlord. It turned out that the metaphorical trespasser had three guns to his one and was shooting him to pieces right there on his own turf. The landlord, shocked and bewildered, was still coming. He had to –it's his house. He had to; even though he knew in his heart of hearts he wasn't going to win this.

At the end, Ricky was out cold for well over a minute. Laid out on his lawn. He regained his senses and left without being interviewed. As I watched him leave the ring, I could almost hear King Levinsky, who lasted less than a round against Joe Louis, offer his own insights about being knocked out: "It's not the blows, much as they hurt. But it's all them witnesses. Everybody watching you. You split to pieces, like a goddamn plate glass window hitting the sidewalk."

The look on Hatton's face as he departed was a mixture of dejection and embarrassment. I'd like to suggest to him that he should be neither. He has far less flaws as a man than he does as a fighter and that's something to aspire to. He has reminded us all that the best nobility is found among the working classes, among those who laugh at themselves, who'd die for their family, and who make their way by the sweat of a brow and the camaraderie of friends. He is a champion familiar with glory and only recently introduced to defeat. He is a man who did not go gently to that introduction.

Ricky Hatton should be encouraged to keep a proper perspective. He lost but one house last night. He will never lose his home, for his home is in the hearts of thousands, plus one, who

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sing of his heroism ...even as he falls.