

Going to the Well Once Too Often - The Case For Cotto Over Pacquiao

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Tuesday, 10 November 2009 19:00

I am a big fan of Manny Pacquiao's. Unlike almost any veteran champion, he has taken the style that brought him to the title and relatively late in his career refined it in noticeable ways. In the past few years he's developed into a two handed puncher. His balance has improved. He's now a threat whether leading or counter-punching. He moves his head. Success hasn't caused him to slack off in his training either and he's still almost as fierce a presence now as when he was a hungry junior lightweight.

I want to be clear about the esteem in which I hold Pacquiao because of the kind of heat any criticism of him or any suggestion that he might lose a fight creates. The guy will definitely go down as an all-time pound-for-pound great. But vastly too much has been made of his last two easy wins over Oscar De La Hoya and Ricky Hatton - fighters who, at least on the night they got in the ring with Manny, may as well have been wearing "slaughter me" signs on their backs.

These observations are easy to make in hindsight, and I'll admit to not recognizing the glaring hints of the obsolescence exhibited by each of the bigger fighters prior to their stepping into the ring with Pacquiao.

More accurately, I knew that De La Hoya was finished, but I didn't think it'd matter. I assumed the size advantage he had over Manny would be insurmountable. I forgot the lesson of Sugar Ray Leonard versus Hector Camacho: Once you're done, you're really done. And I couldn't get past the fact that like Leonard did Camacho, De La Hoya asked for the fight with Pacquiao. How many times do fighters go and knock on the a fighters door who they're not sure they can beat when they can order from the menu?

I assumed that Pacquiao would beat Hatton, but didn't anticipate the kind of public execution it wound up being. Pacquiao looked sensational stopping Hatton with a single overhand left that caught him perfectly on his chin.

But I wonder if the inferences that many observers made seeing those fights might not be a slight misinterpretation as to what they indicated.

I believe that the real Manny Pacquiao is closer to being the guy we saw going 24 more or less even rounds with Juan Manuel Marquez than the one who destroyed De La Hoya and Hatton. (Conversely, I think Marquez is closer to being the guy we saw in with Pacquiao than the severely compromised fighter fattened up in order to make Floyd Mayweather look good.)

This observation isn't meant to denigrate Manny Pacquiao. Juan Manuel Marquez is one hell of a fighter, and holding your own with him (and never officially losing to him) is a fearsome accomplishment.

But Manny Pacquiao isn't a welterweight. Picture Ray Robinson or Emile Griffith or Thomas Hearns: those are welterweights. Prefer a more contemporary fighter? Try Paul Williams. There

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are even those who believe Pacquiao may not even be a legitimate junior welterweight.

Miguel Cotto has grown into being a solid 147-pounder, but he's not so big that making the contracted weight of 145 against Pacquiao is going to kill him. He was, after all, only 146 for his last fight four months ago.

There's a general consensus that Cotto is not the fighter he was before being knocked out by Antonio Margarito thirteen months ago. His recent split decision win over Joshua Clottey has been trotted out as confirmation of this demise.

Maybe so. But there are ways of looking at that fight that provide an alternative reading. And there's an earlier fight in Cotto's career that should make Freddy Roach at least a little bit nervous.

No, I won't try to make a case for chronic front-runner Zab Judah being the fighter that Manny Pacquiao is. But his comparative deficiencies are mostly tied to matter of character, not talent. Zab is bigger and stronger than Manny. He's as fast. His boxing fundamentals are in the same ballpark. Like Pacquiao, he is a southpaw.

Two and a half years ago, I watched Cotto systematically change Zab Judah from a supremely confident fighter thrilled to be fighting in Madison Square Garden into a guy who was just trying to find anyplace in the ring where he could catch a breath. When Cotto made sure there were no such places, the fight ended. Judah's beating was the product of great body punching, patience, and evolved ring intelligence. The knockout loss was inevitable.

Zab Judah can be made to grow discouraged in a way that would be foreign to Manny Pacquiao. I acknowledge that Pacquiao won't fold, won't stop fighting, and won't mentally throw in the towel. But anybody who fights Cotto gets banged around a lot. And I can't imagine Freddy Roach not stepping in if he thinks it's necessary.

For Manny to win, he has to be like a piranha, moving in and out, taking a bite each time. And he should hope that Miguel's skin continues to deteriorate. Put together Cotto's tendency to start slowly with Pacquiao's ability to be off first right from the gate and it's easy to conclude that the first few rounds will favor the smaller, faster man.

After the fourth, though, Cotto's pressure will become inexorable. And it will slowly begin to do its work. Pacquiao has faced three opponents who were better fighters than Cotto (Marco Antonio Barrera, Juan Manuel Marquez, and Eric Morales), but all of those fights were held at featherweights or super featherweight. He has never been hit nearly as hard as he will be hit on November 14th. I'd don't think his frame will accept it. It's not a question of aptitude, heart, or accomplishment; Pacquiao has long since earned his spot in Canastota. But the choice here is Miguel Angel Cotto by TKO in the later mid-rounds.

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