

THE FINAL PRESS CONFERENCE: Manny Is Loose, Cotto Has Game Face On

Written by Ronan Keenan

Tuesday, 10 November 2009 19:00

LAS VEGAS -- The deference between Manny Pacquiao and Miguel Cotto was upheld at Thursday's final pre-fight press conference, the last chance for promoters to crank up the publicity machine ahead of this weekend's showdown at the MGM Grand.

The tone was relaxed, with promoter Bob Arum exclaiming that both fighters have been among the most cooperative and agreeable he has ever worked with. But even-tempered, respectful characters don't necessary engender sizable pay-per-view sales.

Mark Taffet, Senior Vice President of HBO Sports Pay Per View, took the dais and stated that Saturday's fight will emulate Floyd Mayweather-Juan Manuel Marquez and become the second event this year to garner over one million sales – a feat that has not been achieved since 1999 [when Holyfield-Lewis and De La Hoya-Trinidad set the record]. If Cotto-Pacquiao is to attain such a buy-rate it will be attributable to interest in a compelling prizefight rather than curiosity in dramatic subplots.

Cotto came to the press conference decked out in shades, a black tie and grey suit, while Pacquiao, possibly signaling a growing comfort with press events, shunned formal attire in favor of a casual shirt and jeans combination. The 30-year-old Filipino also seemed at ease as he spoke coherently in English, while smiling throughout his time on the platform.

"This fight is the most important fight in my boxing career. If I win this fight, it's history for boxing and the Philippines, and it's a great honor for my country," said Pacquiao through a gleaming grin. "I want to give the people enjoyment on that night. I respect Miguel Cotto's team. They are nice guys. They are friendly."

And while Puerto Rico's Cotto also demonstrated lucid English in speaking highly of his opponent, he seemed a little less chirpy than Pacquiao, perhaps weighed down by the effort of squeezing down to the contractually agreed limit of 145 pounds. Cotto, 29, did look a little gaunt, but no more so than before his recent fights.

"I have trained very hard and I know the skills of Manny, but I have a gameplan," said Cotto.

Whilst the event's sponsors were orating on stage, Cotto's eyes continually scanned the audience, shifting from one side of the auditorium to the other. Conversely, Pacquiao scribbled incessantly on a piece of paper, seemingly locked away in his own world, far away from the gaze of the sizable press contingent.

When it came for the fighters to pose for the traditional face-off, Cotto suddenly adopted a stony glare, with furrowed eyebrows and deadpan eyes. Yet Pacquiao had little interest in a staring contest, breaking away from eye contact in fits of laughter after just a few seconds. Cotto tried to continue the face-off, but soon gave up and broke into a smile.

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Saturday's fight may have a modest hype factor, but that hasn't suppressed mainstream interest in Manny Pacquiao. The Wall Street Journal and New York Times are reportedly covering the fight, while Time magazine recently dedicated a five-page feature to the fighter.

However, the recent upsurge in the sport's crossover appeal may have gone to Arum's head on Thursday, with the promoter claiming that articles relating to Cotto-Pacquiao are the most read stories on newspapers' websites.

"[Writers] tell me that when there's an article that they write on this fight ... it's the number one article on the site. That's proof in the interest in this fight and proof in the interest in boxing," declared Arum. "Sponsors and advertisers are going to come flocking back to this sport."

Despite such apparent signs of strength in the promotion, Arum wouldn't make a prediction on the pay-per-view sales for the fight. "I don't have to go into numbers," he said.

There was plenty of hallow trinket-trumpeting on Thursday, with news that the fight's winner will receive the World Boxing Organization's Super Champ welterweight belt, even though the contest is being fought two pounds south of the welterweight limit. In addition, Mauricio Sulaiman of the World Boxing Council took to the stage to announce that the winner will also be presented with the organization's first ever diamond belt.

"There are 600 diamonds on the belt," said Sulaiman of the award that is reportedly worth \$50,000. "It is not a new championship, it is just a trophy."

But if the fight's winner will not garner the WBC's proper championship, why was the organization given such a prominent role at the press conference? Evidently, promoters still believe that shiny baubles can help sell a fight, and the WBC's willingness to invent a diamond-encrusted trophy helped patch up the historically stormy relationship between the alphabet group and Bob Arum.

"[The WBC] will also present a special diamond medal to Mr Arum," added Sulaiman. "I'm very proud to be here."

Last year, Arum refused to even credential the organization's president Jose Sulaiman for the Pacquiao-Oscar De La Hoya event.

Even though Cotto is considered the defending champion, the seating arrangements for the press conference left little doubt as to which fighter is the star attraction. While five of Pacquiao's associates were permitted to sit on the dais, only two members from team Cotto were given a placement.

Incidentally, the organizers sat Pacquiao's conditioning coach Alex Ariza and advisor Michael Koncz next to each other, and despite a well-documented bust-up between the two, they were all smiles on Thursday. Both men got a chuckle when Bob Arum described Koncz as the media's "whipping boy" of the last few weeks. Although Ariza, who reportedly launched a two-fisted flurry at Koncz last month, didn't seem quite as willing as Koncz to engage in the

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banter.

While most insiders are favoring a Pacquiao victory, former three-weight world titlist Iran Barkley believes Cotto can overcome the odds on Saturday. "I like Cotto, he's very tough," said Barkley. "And he's had to put up with Bob Arum for the whole of his career; that means he has good mental strength." □ □

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