

Rock Newman Knows The Best Fights Aren't Always Made

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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There is a scene in the 1972 film classic, *The Godfather*, in which Michael Corleone, temporarily exiled to Sicily while his family engages in a bloody mob war back in America, is walking through the hills when he spots a passing beauty and is immediately transfixed.

You got struck by the thunderbolt,” one of Michael’s bodyguards tells him, using a local term for love at first sight.

Boxing fans know a variation of the feeling. Even hard cases have been known to be smitten with a case of man-love for mostly unknown fighters they personally observe for the first time. The new object of their affection might not be leading-man handsome; in fact, he might have a crooked nose and a facial scar or two. But who cares if the fighter in question can punch like a mule kicks, has the requisite amount of skill and charisma, and a predatory style that no doubt would be frowned upon in other areas of polite society?

Ed Schuyler Jr., the retired longtime boxing writer for the Associated Press, had just such an epiphany on Sept. 13, 1971, the night a young Panamanian fighter with jet-black hair, formidable boxing ability and a glee in dispensing punishment made his U.S. debut in Madison Square Garden, on the undercard of a show headlined by Ken Buchanan’s successful WBA lightweight title defense on points against Ismael Laguna. Roberto Duran needed less than a round to wipe out a rugged journeyman named Benny Huertas, and Fast Eddie left the arena believing that he had seen a violent sport’s next big thing. Time would prove him correct; on June 26, 1972, Duran returned to the Garden and brutalized Buchanan in taking his title on a 13th-round TKO, formally introducing the world at large to *Manos de Piedra*.

A similar moment of clarity enveloped me on June 23, 2001, when a little Filipino southpaw wrested the IBF super bantamweight title from South Africa’s Lehlohonolo Ledwaba on a one-sided sixth-round stoppage at the MGM Grand. I made a mental note to remember the name of the little Filipino because, well, I had a hunch he just might turn out to be something truly special.

Yes, that would be Manny Pacquiao.

Rock Newman recalled his own brush with the thunderbolt. He was ringside in New Jersey, mesmerized by the destructive power of Tony Ayala Jr., a seething teenaged tornado from San Antonio.

“I saw Tony in an undercard fight when he was coming up,” said Newman, best known as the manager of former heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe. “I saw that incredible fury, that devastating punching power. It jumped out at me. It happens that way sometimes.”

As fate would have it, Ayala was even more brutal beating up women in drive-in restrooms and apartments he had broken into, which led to his 17-year incarceration (he has since made a

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return trip to prison), forever leaving fight fans to wonder how he might have fared against celebrated contemporaries Duran, Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Ayala's manager, Lou Duva, thinks his guy would have been the equal or more of any of the aforementioned legends, but that is speculative. Those fights never happened, so the title of author George Kimball's engrossing book *Four Kings*, which details each matchup involving Duran, Leonard, Hearns and Hagler, is not *Five Kings*. Ayala is the wild card in the deck of our collective imagination, the ace in the hole that never got played in a high-stakes hand.

But Newman has a keener insight into boxing's might-have-beens than Ayala's penchant for career self-destruction. He and Bowe made millions of dollars together, the three high points of their association being the Bowe-Evander Holyfield trilogy, the finest three-act passion play involving big men since Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier pushed one another to the limits of human endurance in the ring.

Now, with fight fans in frenzied anticipation of a Pacquiao showdown with Floyd Mayweather Jr., interest spiking crazily in the wake of "Pac-Man's" domination and eventual 12th-round TKO of highly regarded WBO welterweight champion Miguel Cotto, Newman reflected on the megafights that Bowe might have engaged in, but didn't.

As wonderful as Bowe-Holyfield I, II and III were, wouldn't boxing have been better served if "Big Daddy" had deigned to mix it up with Mike Tyson, a product of the same blighted Brownsville section of Brooklyn? And what about Bowe seeking revenge against Lennox Lewis, who beat him in the super heavyweight gold-medal bout at the 1988 Seoul Olympics? That never happened either.

Ask Newman about those missed opportunities for pay-per-view bonanzas and he sighs. "You got a couple of hours?" he asks. "That's what it would take to go over all the whys and wherefores for those fights never happened.

"When it comes to making big fights, nothing is automatic. The bridge between wanting to see something, and actually seeing it, can be steep and long. Sometimes it's a bridge that leads to nowhere."

That "bridge to nowhere" not only is where Bowe-Tyson and Bowe-Lewis became stalled and eventually expired, but it's the place where the long-awaited rematch of Bernard Hopkins and Roy Jones Jr. got lost for nearly 17 years. It's where the fight between golden oldies Larry Holmes and George Foreman, which would have done good business, even though both men were in their late 40s, vanished in a puff of smoke.

And if Bowe never got it on with Tyson or Lewis, Newman reasoned, there is at least a possibility that Pacquiao (50-3-2, 38 KOs) and Mayweather (40-0, 25 KOs) will never share a ring. Personalities and contractual conflicts have a way of torpedoing fights that, on the surface, make too much sense to not happen.

Mayweather has filed a lawsuit against Top Rank CEO Bob Arum, his former promoter who now handles Pacquiao, and Arum has countersued. The animosity between Mayweather and

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Arum is palpable, with insults swapped back and forth as if they were baseball cards.

For his part, Mayweather has suggested that a fight with Pacquiao can happen only if Arum recuses himself from the promotion, which isn't going to happen, and if he receives a 60-40 split of the available monies, his rationale being that he's undefeated and Pacquiao isn't. That won't happen either.

Trying to negotiate this minefield of nastiness and recriminations are HBO Sports president Ross Greenburg, who believes an equitable arrangement can be achieved if enough money is thrown at the problem, and Golden Boy executive Richard Schaefer, who has a working arrangement with the Mayweather camp and the difficult task of finding enough common ground with Arum to close the deal. Oh, sure, Schaefer and Arum have done business before, but this negotiation figures to be especially bitter and protracted.

"These guys both have huge egos," Greenburg said, referring to Mayweather and Pacquiao, not necessarily Schaefer and Arum. "But the money we are talking about is astronomical and will set their families up financially for the next century. I think they can be convinced to come to a 50-50 split.

"This fight has to happen. It happened about five times in the '80s. You think of Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns. That's the type of fight this is. This should be our Super Bowl. It will break records, and it will define both guys."

We shall see. Even Newman believes Pacquiao-Mayweather will take place, but he still daydreams of the massive piles of money he and Bowe missed out on because Tyson and Lewis never signed on the dotted line.

"If we know anything by now, it's that nothing is automatic in boxing," Newman said. "If (Pacquiao-Mayweather) doesn't get made, it will because one of the fighters chooses not to take the fight. It won't be about money. It can't be about money. There's too much of it to be made by both sides for that to be a consideration.

"So, yeah, personalities can come into play. It's happened before. Look, it's pretty well-known that Arum and I have never been interested in going out on a double date. That said, Arum, as maddening as he can be at times, is a financially practical person. As a businessman, he won't let anything personal between himself and Mayweather supersede the bottom line.

"Oh, sure, they'll be a lot of posturing back and forth, but at the end of the day Arum is too sensible to let past squabbles get in the way of doing what needs to be done."

Like everyone else, Newman admits to loving the excitement Pacquiao has brought to boxing, a jolt of energy the likes of which we haven't witnessed since the young Tyson was starching a succession of petrified opponents in the mid- to late-1980s.

"Pacquiao's incredible appeal is a combination of things," Newman said. "It's the absolute passion and fury that he brings into the ring. He has this singular, intense destructive focus. I

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think there is a realization, and not just by Filipino people, that he's fighting for more than himself. Every time he steps inside those ropes, he is the heart and soul of a country. It's almost like every Filipino's sense of his own worth is tied to Pacquiao's success. That is an enormous burden for anyone to carry, and I think all of us who watch this guy know that.

"There is a purity to his savagery."

There is also a certain purity to Mayweather, if a lesser dose of savagery. But it is that which makes "Money" so effective that has Newman thinking he would find a way to take down Pacquiao.

"I've observed Floyd Mayweather from the time he was a 4-year-old kid hitting the speed bag," Newman said. "His boxing IQ is greater than anyone else's. I'm not saying his skills, power or any of that are best, but his boxing IQ is.

"He simply knows how to win fights. He knows everything there is to know about range, about angles, about how to hit and not to get hit. I think, as an in-the-ring intellectual, Floyd would figure out a way to win this one, too."