

There's Nothing Magical About Manny Pacquiao's Improvement: Part 1

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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During the lead up to Manny Pacquiao's brilliant dismantling of Joshua Clottey, he'd received more than his share of criticism from people hinting that his blitz through the weight classes on his way to the WBO welterweight title had been assisted by various forms of chemical help. I think that the reason for Pacquiao's being able to retain and even augment his effectiveness is far less mysterious, although much more rare, than his detractors might realize. Manny Pacquiao is one of the very few boxers in the sport's history able to make dramatic improvements after attaining star status, during the very late stages of his prime.

In some circles, this is seen as a kind of magic. But there's nothing magical about it. It's now apparent that Pacquiao is not only one of the most physically gifted fighters we've seen in years, he's also one of the smartest. As he's had to take on increasingly large opponents, there's been an inverse proportion in the balance between physical advantage and strategic superiority.

Pacquiao had already been a champion and was a world class fighter when he lost a decision to Erik Morales in 2005. He was good enough to fight on better than even terms with the likes of Marco Antonio Barrera and Juan Manuel Marquez. That he was able to do this as an essentially one handed brawler with bad balance was a real testament to both his power and his fighting heart. But trainer Freddie Roach understood that, without further technical development, especially as he moved up in weight, Pacquiao was going to reach a point of diminishing returns, and would be getting into tougher and tougher fights. Considering that he'd already engaged in a series of taxing encounters, it would be crucial for Manny to learn new skills.

This is the point where Pacquiao's uniqueness really began to manifest itself. Instead of assuming that what he'd always done would be enough to carry him at the elite level (he was, after all, both a champion and a star), he dedicated himself to learning a repertoire of added techniques. With some things, he had to go back to the drawing board and start with the basics. That he was humble enough to do that tells you a lot about his character.

Although Pacquiao was a fantastic natural fighter, as a southpaw he had relied too heavily on the great power from his left hand. His right was severely underdeveloped. Even though it had power, Manny really didn't know how to deliver with it, and he couldn't use it to set up combinations. He threw lots of punches, but seldom put them together in tactical sequence. Furthermore, his footwork and balance were adequate at best for a fighter of his accomplishment.

Starting with his 2007 rematch with Marco Antonio Barrera, we started to see steady improvement in every facet of Pacquiao's game. By the time he took on Juan Manuel Marquez in 2008, he was able to engage a complete boxer/puncher in an exciting twelve round strategically sophisticated war - a chess match played out with high powered weaponry. His punches were now thrown straight. His right jab and hook were both solid weapons and he was capable of moving in and out quickly while maintaining excellent balance.

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Three months later he was even better, taking on David Diaz for the WBC title in his first fight at lightweight. Diaz wasn't anywhere close to being in Pacquiao's league, but he was a strong, durable guy whose only previous loss had come to the murderously hard punching Kendall Holt at junior welterweight. Pacquiao administered a truly brutal beating to Diaz, systematically breaking him down, judging distance magnificently, remaining nearly untouchable, staying patient, and hurting Diaz throughout all nine rounds before firing off a perfect combination that left him lying in a pool of blood.

Like many, I assumed that 135 pounds was about as far north as Pacquiao could travel while remaining effective. His frame didn't seem suited to carrying much more weight, even taking into account his junior middleweight legs. And it's at about this point that Manny Pacquiao stopped being seen as a fighter and started being looked on as a mythical being. It's where his detractors began to question how what he was accomplishing was humanly possible, and where his supporters began to attribute super human powers to him.

But, as I say, what happened next with Pacquiao isn't mysterious at all. It's just nearly unprecedented. Moving into the welterweight division, Pacquiao appeared to be punching harder than ever. The ability to do this runs contrary to conventional boxing logic. And, in fact, it wasn't what was happening; appearances can often be deceiving.

What was really happening was that Pacquiao was now facing slower moving, less complete, and even possibly shot fighters. If you add in his recently acquired ability to throw punches in strategic combination and his newly found leverage, it's no wonder that what he was landing was causing tremendous damage. He wasn't actually punching any harder; he was just punching more effectively. And he was now punching the right guys.

Because I didn't regard either Oscar De La Hoya or Ricky Hatton as legitimate barometers of Pacquiao's progress (it was evident as soon as they stepped into the ring that both were shot), I thought of Miguel Angel Cotto as the first genuine test of how Pacquiao was faring at a higher weight. He looked great fighting Cotto. Initially, it appeared that taking shots from a hard punching, bigger guy might give him problems. But, by using his legs a lot in the first couple of rounds, in combination with being aggressive, Manny had things well under control by the third round. From that point on, Cotto's style couldn't have been better suited to Pacquiao. Too slow, too confused by the angles of Pacquiao's punches, and too damaged from previous fights, Cotto was a sitting duck, taking a horrific beating until being rescued in the last round.

In spite of how impressive the win was, there was still a small lingering doubt as to how Manny would do against an undiminished, big, powerful, impervious-to-punches welterweight in his prime. Beating Joshua Clottey convincingly would erase any questions about how completely Manny Pacquiao had transformed into a viable welterweight champion.

It was in this fight that Pacquiao showed every aspect of the lessons he'd learned since 2005. Without even scoring a knockdown, he fought the greatest fight of his life. Using a spellbinding combination of power, accuracy, footwork, hand and foot speed, aggression, and boxing skills, Pacquiao made a previously indomitable opponent give up within three rounds. Things grew so one sided that it was soon obvious Pacquiao was trying to make Clottey commit to anything.

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The only possible chance he had to accomplish that was to give Clottey some free shots. Joshua was just too freaked out to take them. He was being hurt constantly, he was scared, and he had no answers. He steadfastly refused to take the bait.

There are guys who'd have been content to take the easy decision. Even though he didn't get it, don't think that Manny wasn't looking for the knockout all night long. He didn't take dumb risks, but there wasn't a moment when he wasn't trying to make something happen. That's just one more thing that makes him a great, great fighter.

Manny Pacquiao is at his very best at this point in time. He is a fighter who had rough edges and weak spots even after he was a world champion, even after he'd beaten fellow greats. But, through hard work, good advice, diligence, and sound scouting by Freddie Roach, and a willingness to address his own liabilities, those rough edges and weak spots no longer exist. He's clearly the best fighter in the world.

Any fighter is beatable, and someone will beat Manny Pacquiao someday. But for the moment, it's hard to imagine who that fighter will be.

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