

BORGES: What Pacquiao Must Avoid Tonight

Written by Ron Borges
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LAS VEGAS – Avoidance is not generally considered to be Manny Pacquiao’s strong point but it may be a critical one tonight.

When Pacquiao enters the ring to face Shane Mosley at the sold out MGM Grand Garden Arena he will be facing a 39-year-old opponent who is a prohibitive underdog and someone few people in or out of boxing believe is his equal. That, of course, is part of what makes Mosley dangerous.

By all accounts Pacquiao has prepared himself well for this fight, trainer Freddie Roach insisting it has been one of their best and last undistracted training camps. That is a sign to Roach that the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world is taking Mosley seriously despite all those who kept telling him this would be an easy fight.

Yet there is more to beating Mosley than simply being prepared for him. At some point, Pacquiao may have to fight himself more than his opponent. Fight off his tendency to go to the ropes when told not to and his willingness to engage in firefights when they are unnecessary and potentially destructive.

Pacquiao (52-3-2, 38 KO) likes to fight and loves to please and he well understands that what has made him a fistic and fiscal phenomenon beyond his wildest dreams is that the public embraces someone who so willingly embraces the idea of pleasing them by risking himself. In other words, Manny Pacquiao likes to fight, even when merely boxing would safely get the job done.

“I like that,” Mosley (46-6-1, 1 ND, 39 KO) said this week. “I like a good scrap.”

What Mosley has always liked are fighters who come to him. He has long struggled with defensive guys like Winky Wright, who beat him twice, and Sergio Mora, with whom Mosley fought a lack luster draw in his last outing eight months ago. One could include Floyd Mayweather, Jr. on that list except that Mayweather, although elusive and a defensive magician is far more dangerous and destructive than that.

Still, Mayweather has never been one to go boldly where others fear to tread, instead sitting back and looking to counter while using his defensive skills to frustrate opponents and create openings. Pacquiao, in contrast, takes fighting at its word.

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This is a great strength but also a worrisome habit that Roach understands he needs to temper early in the fight, when Mosley will be at his most dangerous. It is in those moments that the night will be decided because if Mosley can't do anything then he won't do anything later but take a beating.

"First four rounds, very dangerous," Roach intones. "Shane is a good boxer. He still has speed and he has fast hands, punching power and a lot of experience. He knows how to lure you into trouble."

That is probably the only thing Roach fears about this fight – that a moment could come when Pacquiao is a little too bold and a bit too reckless and Mosley is lying in wait for him and catches him with a right uppercut (as Antonio Margarito and Joshua Clottey both did several times despite the one-sided victories Pacquiao hung on them) or a sizzling right hand counter like the one he briefly hurt Mayweather with in the second round of what became a painfully one-sided fight from the moment that punch landed and buckled Mayweather's knees until Mayweather's hand was raised in victory after he failed to lose another round or be hit with another meaningful punch.

The boxing world looked at that fight and saw a one-sided beating followed by a poor performance against Mora and concluded Mosley is finally damaged goods, an empty shell that appears to be more dangerous than he actually is. Considering that he's fighting a man considered to be the best fighter in the world that would seem to put him in a no-win situation.

Truth be told without Pacquiao's cooperation that is exactly where he is, which brings us to the one concern Roach will have tonight.

"Manny likes to attack," Roach explained. "If he attacks without setting it up he could walk into a counter shot, especially if he goes to the ropes. That's my biggest concern.

"The best place for him to be is in the center of the ring. That's the safest place to fight Mosley. Manny knows the move to make. He knows what to do when he tries to attack.

"The key to this fight is for Manny to box him and not get into exchanges. Mosley likes to rock back and wait to counter you. He doesn't have one-punch (knockout) power but speed is power and he still has speed."

How much is the question? Mosley is 3-2-1 in his last six fights and 8-6-1 with a no decision since sustaining his first loss in 2002 after opening his career 38-0 with 30 knockouts. In short, he's been barely a .500 fighter over the past nine years and .500 fighters would not figure to do well against Pacquiao.

That is why Mosley has been made a prohibitive betting favorite all over town, a fact that has irked him nearly as much as the near constant mentioning of his age and the ravages of time on his skills, which frankly have begun to recede. The rest of the world may see slippage but Mosley sees something else. He sees opportunity for whoever is bold at the right moment tonight.

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“Fans want to see a fight where they know risk is being taken,” Mosley said. “It’s very risky for someone like Manny Pacquiao to fight someone like myself. Is Manny going to get knocked out? Or is Mosley going to get knocked out? The unpredictability of the fight arouses people around the world. Anything can happen that night.”

That the public has bought into that is reflected by the sellout at the Grand Garden, the added closed circuit seats now available and the projected pay-per-view numbers that have led promoter Bob Arum to predict sales of 1.6 million. If that number is reached it would make this a bigger PPV show than the night Pacquiao defeated Oscar De La Hoya several years ago, a stunning possibility considering Mosley’s declining skills and .500 record of late.

Hype is not the same as reality however and so while Roach worries about Mosley landing a booming counter shot or the kind of right hand that orthodox fighters often have an easy time landing on southpaws like Pacquiao, he also understands doing it will be a lot more difficult for Mosley than talking about it.

There is comfort in that. Comfort that underneath it all seems to hint that he feels a Pacquiao blowout is far more likely than a Mosley upset.

“I have a lot of advantages over him,” Mosley insisted. “Now all I have to do is exploit his weaknesses. Once I exploit them I should be able to take care of business.

“People forget. They forget about my punching power. They forget about speed. They forget about all those things.”

If Manny Pacquiao is among those people, Shane Mosley might pull off the biggest upsets of the year in boxing but he is not. That doesn’t mean he can’t make a mistake and be countered and hurt. It doesn’t mean he won’t be forced to eat a number of uppercuts just as he had to do against Clotey and Margarito and Juan Manuel Marquez, who remains the one fighter who has given him fits.

But to do any of that often enough to win, 39-year-old Sugar Shane Mosley – a Sugar no longer as sweet as he once was – will have to overcome serious problems of his own. Problems like Pacquiao’s left-handed stance, which has caused him troubles in the past; problems like Pacquiao’s speed, which is superior to Mosley’s both of hand and foot; problems like his relentlessness, youth, punching volume and power. They are problems that change the equation once they are all factored in.

“The speed and power Manny possesses are unlike anyone I’ve ever seen in my life,” Roach says. “It’s like an explosion when he hits you. Shane’s a great fighter but once in a lifetime a guy like this come along.”

Once in a lifetime guys – if in fact that is what Manny Pacquiao proves to be – don’t lose to 39-year-old guys with a habit lately of losing nearly as often as they win.

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