

In recent years, Manny Pacquiao has grown increasingly important to the sweet science.

Manny Pacquiao: The Face of Boxing

Throughout its history as a mainstream sport, boxing has been inextricably linked in the public mind to the heavyweight champion of the world.

There were times when he wasn't even the best fighter in the division. James Braddock was overshadowed by Joe Louis. Sonny Liston lurked ominously during Floyd Patterson's reign. And in the 1980s, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler, Thomas Hearns, and Roberto Duran shared the spotlight with the heavyweights.

But for most of boxing's history, from the early English pugilists through Mike Tyson and Lennox Lewis (who engaged in the last heavyweight title fight that truly mattered), the heavyweight champion has been The Man. Everyone, not just sports fans, knew his name.

Manny Pacquiao is now more important to boxing than the heavyweight champion. He has become the face of boxing.

A Pacquiao fight is an EVENT, like a rock concert by an iconic performer. He's a standard-bearer for the Filipino people. And their idolatry has rippled around the globe, transforming into crossover appeal insofar as the American public is concerned.

Pacquiao now has international star power. And his fame keeps growing.

The kick-off press tour for the May 7, 2011, fight between Pacquiao and Shane Mosley told the tale. Manny was escorted from place to place like a head of state. The number of media members present at each stop was overwhelming. Tim Smith of the *New York Daily News* summed up what happened when the tour touched down in New York.

"A day with Pacquiao," Smith wrote, "is an exhausting marathon of fighting through clamoring fans, listening to the same questions over and over, and jumping in and out of a caravan of fast-moving black SUVs. As he left the venue, Pacquiao and his group made their way through a

kitchen and were set to walk out of a back entrance. But as security opened the door, they were met with a pack of fans clamoring for autographs. They had to have the fighter wait inside until they could clear a path to his waiting car. Once he got into the car, fans surrounded it, screaming for Pacquiao. Everywhere he goes, people want a piece of him. They want to touch him, take a picture with him, have him sign something. Pacquiao takes it all in stride. 'It's all part of being famous,' he said."

The following day, February 15th, was styled as *Mr. Pacquiao Goes to Washington*. Manny was escorted to the floor of the United States Senate by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid. Then Manny and his wife, Jinkee, journeyed to the White House, where they met with Barack Obama in the Oval Office.

"I'm stunned by what has happened," Bob Arum (Pacquiao's promoter) said afterward. "I knew that Manny could become big, but this has gone beyond my wildest expectations."

There's a difference between a fighter being good and a fighter being marketable. Pacquiao is both.

Why is he so special in the public mind?

One reason is the way in which Arum has promoted him. But Pacquiao's personal qualities are the key.

Ten years ago, I wrote, "To be marketable, a fighter has to appeal, not just to boxing fans, but also to the general public. He has to find his way into the 'people' and 'celebrity' sections of the newspaper. He needs certain personal intangibles and he has to be willing to work at the commercial aspects of the game. Marketing expert Leigh Steinberg states the criteria as follows: 'How can the public identify this figure? What distinguishes him from any other person on the face of the earth? The challenge is to clearly and distinctly create a persona for this individual as opposed to any other person in the world.'"

Pacquiao combines an endearing personality with good looks.

He's generous with his time and wealth.

He sings.

"How good is Manny's singing?" Arum is asked.

"He sings better than Oscar," the promoter answers.

But most notably, Pacquiao has dedicated himself to improving the lives of the Filipino people. Last year, he was elected to Congress; an event that CNN listed as one of "twenty stories that changed Asia" in 2010.

It's too early to know with certainty what Pacquiao's impact in the political arena will be. But with his high profile, he offers hope for raising international awareness and action on such issues as the crusade against slave trafficking.

"People expect a lot from me," Manny says. "I try not to disappoint them."

"If anyone doesn't like Manny Pacquiao, then he must have done something to them personally," says Naazim Richardson (Shane Mosley's trainer). "Because it's impossible to not like Manny Pacquiao."

Then there's Pacquiao, the fighter.

"For me, boxing isn't about hurting each other," Manny says. "Boxing is entertainment and making people happy."

But a fighter has to hurt his opponents to win. And Pacquiao is very good at it.

Manny has won titles in eight weight divisions. That's a remarkable accomplishment. But as Emanuel Steward notes, "It isn't all about Pacquiao moving up in weight. Part of it is that he's just not coming down as far. He hasn't had to starve himself and weaken himself to make weight like so many fighters do today."

Pacquiao has beaten some of the best fighters of his time. Erik Morales, Marco Antonio Barrera, Juan Manuel Marquez, Oscar De La Hoya, Ricky Hatton, Miguel Cotto, and Antonio Margarito are among his victims.

And he's an exciting fighter. Much of his defense is in his offense. In recent years, he has been so dominant in the ring that his excellence is often taken for granted. That's a disservice to Manny's work ethic and the contributions made by Freddie Roach.

Roach began training Pacquiao in 2001, when Manny came to the United States to challenge Lehlohonolo Ledwaba for the IBF 122-pound crown.

Freddie is a teacher. "You teach every fighter differently," he says. "That's because they all learn differently and have different natural ability."

The word from inside Team Pacquiao is that, after less-than-ideal training camps for Manny's fights against Miguel Cotto, Joshua Clottey, and Antonio Margarito, Pacquiao's focus has returned to the level that it was at prior to his fighting Ricky Hatton.

That's bad news for Mosley.

Also, as Naazim Richardson notes, "Things are at a point now where, when you fight Pacquiao, you're fighting the man and you're also fighting the perception of how great he is. People are so busy watching Pacquiao that they don't see what the other guy does. It's like Joe Frazier said about fighting Ali. When Joe hit Ali, they talked about how great Ali's jaw was. When Ali hit Joe, it was, 'Look how fast Ali's hands are.'"

Pacquiao is now the consensus choice among knowledgeable boxing people as the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world. The most compelling argument in favor of his supremacy is the fact that Floyd Mayweather Jr won't fight him.

"I think that Mayweather might be a little scared," Marvelous Marvin Hagler said last year. "If you're going to fight, let's fight. Do you want to fight the guy? Yes or no? Pacquiao is saying, 'Come on! Let's do it today.'"

"Floyd is scared of Pacquiao for some reason," Roy Jones adds. "If they told Ali that he had to fight George Foreman with one hand tied behind his back, he would have done it. And Floyd found a reason to not take the fight."

Pacquiao says simply, "People know that Mayweather is not ready to fight me."

Meanwhile, tickets for Pacquiao-Mosley have completely sold out. A thousand tickets went unsold when Mayweather fought Mosley last year.

Put it all together and it's clear that Manny Pacquiao is now The Man. In recent years, boxing has been on the ropes. Pacquiao is in the vanguard of those fighting to give new relevance to the sport and bring it back.