

In recent years, Manny Pacquiao has been the best story in boxing.

Manny Pacquiao and the Essence of Boxing

“Boxing,” Hugh McIlvanney has written, “is a sport in which two men try to batter each other senseless. No matter how you dress it up, the basic objective is to render the opponent unconscious. You can say that more people are killed in motorcycle racing, that more people are killed in mountaineering. But in neither of those two activities is the fundamental objective to knock the other guy out. Motive, not statistics, will always separate boxing from other sports.”

On the night of March 13, 2010, Manny Pacquiao readied for battle in the futuristic city known as Cowboys Stadium. The gate that divides the visiting team’s dressing room had been lowered, cutting the room in half. Eight “red corner” undercard fighters were on the other side of the gate. Pacquiao’s opponent and the “blue corner” fighters were in smaller quarters.

Pacquiao had arrived at the stadium at 7:50 PM. The earliest he would be called to the ring was ten o’clock. For the better part of an hour, he talked on his cell phone and sent text messages to friends. Then he readied for battle.

One day earlier, Manny had weighed in at 145¾ pounds. His opponent, Joshua Clottey, had tipped the scales at the maximum contract weight of 147. The assumption was that Clottey now weighed at least 160. Pacquiao weighed 150. His body was sculpted without an ounce of superfluous fat. It was hard to imagine that, less than two years before, he’d fought after weighing in at 130 pounds.

Football, like boxing, is a violent game. In this same dressing room, gridiron warriors had suited up for battle. Forty-five players on each team that confronted the Dallas Cowboys had donned rib protectors, shoulder pads, arm pads, knee pads, hip pads, thigh pads, and helmets with face masks. When the competition began, they’d protected each other and helped teammates off the turf after they’d been knocked down.

Pacquiao would enter the ring for combat naked from the waist up. A protective cup to safeguard his genitals would be his only shield. There would be no one to block for him. His head would be completely exposed.

The rules of football are designed to minimize direct blows to the head. Boxing requires them.

Pacquiao knows that there's a dark side to his trade. Before each fight, he asks the people closest to him to "pray for me."

Two centuries ago, William Hazlitt wrote of the hour before a fight begins, "It is then the heart sickens as you think what the two champions are about and how a short time will determine their fate."

As the clock ticked down, Pacquiao shadow-boxed, moving around the center of the room.

There were final instructions from trainer Freddie Roach.

Then it was time. Manny left the dressing room and walked through the subterranean depths of the stadium. A tunnel of humanity lined by Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders—sexual icons of our time—lay ahead. The inside of the stadium was bathed in a silver otherworldly glow. Spotlights moved back and forth. Forty thousand fans were screaming.

A smile played across Pacquiao's face. He seemed to be without fear. In many respects, this fight in this stadium was about the future of boxing. But boxing is timeless. The essence of the competition he was about to engage in was the same as John L. Sullivan experienced on a barge towed upriver to avoid New York law enforcement authorities in 1881. After the bell rang, it would be no different, really, from what Joe Louis and Max Schmeling did at Yankee Stadium or the encounter between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in the heart of Africa. It was the same as the competition among unarmed combatants at the first Olympiad in Greece thousands of years ago. A boy who once fought on the streets of the Philippines for pocket change also knew it well.

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2010 began with the collapse of the proposed mega-fight between Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr. Then, on January 10th, Bob Arum (Pacquiao's promoter) announced an alternative plan. Manny would fight Joshua Clottey of Ghana at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

Thereafter, Bart Barry observed, “We come to the end of our Pacquiao–Mayweather mourning season. Fun as it is to gnash teeth and tremble at the future of prizefighting, the sun has risen anew, men still don gloves to resolve conflicts in manly ways, and a major venue awaits a major event.”

Pacquiao–Clottey was for Pacquiao’s World Boxing Organization 147-pound championship. Three themes were central to the promotion. The first, of course, was the persona of Manny Pacquiao.

Manny came to Dallas on fire, both as a fighter and as an attraction. Three times during the previous fifteen months, he had moved up in weight to challenge bigger men. Each time, there was widespread doubt as to what the outcome would be. And each time, after the fight, it looked as though the result had been preordained.

“It’s not just about beating opponents,” former featherweight champion Barry McGuigan, now a television commentator, observed. “It’s the way that you beat them. Pacquiao went through Oscar de la Hoya like a sparring partner. The way he knocked out Ricky Hatton was staggering. He just pole-axed him. Then he systematically took apart Miguel Cotto in a way none could have predicted.”

Pacquiao’s journey from abject poverty in an impoverished land to iconic status and wealth beyond his imagination has captivated his followers. “The broad outlines of his legend,” *Time Magazine* declared, “have made him a projection of the migrant dreams of the many Filipinos who leave home and country for work. Some spend decades abroad for the sake of the ones they love. Everyone in the Philippines knows a person who has made the sacrifice or is making it. Pacquiao gives that multitude a champion’s face of selflessness; the winner who takes all and gives to all.”

The second promotional story line revolved around Freddie Roach.

Roach turned pro at age eighteen and began his career with ten consecutive wins. After losing a decision, he ran his record to 26-and-1. The legendary Eddie Futch was his trainer.

“I look at old tapes of myself now,” Roach says, “and I know I could have been better. In the gym, I listened to what Eddie taught me and I could do it. But then the fight would come and I’d fight instead of box. I’d get hit and I had to hit back, which wasn’t always good. And I was stubborn. If something wasn’t working, instead of adjusting to something

else, I'd keep trying the same thing. There's a line between being courageous and being foolish. But when I was young, I was too aggressive to see it."

There's an old adage that says, if a fighter isn't getting better, he's getting worse. Roach peaked young. He was 13-and-12 after the age of twenty-two. By the end of his career, he was an opponent. He retired at age twenty-six, never having made more than \$7,500 for a fight.

"I remember when Eddie took me to his office and told me that I was taking too many punches and my performance wasn't what it used to be and I should retire," Roach says. "I started to cry. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life."

Then life got tougher.

"All the people who said to me when I was winning fights, 'You're a great guy; when you finish boxing, come to me and I'll give you a job,' all of a sudden, they weren't around."

Roach worked for a telemarketing company and drank heavily for the better part of a year. Then, at Futch's suggestion, Virgil Hill (who Eddie trained) asked Roach to work with him because Futch was focusing heavily on his more-established fighters.

"When Virgil asked me," Roach recalls, "the first thing I said was, 'I don't know how to train fighters.' But he and Eddie talked me into it. After that, Eddie, grew me as a trainer, step by step, the same way he grew me as a fighter. I remember when he let me go to a rules meeting alone for the first time. It was when Virgil fought Leslie Stewart [in 1987] and won the light-heavyweight championship. I felt so good, that Eddie trusted me like that."

Roach, like his mentor, can take a good fighter and make him better. "You have to have patience," he explains. "You have to be a psychiatrist. You have to be a problem solver. You have to know boxing. And you need a good fighter. That part about having a good fighter is the key."

"Over time," Roach continues, "I realized that I could be a better trainer than I was a fighter. Now my goal is to make as many world champions as possible. It's not as good as being a champion myself would have been, but that's the way life is. There are still times when something is difficult and I say to myself, 'Boy; I wish Eddie was around.' But someone told me not long ago, 'Eddie would be proud of you.' And I said, 'I know.'"

Roach has risen to the top of his profession. “There are a lot of people who blew me off who are very nice to me now,” he notes. “I don’t hold grudges, but I remember. A couple of years ago, Bob Arum called me an idiot.”

Freddie smiles. “It comes and it goes. I like Bob. Everything is good between us now.”

Pacquiao-Clotney was marketed as “The Event.” That led to the third promotional hook. This was the first fight card ever in Cowboys Stadium.

In late 2009, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones had offered a \$25,000,000 ticket-sale guarantee for Pacquiao-Mayweather that was rejected out of hand by Golden Boy (Mayweather’s promoter). “I wanted that fight between those two fighters worse than my next breath,” Jones acknowledged.

From Jones’s point of view, Pacquiao-Clotney was branding for his stadium. “I’m certainly a fan of boxing,” he explained. “But that’s not what this fight is about. This is a very logical way to introduce our stadium to the world and lift its aura.”

In other words; Jones wasn’t in boxing to be in boxing. He was in the sport to build his stadium as a venue. Just as the Dallas Cowboys style themselves as “America’s Team,” he wants Cowboys Stadium to become “America’s Stadium.”

Toward that end, Jones hosted the 2010 NBA All-Star Game. A record 108,713 fans attended. Cowboys Stadium will also be the site for the 2011 Super Bowl and the 2014 NCAA Men’s Basketball Championship Final Four.

The stadium is awesome. Built at a cost of \$1.2 billion, it seats 80,000 fans for football with space for additional standing-room attendees and can accommodate twenty thousand more for boxing. There’s a retractable roof and a four-sided HDTV video board that’s 160 feet long, 72 feet high, and weighs 600 tons. The video board, Jones is fond of saying, is the largest in the world.

Ticket prices for Pacquiao-Clotney ranged from \$700 down to \$35 (for standing room “party passes”). On fight night, 41,841 fans filed into Jones’s palace.

Bob Arum spent most of fight week walking around with a smile on his face like the proverbial cat that had swallowed a canary. “This is going to be one of the biggest events in the history of boxing,” he proclaimed.

“If you think the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders are pretty, wait until you see them on that forty-million-dollar video screen.”

There was a buzz to the promotion. Jones radiates intensity and he said it like he meant it when he told the media, “This will be a fight to remember. We’re going to promote this like it was the Super Bowl.”

The National Football League is an entity unto itself. It goes to great lengths to preclude other sports from poaching on its cachet and marketing power. Jones acknowledged as much on a March 9th teleconference call, saying, “The NFL is reluctant to cross over with other sports.” But then he added, “In a very obvious way, people will recognize there is a crossover in interest for this fight. I’m not trying to be presumptuous about boxing and the NFL. But we all know how popular the NFL is right now. It raises all boats and it will raise boxing.”

HBO got a taste of the Jerry Jones style during production planning when the discussion turned to whether or not the pay-per-view telecast would include live overhead shots of Cowboys Stadium on fight night. The cost was beyond HBO’s budget. Jones indicated he would see to it that the cost would be covered. “I’m not known for following budgets,” he said.

Thereafter, Arum noted, “Don King and I are lucky this guy didn’t get in boxing when we did. He would have run us both out of the business.”

Freddie Roach, for his part, took one look at the inside of Cowboys Stadium and told Jones, “You’ve got a lot of balls, building this place.”

Meanwhile, there was a fight to be fought, although it began as a fistic rendition of the old Broadway song “Mutual Admiration Society.”

Clotey told the media, “Pacquiao is my favorite fighter. He has been for a long time. He is a very nice guy and I feel comfortable around him.”

Pacquiao responded in kind, saying, “Clotey is a very good boxer. He is big and strong. I like this match because both sides, there is no trash talk. We are setting a good example for everybody.”

That said; for most of the promotion, Team Clotey was treated by the media as an afterthought. Pacquiao was a 6-to-1 betting favorite. Clotey’s manager (Vinny Scolpino) and trainer (Lenny DeJesus) went almost unnoticed during fight week as they strolled around the Gaylord Texan Hotel, which served as event headquarters.

Still, within the boxing community, Clotey was considered a live underdog. “I’m not a flyweight,” he reminded people, referencing Pacquiao’s

climb up the ladder through seven weight divisions. “I am not a bantamweight. I am a welterweight. I can throw shots that land and cause damage.”

“We have the perfect game plan,” Roach countered. “Clottey is a big strong guy and we respect him. But he is what he is. He fights the same way whether he fights southpaws or right-handers. He’s predictable. He’s good at what he does, but he does the same thing over and over again. I feel that Manny is going to overwhelm him with speed and combinations. Clottey has a good chin but he doesn’t protect his body that well. I think Manny will break him down with body shots. I don’t know if Manny can knock him out. But I think he can make Clottey quit or take things to a point where the referee or Clottey’s corner stops it.”

On the day of the weigh-in, Roach elaborated on that theme, saying, “I’m not worried about Clottey’s size. Manny weighed 144 pounds when he woke up this morning. That meant he could eat breakfast and a small lunch. He’s happy and strong, and Clottey is starving himself to make weight. I know Clottey will go into the ring ten pounds heavier than Manny. But size doesn’t win fights. Skill does. And I’ve got the better fighter.”

Roach might have added that boxing’s traditional “tale of the tape” doesn’t measure the size of a fighter’s heart.

On fight night, Pacquiao proved Roach right. The biggest problem that Team Pacquiao faced came in the dressing room before the fight. When it was time for Manny to hit the pads in his final warm-up prior to leaving for the ring, Freddie realized that there were no pads.

Roach brings two sets of mitts from his home base in Los Angeles to out-of-town fights. The night before Pacquiao-Clottey, he’d worked the corner of Jose Benavidez (a promising young prospect in his stable) on a FoxSportsNet telecast. After the fight, he gave the pads he’d warmed Benavidez up with to a friend as a memento. He forgot that, earlier in the week, he’d donated the other pair of mitts to a charity auction.

The solution was simple. At age fifty, Freddie warmed Pacquiao up by catching the punches of the best fighter in the world on his bare palms.

As Pacquiao walked to the ring to face Clottey, the atmosphere was electric. But whether a boxing ring is in Cowboys Stadium, the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, or a small union hall in Pennsylvania, it’s still a boxing ring.

Two fighters doing their best to win are necessary for a great fight. The early rounds established the pattern of this one. Clotney stood with his hands held high, both fists in front of his face, elbows protecting his body. Pacquiao attacked, getting off first, darting in and out, looking for openings. His speed intimidated and befuddled Clotney. Joshua was reluctant to abandon his defensive posture. When he did, Manny responded with pinpoint violence, firing straight lefthands that came at their target as fast as jabs. That's the way it was all night. The fifth round was Clotney's best. Other than that, Pacquiao pitched a shutout.

As the fight progressed, round after round, Lenny DeJesus implored his charge, "Come on, we gotta take chances. What are you waiting for? . . . The kid's ahead. Let's throw punches. Hurt this guy . . . Let's create openings now, okay? Let's take a chance . . . Let's be creative. Let's throw punches. We're losing every round, so get to it . . . We're losing every damn round. Come on. You're taking a whipping, baby . . . What's going on? Come on. We haven't won a round, baby. We've got to do something."

When it was over, Pacquiao had thrown 1,231 punches to Clotney's 399. He outlanded Clotney in every round, highlighted by a 232 to 82 edge in power punches landed.

The judges were on the mark with a 120–108, 119–109, 119–109 verdict. Clotney managed to avoid winding up as a featured attraction on Pacquiao's highlight reel. But a fighter in a championship bout should have a loftier goal.

"Clotney didn't come to fight," Roach said afterward. "He came to survive. I know it was hard for him. Most fighters can't adjust to Manny's speed. They see him on television and say, 'Oh, he looks fast.' But you don't really know how fast he is until you're in the ring with him. And once you're there, when you feel his power and his punches are coming from all angles . . ."

Roach's voice trailed off, then picked up again. "An opportunity like this comes along for a fighter once in a lifetime, if he's lucky. If Clotney was my fighter, I'd be very upset with him. I'd rather get knocked out trying to win a championship than do what he did."

A half-century ago, A. J. Liebling wrote, "The desire to punch other boys in the nose will survive in our culture. The spirit of self-preservation will induce some boys to excel. Those who find they excel will try to turn a modest buck by it. It is an art of the people, like making love."

In rare instances, the best practitioners of the art of boxing are embraced by their country, an entire ethnic group, or believers in a given religion. Once in a generation, if that generation is fortunate, a fighter is embraced by the world.

Pacquiao is ascending to the summit. It's ironic that he practices the most unforgiving of sports. Cruelty seems foreign to his nature. Like Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali before him, he has come to symbolize caring and compassion.

Meanwhile, it's a joy to watch Pacquiao ply his trade. He's the most exciting fighter in the world today and everything that an athlete should be: awesomely talented, a great competitor, respectful toward opponents, and appreciative of his fans. He's also the best show in boxing.

Where Pacquiao goes from here is an open issue. His immediate priority is a run for Congress in the Philippines against the scion of a wealthy political family. It's an uphill battle with the odds against him; more so than for any of his fights in the ring.

Win or lose, Pacquiao is likely to return to the sweet science before the end of the year. When he does, he will remind us all once again of the essence of boxing.

"Life," Matthew Wells wrote several years ago, "rarely comes at you in short bursts of wild mayhem. More often than not, it is a long drawn-out grind that forces you to make thousands of small adjustments in order to keep pointed in the right direction. Boxing, more than any other sport, is emblematic of this struggle. It reminds us that life can be hard and even unfair, but with hard work and dedication, you can, once in a while, achieve something truly brilliant."