

Boksing Aficionado

Nowadays, almost every Filipino claims to be a boxing aficionado. This is of course due to Manny Pacquiao, rated by Ring Magazine as the best pound for pound fighter. At least he was until the controversial decision in his third fight against Juan Marquez. All manner of overweight politicians surround Pacquiao, hoping some of the sheen would rub off on them. Even the obese and unhealthy former First Gentleman Mike Arroyo claims to be a friend of Manny. None of these people probably even know who the Marquess of Queensberry was.

In my teenage years during the late 1950's, I liked to watch boxing matches, going to the amateur bouts at the Rizal Memorial Coliseum regularly. Far Eastern University was one of the few schools who had a boxing program and usually had the best amateur boxers.

After I started working at Procter & Gamble in the middle of 1960, I could afford the professional fights. (In case you're interested in my starting salary, it was the equivalent of \$90/month.) The fights were held either at the newly built Araneta Coliseum in Quezon City or the Rizal Memorial Stadium in Manila. 15 years later, Araneta would be the site of the classic Ali Frazier III or "Thrilla in Manila." I saw all the best Filipino fighters of the era, most of whom were Orient Boxing Champions at one time or another. With a little luck and a more fair judging system, many of them would have been World Champions. One Filipino who made it as World Junior Lightweight Champion was Gabriel "Flash" Elorde. I saw him fight several times before he became world champion. He became the first Filipino world champion in twenty years. There was a Filipino-Hawaiian world champion in 1951 by the name of Dado Marino but he lived and fought mostly in Hawaii. Elorde's undoing was going up in weight to fight Carlos Ortiz of Puerto Rico who beat him a couple of times. Prominent fighters of the era were Tanny Campo, Dommy Ursua, the brothers Leo and Bonnie Espinosa, Leo Alonso, Danny Kid, Emil Tinde, Roberto Cruz, Al Asuncion, Little Cesar and Bert Somodio. Al Asuncion was a former amateur and Olympic fighter with a whirlwind style. Rocky Marciano's manager Al Weill even tried to get Asuncion to fight in the U.S. Somodio started boxing under the sobriquet "Nursery Kid." Colorful names abounded. They were mostly flyweight (112 lbs.) to lightweight (136 lbs.). The only one heavier was Roberto Cruz who fought as a welterweight. There were only a handful of middleweight (160 lbs.) fighters. All fought for Oriental titles but if the venue was in Japan against a Japanese fighter the hometown decision always went against the Filipino. The only way a Filipino could win in Japan was by knockout. By contrast Filipino boxing judges always tried to be fair.

They fought ten to twelve rounds of fast, furious action. At that time the stadiums were not adequately air-conditioned so it was sweltering inside. Betting was heavy (I never bet, just liked to watch). The crowd was usually bloodthirsty. They didn't like defensive counterpunching types.

Foreign fighters came regularly. I even saw an exhibition match featuring the light heavyweight boxing champion Archie Moore. Archie fought 2 epic battles but lost to World Heavyweight Champion Rocky Marciano. An African-American lightweight fighter named Arthur Persley came to the Philippines for several bouts. He liked the Philippines so much he stayed, married a Filipina and fought well into his forties. I saw him fight World Lightweight Champion Carlos Ortiz, narrowly losing a decision.

Vertically challenged Filipinos have adopted basketball as their favorite sport but prominence in boxing and baseball came first. All 3 sports were introduced to the Philippines by Americans. Filipinos took to boxing, quickly becoming world contenders

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in the lighter classes. An American promoter gave Filipino fighters the nickname “Little Brown Dolls.” It didn’t take much imagination to come up with the term since two decades earlier the 300 pound William Howard Taft called us “My Little Brown Brothers.” By 1923 a 5’ 1” Filipino named Pancho Villa (real name Francisco Guilledo) became World Flyweight Champion. There would be a string of contenders that followed. Just before WW II, Ceferino Garcia became World Middleweight Champion. That is the heaviest class that any Filipino ever won.

Boxing is a poor man’s sport. It was a way out of poverty for many. All the great Filipino champions were born dirt poor, including Elorde and Pacquiao. But boxing exacts a heavy price. Villa died a few days after a match, two years after winning the championship. Elorde died before his 50th birthday. You could easily tell a veteran fighter from his appearance – cauliflower ears, flattened noses and scar tissue around the eyebrows. The poor boys would start fighting in their teenage years in dingy stadiums often times run by shady promoters. But they all gave a good account of themselves.

Boxing is the only sport where the Philippines has ever won silver and bronze Olympic medals, though the country still has to win its first gold in any sport. Five foot six inch tall Filipinos insist on making basketball their sport of choice. But basketball’s glory days have come and gone. No one has ever made it to the NBA. They even argue about the maximum height of the only import (read tall, black American) each professional team can have. There is poetic justice perhaps that in the country’s boxers, coming out of poverty, would carry on their 120 pound frames the athletic aspirations of the country and produce better results, whether amateur or professional category. Decade after decade the country’s poor would produce world contenders. They did it by hard work, guts and talent. Pacquiao was once asked how he was able to work so hard and he answered “*tiiis*.” Tagalog for endure. They did not bribe or cheat their way to their titles. Our politicians could learn a lesson.

May God keep our boxers safe.