

THE MODERN-DAY HENRY ARMSTRONG Does Manny Pacquiao Live Up To That Standard?

By Don Stradley

“So they said, ‘We want you to win three championships.’ This was a strategy. We had worked this out simply because we were trying to make more money. So they said, ‘If you can win three championships, you’ll have the flamboyance of a heavyweight.’ I said, ‘It sounds pretty good to me.’”

—Henry Armstrong

When Henry Armstrong lost the welterweight championship to Fritzie Zivic at Madison Square Garden in October 1940, boxing observers regarded the title change as a shocking upset. It’s not that Zivic wasn’t handy, it was that Armstrong’s reputation had grown to monolithic proportion. Joseph C. Nichols of *The New York Times* reported, “Zivic did what the rank and file of boxing followers deemed impossible.”

Just before the bell ended the 15th and final round, Armstrong fell, partly from a punch, partly from exhaustion. That Armstrong collapsed at this moment was significant. True, Zivic had exhausted him, but it seemed that Armstrong’s Herculean energy had finally run out. For not only had he once swept the featherweight, lightweight, and welterweight championships in a 10-month period, but he’d embarked on a schedule that was as punishing as the sport itself, defending the welterweight crown 18 times during a two-year period. The kid who had once worked for the Missouri-Pacific Railroad had become a kind of human locomotive, roaring and belching fire as he ran over the opposition, settings standards that will never be matched.

In 2008, as Manny Pacquiao defeated Juan Manuel Marquez for THE RING junior lightweight championship, David Diaz for the WBC lightweight title, and Oscar De La Hoya at welterweight (with no titles at stake), it became fashionable to mention Armstrong’s name along with Pacquiao’s. It’s never bad to recall a great fighter from the past, but after Pacquiao chiseled away the remains of De La Hoya’s image last December, the comparisons to Armstrong grew more frenzied, as if finally, Armstrong had an equal. But some aren’t sure the comparisons are necessary.

“Comparing him to Armstrong may be a disservice to Pacquiao,” fight historian Bert Sugar told THE RING. “Pacquiao is *sui generis*; he needn’t be compared to anyone. He may be the best Asian fighter of all-time, and perhaps the best southpaw of all-time. But you can’t compare him to Armstrong, because no one compares to Armstrong.”

The numbers put up by Armstrong are staggering. Some quick examples: Armstrong defeated 15 world champions—at a time when there was only one champion per weight class, and only eight classes; he defeated over 10 men who would be enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame; and he once made four title defenses in *one month*, October 1939 (some sources say five, but one of the bouts was advertised as a non-title fight). Granted, if Armstrong fought now, he wouldn’t rack up four defenses in one month, or one year. The negotiations alone would cause most promoters to have strokes. But Armstrong’s era was different. At a time when fighters fought frequently, Armstrong was the busiest of champions.

Where Pacquiao also differs from Armstrong is that he doesn't have the aura of invincibility that glowed around Armstrong, an aura that started emanating on New Year's Day, 1937, when Armstrong knocked out Rodolfo Casanova in Mexico City. Armstrong would win 27 bouts that year, 26 by knockout. One of those wins was a sixth-round stoppage of Petey Sarron for the featherweight crown.

1937 was also the year Al Jolson, one of the most popular entertainers of the day, bought a piece of Armstrong's contract, giving Armstrong's profile a major boost. Jolson partnered with actor George Raft and boxing manager Eddie Meade to pilot Armstrong's career. To give Armstrong cachet worthy of his new Hollywood connections, it was suggested he try for three titles simultaneously.

With the featherweight title locked up, the next step was to meet lightweight champion Lou Ambers at Madison Square Garden. However, Garden promoter Mike Jacobs despised Ambers' manager, Al Weil. Out of spite, Jacobs proposed Armstrong skip Ambers and face welterweight champion Barney Ross. On May 31, 1938, Armstrong defeated Ross by decision for championship number two, dominating Ross from bell to bell. In his very next fight Armstrong completed the triple play, winning a split decision over Ambers. Armstrong immediately relinquished the featherweight title and carried on as a "double-champion."

Then, in a bout that saw Armstrong penalized five times for low blows, he lost the lightweight title back to Ambers on points. This was amid rumors that Jacobs was under pressure to get the belt off of Armstrong, for the very thing that had made Armstrong a star was creating controversy. Prior to 1937, there'd been no rule about champions fighting for belts in other weight divisions. But once Armstrong became a triple champion, there were serious complaints that Armstrong and his managers were monopolizing the titles. The New York commission, which set the tone for the rest of the country, created a rule in December of 1939 forbidding two champions to fight, unless the lighter champion voluntarily surrendered his belt.

Armstrong's sweep of Sarron, Ross, and Ambers trumps Pacquiao's sweep of Marquez, Diaz, and De La Hoya, partly because Diaz doesn't measure up, and also because Armstrong fought an additional 14 times during that 10-month period. But a general look at how Pacquiao and Armstrong compare in various categories shows that Pacquiao holds his own.

The Early Years

After a few professional bouts, Armstrong went back to the amateurs to try for the 1932 Olympics, and when that failed, he resumed fighting for money. By his third year as a pro, Armstrong had scratched out a record of 19-4-6 (6).

Pacquiao was actually more accomplished during his salad days, winning the WBC flyweight title in his 25th bout. He suffered two knockout losses, but one of them came after a failed attempt to make weight. Pacquiao's early victims of note include Lehlohonolo Ledwaba (for the IBF super bantamweight title), Emmanuel Lucero, and Jorge Julio.

The Featherweight Years

Had he never fought as a welterweight, Armstrong would still be remembered as one of the top feath-

erweights of his day. His key achievements at what would now be featherweight and junior lightweight include wins over Sarron, Mike Belloise, Benny Bass, Baby Arizmendi (two out of four), Juan Zurita, Midget Wolgast, and Chalky Wright.

At roughly the same weight, Pacquiao's conquests include Marco Antonio Barrera (twice), Fahsan 3K Battery, Hector Velazquez, Erik Morales (two out of three), Oscar Larios, and Jorge Solis. There were also two bouts with Marquez, a draw (at feather) and split-decision win (at junior light).

As for who accomplished more in this category, it's apples and oranges. Pacquiao faced heavier punchers, Armstrong faced more Hall of Famers, although some were past their primes.

Which Was The Greater Accomplishment, Beating Ross Or De La Hoya?

Armstrong jumped from featherweight to welterweight to face Ross. Pacquiao jumped from lightweight to welterweight to face De La Hoya. Both feats made history, but these career-making bouts were surprisingly easy for both Armstrong and Pacquiao.

If you consider that Pacquiao started his career as a 106-pounder, while Armstrong weighed 120 for his debut, Pacquiao's win over Oscar was more impressive than Armstrong's win over Ross. Pacquiao was also giving away several inches in height and reach to De La Hoya, while Armstrong and Ross were approximately the same size, although Ross outweighed Armstrong. Pacquiao also gets credit for stopping Oscar, whereas Ross went the distance; depending on who tells the tale, Armstrong either carried Ross for the final rounds, or Ross bravely remained upright.

But Pacquiao's win had some smoke and mirrors behind it. For instance, much was made of De La Hoya having fought twice at middleweight, but he'd been terrible at middleweight. Also, Pacquiao's trainer, Freddie Roach, had worked with Oscar and knew his best days were well behind him; matching Pacquiao with Oscar was less risky than it seemed on the surface.

Ross, on the other hand, was a long-reigning champion, a 7-5 favorite, and had shown no signs of deterioration. Unlike Oscar, who'd weakened himself to make 147, Ross was at his natural fighting weight. Ross also fought harder than De La Hoya, although, as the *Times* noted, his punches "bounced off Armstrong like hail on a slate roof."

The edge in this category goes to Armstrong, but not by much.

Lightweight And Beyond

This is where Armstrong blows Pacquiao out of the water. Rarely weighing more than 135, Armstrong was ostensibly a lightweight beating up welterweights, occasionally giving up as much as 13 pounds. During this period he defeated Pedro Montanez, Lew Jenkins, Arizmendi again, Ralph Zannelli (twice), and several more unfortunates. Some have said the 147-pound division was not especially strong during this period, but Fritzie Zivic didn't defend 18 times, that's for sure.

This was also when Armstrong, at 142 pounds, challenged Ceferino Garcia for a portion of the middleweight crown (recognized only in California). Armstrong was allegedly offered a bribe to fall in four, but he refused and handed Garcia a typical Armstrong-style mauling. The contest was declared a draw by referee George Blake. More than 60 years later, the peculiar stench from that bout still lingers.

If Pacquiao is to be mentioned alongside Armstrong, the hard work begins now. Pacquiao has one win

at lightweight and one at welterweight. Roach has said that Pacquiao will not continue at 147, which is wise. Still, should Pacquiao beat Ricky Hatton, score a definitive win over Marquez, and perhaps lure Floyd Mayweather out of retirement and beat him, he'd have a strong case for being the modern-day Armstrong. We may be asking a lot, but it's not easy to match a fighter whose record resembles an international zip code.

Armstrong's Endgame

Armstrong seemed done when Zivic beat him a second time, but he scored wins over Bummy Davis, Jenkins again, and some less distinguished characters at whistle stops along the way. He even caught up to Zivic, beating him over 10 rounds when Zivic was no longer champion. But the relentless schedule, the ferocity of his fights, and a growing alcohol indulgence eventually caught up with Armstrong.

In 1943, a faded Armstrong lost to a fellow who had made his professional debut on the undercard of the first Armstrong-Zivic bout, a young cat named Sugar Ray Robinson. The idea of Robinson battling Armstrong is fascinating, but the *Times* described it being "as tame as a gymnasium workout between father and son." Armstrong told author Peter Heller, "It was a disgusting fight. I said, 'Ray, this is the Garden, and they're booing. I've never been booed in the Garden, so they must be booing you.'"

Armstrong, 151-21-9 (101), quit boxing in 1945. He overcame alcoholism, married a few times, became an ordained minister, tried managing fighters, struggled financially, and spent his final years working with underprivileged children in St. Louis. He died in 1988 at age 75. Just as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton occasionally swap places in the hearts of film connoisseurs, so it is with Robinson and Armstrong among boxing experts. In 1994, THE RING chose Armstrong as the greatest welterweight of all-time. More recently, another RING survey chose Robinson. Bert Sugar's 2006 book *Boxing's Greatest Fighters* slots Robinson as the all-time best in any division, with Armstrong at number two. What all will agree on is that Robinson was lucky he didn't meet a prime Armstrong. At his very best, Henry Armstrong stood alone.

Meanwhile, Pacquiao shines brightly in this era, and that's more than enough. n

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