

Column for Manila Bulletin
MANNY VILLAR
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Of Trees and Forest

Pacquiao's Legacy

MANILA, Philippines — It was becoming like a tradition. Whenever Manny Pacquiao arrived after a victory, he was welcomed like a hero, driven around Manila where thousands lined up to see him, along roads where tarpaulins with greetings and congratulatory messages were set up.

So, I was shocked and saddened when the world's greatest pound-for-pound boxer came home last November 21, more than a week after winning his latest fight, without the usual frills and excitement that marked his previous returns – no motorcade, no parade.

He won the fight against Juan Manuel Marquez after the majority of the judges said so, and the computer said so.

Indeed, it was a tough fight and we saw how hard he fought, no dirty tricks, just clean boxing. There were no knockdowns as in his previous fights, but he won fair and square.

It saddened me deeply when many of our countrymen suddenly got cold toward our champion.

Why are we so quick to withdraw the esteem that we often give our achievers?

Nobody in the field of sports can match what Manny Pacquiao has done for his country in terms of world recognition. He is the first and only boxer who has won championship belts in eight different weight classes of boxing.

World leaders and international celebrities in and out of sports honor him and, in doing so, honor his country as well.

Then US President Bill Clinton visited Manny at Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas on April 29, 2009, to wish the Filipino boxing superstar well in his fight with Ricky Hatton of England.

Famous people have visited Manny in the gym, watched his fights and publicly expressed their admiration of him, including Denzel Washington, Sylvester Stallone, Mark Wahlberg, Justin Timberlake, Justin Bieber, and Paris Hilton.

Last November 16, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was in the Philippines for a two-day visit, described the win of Filipino boxing champion and Sarangani Rep Manny Pacquiao against Mexican fighter Juan Manuel Marquez as a "great victory."

"We know that Pacman had another great victory. I am a major Pacman fan," she said in a speech in Malacañang after signing a bilateral agreement.

Isn't it a shame that, while a high-ranking official of the world's most powerful nation pays tribute to a Filipino champion even after a controversial fight, some (I hope not too many) of his own countrymen suddenly disown him?

I read an online article titled “Which Boxer Has Won the Most Championship Belts?” by Stuart Fox, TechNewsDaily staff writer, dated November 12, 2010, a day before Pacquiao won his eighth belt by defeating Antonio Margarito.

The article quoted Tim Starks, a boxing journalist and author of the blog Queensberry-rules.com, who said: “Belts don't make a man. But in Pacquiao's case, they most certainly are a compelling part of his legacy.”

I sincerely believe that Manny Pacquiao has already carved a name for himself in Philippine history. He is the foremost symbol and example of what Filipinos can achieve in the world arena.

That's one aspect of the role that sports can play in nation building. To me, the second aspect is that part of our competitiveness can be reflected in sports, and providing sports programs with adequate funding will yield big returns for our self-respect and pride as a nation.

Sadly, we seem to take for granted that the Philippines has been lagging behind other countries in many fields – in attracting investments, in tourism, in manufacturing, among others.

In a sense, losing is becoming routine for us, but Manny Pacquiao and other Filipino sports champions have shown that the Philippines need not become a nation of losers.

I believe that sports, with adequate support from the government and the private sector, and with the moral boost from the people, is one area that can galvanize our nation to become competitive in other fields.

The self-respect and national pride that we gain from excelling in sports will push us to strive to become competitive in other fields like the global race for investments, for exports or economic growth.

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