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Boxing in the Philippines: The Fight for Survival

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In

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Introduction

The Philippines is renowned as a breeding ground for boxing talent. In 2012, this unassuming country in Southeast Asia could boast no fewer than five current and 36 former world professional boxing champions.

The stellar career of Manny Pacquiao, now a universal sporting icon, undoubtedly represents the jewel in the crown of boxing in the Philippines. In a very real sense, his success has placed Filipino boxing talent in the global spotlight. However, there have long been other pockets of boxing excellence among past and present athletes at many levels of the sport.

In the early part of this chapter, the development of sport psychology support for the sport of boxing in the Philippines is chronicled via a personal account from the first author.

This is followed by a detailed exposition of the life and psychological approach of Manny Pacquiao, based on a qualitative investigation conducted by the second author, which provides unique insights into the world of one of the greatest boxers of all time.



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Sport Psychology as the New Frontier

As a fledging neophyte in sport psychology, I started work with the Philippine national boxers in 1993. It was an eye-opening experience. After more than a decade of observing the evolution of amateur Filipino boxers at close quarters, I was still a fan. As I vividly recall the sights, sounds, smells and experiences of working with this select group of athletes, I realize that I learned much from them.

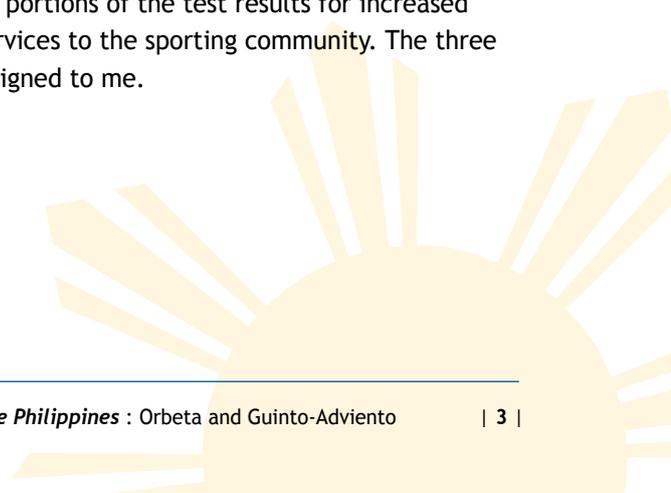
The Philippines is a third-world nation. We lag behind in many things that more developed countries take for granted. Whereas other countries have fully utilized the allied disciplines of the sports sciences, Filipino athletes have not enjoyed the same access. There are many reasons for this, but the most relevant is the overall lack of funding that hampers sport development, growth and sustainability.

The Philippine Sports Commission created the Sports Medicine Association of the Philippines (SMAP) facility as the medical centre for the 1991 Southeast Asian (SEA) Games, which were held in Manila. A Sport Psychology Unit was added in 1993 with a staff of three, including myself. Pioneering this unit was an exhilarating experience. Recognizing the novelty of this idea to the local sports scene, the Director of SMAP allowed us to experiment.



For the first time in Philippine sports history, we transported over 400 athletes to the De La Salle University campus in Manila in order to take a psychological test battery, which included the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & Myers, 1980), the Life Styles Inventory (Ware, Leak, & Perry, 1985), a mental health analysis questionnaire, and stress symptom and coping behaviour checklists. The tests were in English and many athletes asked us to translate some words into Filipino/Tagalog, the local language. I vividly recall a group of smiling boys who politely asked me questions, but would jokingly complain how hard the tests were. I later found out that these were the boxers.

When the tests were scored and interpreted, we invited the athletes from all sports to visit our unit. This strategy served a dual purpose; to feedback portions of the test results for increased self-awareness, and to introduce ourselves and our services to the sporting community. The three psychologists divided up the sports and boxing was assigned to me.





Common Demographic Denominator

In a decade of working with Filipino amateur boxers, I have yet to encounter even one who was “born with a silver spoon in his mouth”. This statement is not meant to pigeonhole anyone or to insult. Rather, it is recognition of an important characteristic in understanding the motivational forces that drive Filipino boxers.

they're
literally
fighting for
their lives

Born from humble and modest beginnings, Filipino boxers enter this punitive and uncompromising sport in a quest to improve their quality of life. A very small number have completed a college education or a vocational degree. The others finish whatever education they can, while they hone their boxing skills. Some drop out of high school to focus solely on the sport. It seems that with no educational fallback or a variety of options, Filipino boxers strive for sporting excellence in order to support themselves and create a better life.

Lee Tajonera, the psychologist who presently works with the national boxing team, echoes this sentiment:

The professional and amateur boxers see the sport as a means to a more comfortable life. For most, it's about survival. So one way of looking at it is that this could be one of the reasons Filipino boxers do well - they're literally fighting for their lives. There's nothing fiercer than a cornered tiger, so to speak. (personal communication, March 10, 2012)

Although the desire for monetary reward or financial gain may generally be regarded as extrinsic in nature, its influence can only be truly comprehended against the contextual setting of the Philippines, where the poor vastly outnumber the rich.

When sport allows an athlete to put food on the table, it can act as a powerful driving force. When it further affords him the chance to travel and see places as he competes, it serves as an additional incentive. When a large monetary figure is dangled in exchange for winning a medal, it becomes understandable if he deliberately subjects his body to incredibly demanding and strenuous activities. Once these needs have been fulfilled, the mission is accomplished.

Mansueto “Onyok” Velasco came agonisingly close to winning an Olympic gold medal for the Philippines in 1996. His defeat at the hands of Bulgarian Daniel Bujilov in the light flyweight division was controversial and loudly decried by Filipinos. In the Philippines, everyone believed he had won. As a result, he returned to a hero’s welcome despite his silver medal. In addition to the mandated government incentives, he received many rewards provided by generous private sponsors. Onyok also began receiving endorsement deals and television/film offers. His life improved and his career path changed. Who could blame him for choosing the new path that opened up for him? Boxing had fulfilled its mission.



The Concept of Support

From the beginning of my time with them, the boxers were thirsty for additional knowledge. They did not exhibit any resistance to the idea of a psychologist. I was surprised, but also intrigued. Over the years, I encountered the same attitude even as the boxing cast changed. When I started working with the national boxers in 1993, my strategy was simple. To develop rapport, I visited the boxing gym and sat through practices often. I talked to the boxers informally and tried to get to know their individual needs. I spoke to the coaches and asked them to enlighten me on the needs of the boys. When they invited me to speak to the boxers, I spoke in the vernacular and used everyday words. I did not say such things as “visualize your technique or game.” I simplified matters, because as one boxer told me in Filipino, “when an opponent is hitting you in the head, you cannot think anymore.”



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In a group of simple men with an uncluttered outlook on life, having any kind of well-educated professional express an interest in their well-being was a big thing for them. My mere presence and the fact that I took the trouble to visit them seemed to immediately help and comfort them. Katherine Buot, a psychologist with whom I worked from 1998 to 2005, adopted a similar strategy with the team to great effect. In the 2001 SEA Games, held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, she was sent with the Philippines delegation and developed a strong bond with the boxers. Her psychological support for the team continued at the 2003 SEA Games, held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Over the years, the psychological services that started simply as social support and consultations, evolved into a more sophisticated program. By 2004, the Amateur Boxing Association of the Philippines (ABAP) committed to hiring a psychologist dedicated solely to boxing. ABAP management recognized the importance of a continuous psychological program. To this day, they remain one of only a handful of sports associations in the Philippines who apportion a part of their budget to psychological services.



A Higher Form of Support

Studies with Filipinos have shown spirituality to have a direct impact on their psychological growth and worldview (e.g., Dy-Liacco, Kennedy, Parker & Piedmont, 2005).

The Filipino phrase, *Nagpapasalamat ako sa Diyos*, translated in English as “Giving thanks to God”, is often quoted by Filipino athletes, and the boxers were no exception. They basically injected God into every aspect of their lives. They prayed before and after every training session. They prayed in the locker room, individually and as a team, prior to competition. Any observer would have spotted them as they ascended into the ring and bowed their heads solemnly. These boys prayed when they won and prayed when they lost.

Coakley (2003) has posited six reasons why athletes use prayer:

1. as a coping mechanism;
2. to aid the quest to have a morally sound life;
3. to bless their sport endeavours;
4. to provide a clear and correct perspective on sport;
5. to strengthen teammates’ relationships; and
6. to act as a measure of social control.

prayer as
a coping
strategy

Filipino boxers have always used prayer as a coping strategy. This technique showed immediate results. The player remembered the importance of keeping a positive mindset and it seemed to calm them. In essence, it was a type of centering.

As a practitioner, I respected the boxers’ beliefs and tried to utilize the techniques they already had in their arsenal. This was not difficult because religiosity is deeply ingrained with Filipinos, 85% of whom are Roman Catholic. Instead of teaching complicated strategies that they would need to learn and practice, one of the things I did was to formulate simple relaxation and meditation scripts based on prayer. This was effective because the boxers themselves did not experience a great departure from their normal routine. Rather, they responded naturally.

Arguably, religiosity and spirituality carries the danger of over-dependence on forces outside of the athlete. I was deeply cognizant of this possibility and attempted to emphasize to the boxers that prayer and God should not take the place of working and striving for success in their sport.

respect for
their beliefs





Significant Cultural Influences

While practically every Filipino belongs to some religious denomination, they can also be highly superstitious and filled with seemingly pagan beliefs (Francisco, 2004). These beliefs come from the *katutubo*, which is roughly translated as “originating from our roots or ancestors.” The Filipino boxer’s life is typically resplendent with such personal beliefs. Every psychologist who has ever worked with them will have heard of at least one startling superstition they follow. Some are highly entertaining and quite harmless; others need further scrutiny.

Belief in *suwerte* (luck) and *malas* (jinxed) is quite common. This orientation towards an external locus of control seems to be a defence mechanism that originates from the Filipino culture. Filipinos embrace values like humility and modesty. When an athlete says that it was luck that caused a win, the elders nod sagely and seem to bestow approval. If a player states that his fight was jinxed and that is why he lost, Filipinos also understand this sentiment.

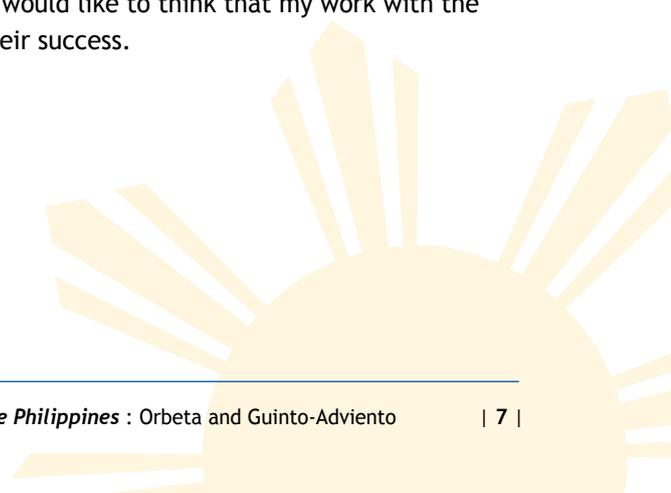
malas for the loss

Since my personal philosophy ran along the lines of an athlete-centered consultative process, I did not shoot down any boxer’s beliefs. Rather, I listened and attempted to understand his world. I only intervened when the belief bordered on obsession and hindered performance or some other aspect of his life. Even then, I realized that I could only gently suggest alternative strategies for coping. One strategy that I introduced was the concept of having specific psychological routines and effective rituals. Whenever rookie boxers joined the national training pool, we administered an easy checklist. Universally, the boxers rated psychological routines as practically non-existent. What struck me was that they seemed receptive to the idea but did not do it for themselves without reminders.

The Philippine contingent to the 1994 Asian Games in Hiroshima, Japan consisted of 98 athletes, and I was selected as a support member of the contingent. We were housed in a single building and the boxers were billeted in one suite of rooms. I was set to arrive from Tokyo the day before the Games commenced, but the head of the medical team called me and said the boxing team wanted psychology services early, so I advanced my trip by a week. As a result, I was with the boxers day and night in Hiroshima. We would have formal and informal sessions. I would ride in the bus with them on the way to the competition venue. In short, I had all the time necessary to remind them about psychological routines and other important points.

suwerte for the win

They won three gold medals, courtesy of Mansueto “Onyok” Velasco, Elias Recaido, Jr. and Reynaldo Galido. I would like to think that my work with the boxers contributed something to their success.





Laughter, Heart and Hope

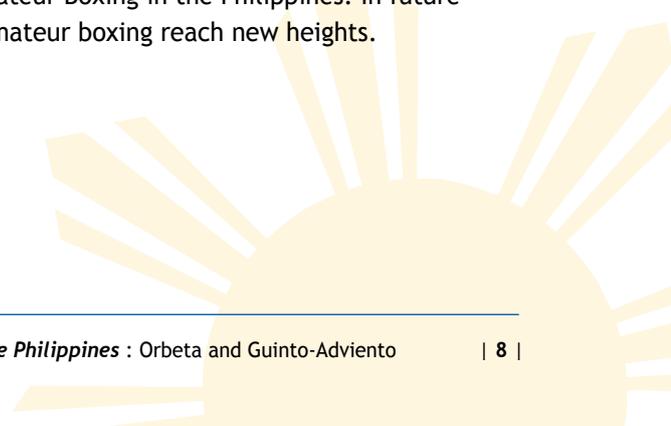
One night during the 1999 SEA Games in Brunei Darussalam, I was sitting on an outdoor bench in the Games Village. Many Filipino athletes, including the boxers, were relaxing and socializing after a long day of practice and/or competition. A Philippines team official approached me and said something to the effect that since the boxers were on the fight docket the next day, they should not be making jokes and should concentrate on the competition. I looked over at the boys. Some were clowning around doing slick dance moves. Others were singing. A few had a stand-up comedy routine going on. I did not wholly disagree with him, but said respectfully, “Sir, it is 8 p.m. If you make them stop and go to bed now, they might feel even more stressed. Let’s wait until their coaches call them.”

In a decade of working with the boxing team, some things have remained immutable. First, they are funny jokers when they want to be, but ever respectful of authority. Second, they can dance because of the fancy footwork they need to perfect. Third, they love to sing. Finally, and most important of all, these boxers have heart and hope.

Through the years, I have attempted to utilize the cultural and societal characteristics inherent in the Filipino boxer to aid their performance. I introduced concepts in sport psychology in a simple and uncomplicated manner. There are no secrets or mystery to my work with the boxers. I have always been flexible and tried to adapt to the athletes and the situations in which I found myself. I did not shy away from the challenge of understanding this demanding sport and the gladiators who inhabit it. It has been a rewarding experience. Before I discontinued my work with Filipino boxers, I was fortunate to have seen the birth of Women’s Amateur Boxing in the Philippines. In future years, I hope to see the next incarnation of Filipino amateur boxing reach new heights.



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Case Study of Manny Pacquiao: Tracing the Footsteps of a Boxing Icon



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Manny Pacquiao is undoubtedly the face of Philippine professional boxing. He holds the distinction of being the first and only eight-division world champion, having won six world titles, as well as the lineal championship in four different weight classes. His phenomenal rise to the top of the boxing world has been made more intriguing by the enormous odds against which he emerged.

Manny makes no pretences about his humble beginnings. His parents separated when he was in sixth grade and he was eventually forced to drop out of high school because of extreme poverty. Manny sold anything he could sell for a profit to supplement the family income. He described himself as a “one-man traveling grocery store” as he sold bread, peanuts, doughnuts, water and a variety of retail items on the street (Pacquiao, 2010, p. 41). Still, it was not enough to make ends meet.

At 14, he decided to take his chances in Manila in response to a boxing promoter who saw his potential in boxing and convinced him that he could have better training and competition in the big city. To survive, Manny took on a variety of odd jobs as a gardener, construction worker, restaurant crew and a tailor, while waiting for his break in boxing. He eventually qualified for the Philippine national amateur boxing team. Finally, he no longer had to worry about his next meal and where he would sleep for the night (Chua-Eoan & Tharoor, 2009).

Manny had an amateur record of 60 wins and only 4 defeats, in the space of two years. He began his professional boxing career when he was merely 16 years of age, standing only 4'11", and weighing much less than the minimum weight division at 98 pounds (Pacquiao, 2010). How he eventually managed to capture several championships across different weight classes without losing speed and power, in itself defies all expectations of his initial body build and profile.

Many researchers and practitioners in applied sport psychology have been intrigued by the question of what psychological factors might account for his extraordinary success and the performance enhancement interventions he might have utilized. Manny Pacquiao never received any formal sport psychology support services. Even as he progressed in competence and achieved financial stability, Manny continued to rely on his own ways to prepare his mind and spirit for training and competition. It is therefore very fortunate that he agreed to a phenomenological interview with the second author just a few months before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where he was flag bearer for the Philippines team.



This interview provided rare insights into Manny Pacquiao's experiences in boxing, through the lens of Asian sport psychology. The focus of the interview was on understanding the psychological features of his extraordinary performance, taking into account the unique configuration of his perceptions, aspirations, motivations and inclinations, within a social, economic, spiritual and cultural context (Guinto-Adviento, 2011). The intent of my investigation was not to identify universal principles that explain his performance but to generate deeper insight into how Manny Pacquiao makes sense of his own world and how people and events have influenced his feats in the boxing arena.

There is only one Manny Pacquiao. Therefore, he is the expert from whom we must draw lessons that could potentially help others who aspire for greatness. To provide ample verbal space for Manny Pacquiao to disclose, in his own terms, his experience of pursuing excellence in boxing, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This approach generated rich insights into sporting excellence as perceived and defined by the champion athlete himself. Results of the IPA are reported under four overarching themes that emerged from the interview.



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Theme 1: Success Involves a Strong Sense of Purpose Beyond the Self

Manny began the interview by talking about his boxing career in the context of his earlier experience of poverty. Born into a poor family and raised by a single mother, Manny's decision to take his chances in the city as an amateur boxer at the age of 14 was borne out of a sense of urgency to literally fight his way out of poverty. However, after having achieved the financial security he initially aspired for his family, he continued to persist in what he acknowledged was a very challenging sport. He explained:

If we were better off in life, I would not have chosen to get into boxing because this is a very difficult, if not the most difficult of all sports. (But) I am already here; I have to stand firm in what I got myself into. Even if I have already achieved my dreams... I have already come to enjoy my job, even if it is hard. But I always think that it is also my privilege to play the sport so I have to sacrifice... it is also a privilege to bring honor to our country and to my family.



Credit: Mike Gonzalez/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA-3.0

In a later segment of the interview, Manny further explained that winning and earning a great living in the process made all the hardship and sacrifice worthwhile. After all, he and his family have reaped the fruits of his labour. He also expressed great pride in his growing capacity to share his earnings with his less-privileged countrymen. It was his way of sharing his blessings. No amount of discouragement from well-meaning relatives, friends and financial advisers could dissuade him from his continuous charitable work.

In his book, *Pacman: My Story of Hope, Resilience, and Never-say-die Determination* (Pacquiao, 2010), his wife expressed her sentiments about his generosity, especially to the poor:

Poverty hurts him in his heart, probably because of the hurt he suffered as a boy seeing his family so hungry all the time. He wants everyone to be happy, even if they have nothing. He says "God gave us everything to live in this world, so why don't we share with others?" (p. 114).

His sense of purpose expanded to eventually include, not only a good life for his immediate family, but also a better life for his countrymen, the majority of whom live below the poverty line. Nowhere did he mention anything about fulfilling a personal dream to prove himself, or pursuing a personal ambition to become one of the greatest boxers in the history of the sport. He was apparently driven by a purpose beyond himself. Initially, he seemed to be compelled by the need of his family to survive, and later on, by the need to bring honour to his countrymen and share the good life he received with the less privileged. Underlying such motivations appear a sense of self that is deeply connected to his family, country and God.



Theme 2: The Integral Components of Faith and Fate in Success

In recalling his years of training for high-level competition in professional boxing, Manny asserted the importance of total conditioning of the mind, body and spirit. Although boxers are known to subject themselves to intense and rigorous physical training in preparation for each fight, Manny emphasized that together with physical training comes mental and spiritual conditioning:

The mind, body and spirit must be one... physically, mentally and spiritually integrated... I could be physically prepared, but if my mind is not trained it loses focus, then nothing matters... You also need to entrust everything to Him because as the Filipino saying goes, "It is for man to labor but it is God who grants benevolence."

God's will
be done

However, Manny recognizes his obligation to work hard in order to do his part in training and competition. Beyond that, he acknowledges, "God alone decides the final outcome, His will prevails... only He knows how the fight will go, if you win or lose... just be sincere in your prayers." This belief allows him to remain confident before each fight, knowing that he has done all the work expected of a great boxer, yet totally accepting of God's will on the final outcome of the match. Manny admitted his desire to win and his hope that God will grant him victory. When asked if he gets nervous before a fight, Manny reiterated his belief in God's will; thus, he is not overwhelmed with fear or anxiety before a fight, no matter how high the stakes are. As far as he is concerned, he did his part and God will take care of the rest.

While Manny asserted that the mind, body and spirit must all be conditioned through dedicated and deliberate training, he explicitly raised the primary importance of faith in God to his extraordinary success in the sport. It is noteworthy that he spent a significant amount of time on this topic, more than any other topic during his interview. He makes no secret about his faith, kneeling in prayer before and after each fight, and making a public declaration of his gratitude to God after each competition. Although many observers have dismissed these practices as mere religious rituals characteristic of a religious upbringing, Manny spoke of a more fundamental and enduring relationship with a God whose presence he experienced in different stages of his life, a God who granted him the opportunity to excel in boxing, and a God whose will is for him is "to bloom where he is planted."

The related sub-theme on fate emerged as Manny explained his success in boxing. He expressed the view that some individuals were meant to thrive and excel in a particular sport. Furthermore, he asserted:

No matter how much one desires and strives to succeed, if that was not meant for him, he will not attain it. Victory will certainly elude him. However, if it is his fate, he will attain extraordinary heights of performance; sometimes, even beyond one's expectations.



Theme 3: Sport Excellence Requires Absolute Determination

This theme emerged from what Manny considers as another fundamental component of achieving excellence in boxing. Since he believes that boxing is one of the most difficult of all sports, he asserts the need for single-mindedness in committing to consistent and disciplined training. According to him, when one decides to pursue a career in boxing, one should be totally dedicated to it because any form of hesitation will hinder success, “What is really needed, once you enter boxing, is to give your whole life to your boxing career because if you are half-hearted in entering it, you will not succeed.” In another part of the interview, he reinforced this by emphasizing that one hundred percent determination is the minimum requirement from the elite boxer; anything less will simply not suffice to achieve success: “If you are not 100% decided... it falls short... if you only give 99.9%, better not get into boxing. If possible, give more than 100%... 110%! That’s me.”

Manny disclosed how he studies for his sport by watching videos of great boxers in competition, scouting his opponents by viewing recordings of their fights, and reviewing his previous fights to ascertain his areas of strength and limitations. Just like a student intent on mastering examination material, Manny described how he thoroughly studies all the elements of his game. He explained that if a student wanted to ace the exam, he is expected to prepare well for it. Similarly, in his determination to perform well, Manny does all the “homework” expected of a diligent athlete determined to succeed.

Despite his acknowledged expertise in boxing, Manny appears to regard himself as an ongoing learner determined to master the sport. In using the analogy of a student preparing for an exam, Manny implicitly assigns great importance to the continuous learning required of him in pursuit of excellence in his sport. This mindset motivates him to seize every opportunity to grow and develop in the sport. Perhaps this could explain why he trains himself harder than anyone else, even exceeding what his trainer asks of him. Early in his career, he knew others could outsmart him, but he made sure no one could outdo him in hard work and discipline. He articulated this further in his book, “I knew there were plenty of people smarter than me, but I also knew no one could outwork me” (Pacquiao, 2010, p. 59).

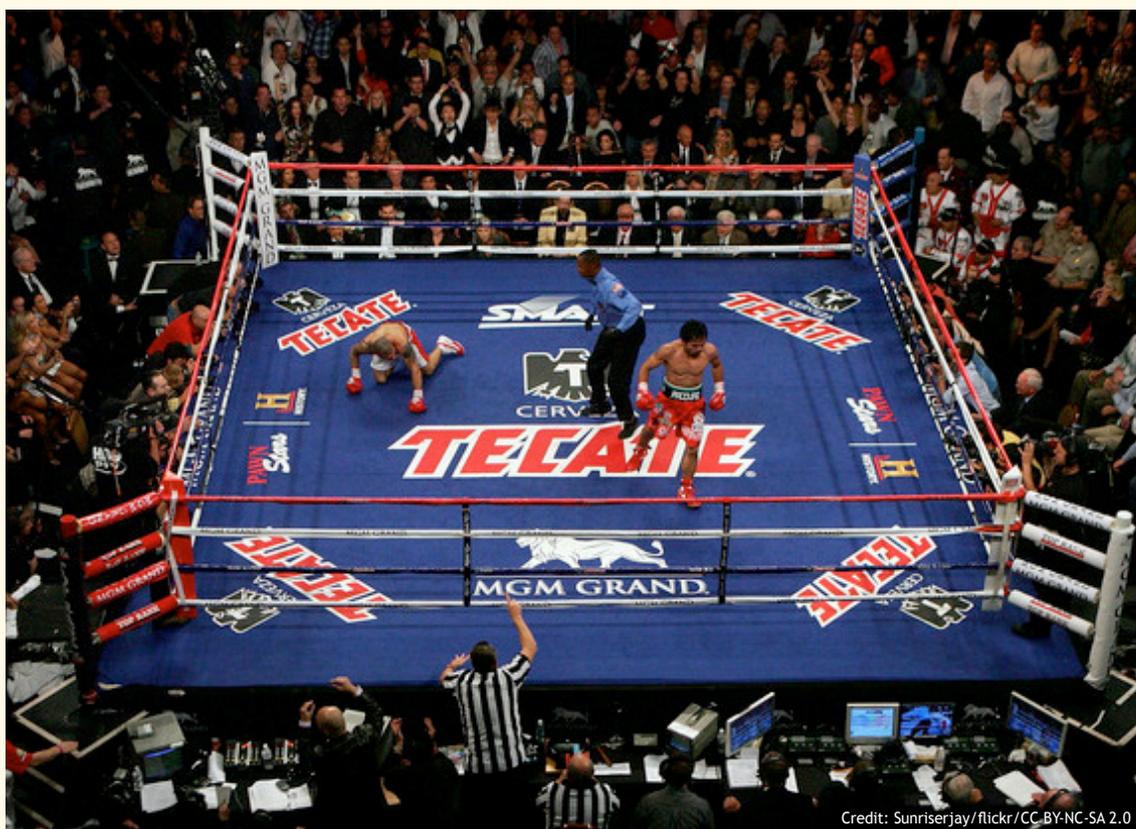


Theme 4: Excellence in Boxing Involves a Distinct Form of Intelligence

Manny, just like the majority of Filipinos, puts a high premium on education. Once he fulfilled his responsibility to provide a good life for his family, Manny did not hesitate to complete his high school education as an adult and eventually earn a college degree in Business Management. He was already a national celebrity by then and did not have to earn a high school diploma and college degree to earn the respect of his countrymen. Yet he did. Later on, he took a certificate course in Development, Legislation and Governance at the Development Academy of the Philippines in preparation for his responsibilities as a Philippine Congressman. These episodes provide the context from which he drew much comparison between preparation for boxing competitions and preparation for school examinations.

Manny introduced the concept of *talino*, the Filipino term for intelligence, in explaining his concept of boxing intelligence. He asserted that boxing intelligence is a special form of intelligence that goes beyond academic intelligence. According to him, the student may still pass an exam, no matter how poorly he has prepared for it. Given enough time during the exam to think and remember what he reviewed, he could eventually figure out the answers, whether partially or completely, to the given questions.

However, in boxing, the actual fight is the ultimate test and the athlete does not have the luxury of time to figure out responses to rapidly shifting challenges posed by dynamic interactions between him and the opponent. A split second delay in thinking and reacting may cost him the entire match.



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Credit: Mike Gonzalez/Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA3.0

According to Manny, boxing intelligence requires sharp thinking and rapid decision-making while in motion and contact with an aggressive opponent. Strategic adjustments during a match are usually made out of instinct; such automatic movements resulting from long hours of intense training and study. Pain and injury should not even block out effective thinking in quick response; the mind must remain sharp throughout the competition. The athlete is not given adequate time to review and strategise during competition.

Therefore, Manny explained that the distinct intelligence required in boxing exceeds what most people consider to be the only form of legitimate intelligence developed in the academic setting.

To further affirm his point, he provided commentary while enacting moves and strategies that he typically made during fights:

Intelligence is really needed (in boxing)... Brains are needed [He points to his temple]... It's different from studying. In studying, you can think and remember the answer during the test... In boxing, when the opponent hits you, you cannot take time to think of the solution. [He now shifts his body movement to demonstrate thinking by pausing to seemingly search for the solution in his mind.] 'Uhhh... should I move this way? Right?' It must be automatic! You have to be smart... your mind must be quick. Isn't it in school, even if you are stupid, you still have the chance to think... [Again, he acts out thinking during an exam.] 'What could be the answer?' [He shifts his posture to address the researcher.] You will try to figure out how to get the right answer, isn't it? You have time to think. In boxing, you do not have time to think. You only have a split second before you get hit. You could be knocked out before you could even think [He acts as if he has fallen to the ground]. Your mind must always be ready... you must be well conditioned so that you are totally focused. When your opponent hits you... right away, in one to three seconds, you have to be able to counter-attack [He moves around as if he is fighting in the ring], think fast on what's the best counter-offense." Totally confident about his boxing intelligence, Manny asserts, "Even while I am hit, my intelligence is not lost" [He points once more to his head].

At this point in the interview, I felt like a student listening to an expert, or like a novice receiving lessons from a boxing guru. I could sense that he was totally engaged in body, mind and spirit as he described his experience and I felt most privileged to witness this boxing legend spare some of his time to make sense to a non-boxer.





Implications for Asian Sport Psychology Theory and Practice

Several implications for theory and practice may be drawn from this study. The first implication comes in the form of a humbling recognition that a formal sport psychology program may be unnecessary to enhance the performance of extraordinary athletes whose remarkable development and progress do not include any form of mental training or psychological support. The prospective benefit of a formal sport psychology program remains a hypothesis that might be too risky to test at this stage in his career. In fact, a research mentor cautioned me from timing my research interview shortly before Manny was scheduled to leave for a big international fight, lest I introduce an extraneous variable in his training program and, consequently, jeopardize his chances of winning.

Perhaps she was teasing me about the potential impact of my research on an athlete of national interest, but it also nudged me about my assumptions of what sport psychology can do to further enhance or maintain elite sport performance. The truth of the matter is that Manny Pacquiao received no training on mental toughness, coping with pressure, stress, pain and injury, or achieving peak performance. It is precisely from this realization that we need to position ourselves as researchers and practitioners, not as experts entitled to assert our theories, but as novices open and eager to grow in the understanding of exceptional performers like Manny Pacquiao. He is truly the expert from whom we can draw much learning and insight, enriching the way we *think* and *do* sport psychology.

This brings us to the fundamental challenge of research and practice among exceptional performers to be authentic in our athlete-centered approach. Although we may agree that the athlete is the central focus in consulting, we may disagree on a similar path to research and knowledge production in the field. A review of the related literature on exceptional performance in sport reveals a preponderance of researcher-generated theories, hypotheses, factors and predictors that drive the investigative process (Baker & Horton, 2004). From the experiences of Manny Pacquiao, we can see that some of the universal principles underpinning sport expertise do not apply to him. To even begin to understand him requires the investigator to let go of assumptions regarding sport expertise or elite sport performance. Appreciating how he perceives the world and what he considers as meaningful and significant to his own development and progress as an exceptionally successful boxer, is the appropriate starting point for meaningful and relevant research and practice. Hopefully, this chapter provided some leads in that direction.

The second implication challenges us to integrate the nuances of culture into our research and practice. This invites us to go beyond assessing how we could be similar to or different from our Western counterparts, and honour the unique internal and external environment of the athlete. For instance, research on motivation and achievement has revealed that not all athletes across different cultures are driven by the self-determined and intrinsic motives espoused by most North American and European athletes (Schinke, Hanrahan, & Cantina, 2009).

The integration of culture in the theory and practice of sport psychology includes consideration of an athlete's socio-economic background and spiritual orientation because they infuse the way the athlete makes sense of the world and consequently acts. In the first theme that emerged from the account of Manny Pacquiao, a compelling life purpose that was deeply rooted in his relationship with family, country and God was revealed. His purpose for pursuing boxing at its highest level went beyond self-fulfillment in defining the trajectory and intensity of his motivation and action. Thus, self-deterministic and intrinsic approaches to motivation and achievement may not effectively work with athletes like Manny whose culture defines the self in relation to family, community and God.

Additionally, Manny Pacquiao's experiences challenge the notion that poverty breeds *learned helplessness* (Seligman & Maier, 1967); on the contrary, it nurtured many character strengths that he used to excel and succeed in elite boxing. Neither was it simply a case of the reverse condition of *learned optimism* (Seligman, 1991); his success resulted from character strengths nurtured in the context of adversity and far-from-ideal life circumstances. Although he received no formal psychological skills training, Manny intuitively recognized and developed the value of a well-conditioned body, mind and spirit. As such, he committed himself completely to training his body, while fully engaging his mind and spirit. We can attempt to dissect the specific components of his "program" but as far as Manny is concerned, everything in his life meaningfully contributes to who he is and what he has become.

It is also noteworthy that Manny Pacquiao's connectedness to his early experiences of poverty was never severed but was actually strengthened over time.



Credit: Shubert Ciencia/flickr/CC BY-2.0



Filipinos have a saying that may be loosely translated in English as “The person who does not look back to where he came from will not reach his destination.” This saying reflects the importance of keeping the pursuit of success always in the context of how one started, and remembering to stay connected to those who were part of that past. This belief includes a warning against dissociating oneself from the earlier stages of poverty by way of arrogant behaviour, lack of appreciation for those who were once part of a humble past, or excessive self-importance that ignores the contribution of others at the start of a career or enterprise. Mental strategies that build solely on personal achievement may therefore be met with resistance, as they appear to alienate the athlete from his humble beginnings and to those who were part of his success.

Determination as a recurrent theme in Manny Pacquiao’s account is likewise contextualized within a meaningful and purposeful life for others. Because boxing provided him with a way out of poverty, a sense of desperation associated with the survival of his family drove him to commit his whole body, mind and spirit to the “job.” Determination, as manifested in his experience, is nested within a network of meanings that include how he viewed himself consistently in relation to the significant people in his life, how he regarded himself in relation to a world that did not revolve solely around him or his needs, and how he perceived his success as an active response to divine favour.

The person who does not look back to where he came from will not reach his destination.

Manny Pacquiao’s definition of boxing intelligence as similar to but distinct from academic intelligence also provides us with insight into what he regards as his mental strength; his keen ability for rapid information processing and effective decision making while in physical contact with an opponent. Although he did not downplay the importance of formal education, he argued for a special form of intelligence that deserves recognition. Perhaps, this could provide the cue for future research and practice to explore and clarify our understanding of sport intelligence within the domain of boxing and across the different sport disciplines. In a study by Gould, Dieffenbach and Moffet (2002) on the *Psychological Characteristics and Their Development in Olympic Champions*, sport intelligence was portrayed as the ability to analyse, being innovative, being a student of the sport, making good decisions, understanding the nature of elite sport, and being a quick learner. Apart from this, little research has been conducted to extend the discourse on sport intelligence.

The use of prayer and religious rituals to enhance performance has become an important consideration for sport psychology in the recent years (e.g., Watson & Nesti, 2005). However, such practices should be understood within a broader reality meaningfully experienced by the athlete, rather than simply categorized as a set of coping skills and mechanisms to enhance sport performance.

The central theme of faith and fate in the life of Manny Pacquiao reflects a fundamental relationship with a personal God who actively participates in his life. His practice of prayer before and after every fight, thanksgiving in all his circumstances, and frequent references to spiritual truths and values are not isolated rituals employed for the purpose of achieving a desired outcome; thus, they cannot be reduced to a set of techniques and strategies that enhance sport performance.





Manny’s faith pervades his worldview, allowing him to see his sport in perspective, providing him with the compelling purpose by which he pursues boxing, and strengthening his desire to share his success with his countrymen, especially with those who do not have much in life. Manny makes no secret about his success formula. As far as he is concerned, he is merely fulfilling his human part of a divine plan.

From a rational point of view, this *God-orientation* may run counter to the assertion that interventions should be grounded in maximizing athletes’ control over their own mental state, with the end goal of facilitating improved self-regulation and greater control over performance. Manny Pacquiao’s God-orientation may be construed as diminishing the active role and responsibility of the athlete in determining the outcome of performance. His prayers may even be labelled as “superstitious,” promoting a mindset that relinquishes internal control to someone else or to an external supernatural force.

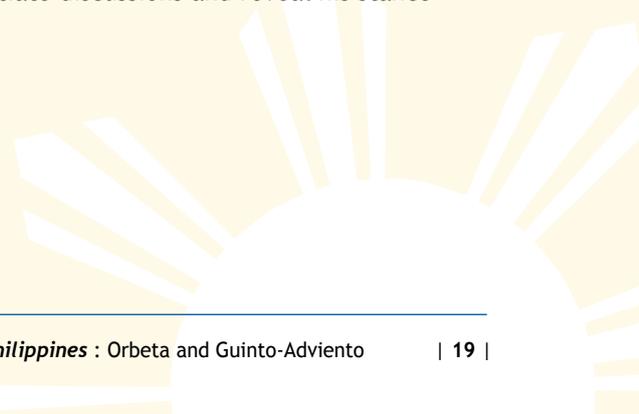
However, despite the negative connotation of spiritual beliefs and practices as manifestations of an external locus of control that are largely discouraged in competitive sport, Manny Pacquiao’s experience suggests otherwise. Nothing in his performance shows that his internal control diminishes as he yields to the will of God.

If possible,
give more
than 100%
...110%!
That’s me!

On the contrary, his firm belief in God’s will appears to ignite his passion to give more of himself to honour the talent that was given to him.

This orientation actually reflects the Christian paradox of man totally dependent on God’s grace for any effectiveness or achievement, but completely committed to hard work and excellence as if the outcome depended on human initiative and effort (Mackey, 2006). Therefore, the believer is not led to an illusion of divine transformation exclusive of human participation and cooperation. Given this perspective, the only thing Manny relinquishes is an excessive attachment to the outcome of the fight. Even outside his spiritual orientation, this attitude has the psychological value of releasing the athlete from the intense desire to control or predict the outcome of competition, so that he may focus on specific performance tasks at every moment during a fight.

Perhaps, a reframing of premises for investigation and practice needs to be undertaken to view spirituality from how it truly makes sense to the elite athlete. We should be aware of our own biases in relation to spirituality and caution ourselves from imposing them on the athlete. Religion and spirituality are very sensitive issues to many athletes. A reflective awareness of these issues has the potential of bridging the initial distance between athlete and consultant to achieve greater rapport and trust between them. It is most appropriate to maintain a healthy respect for the spiritual orientation of the athlete by allowing him to initiate discussions and reveal his stance about such issues.





Summary

It was a great privilege to learn from Manny Pacquiao himself. Much can still be learned from him as he continues to scale the summit of professional boxing. A review of his account showed a lifelong process of harnessing character strengths that were developed in the context of great adversity. These character strengths supersede the psychological characteristics or mental abilities that most formal sport psychology programs hope to develop in athletes who aspire to succeed in the global arena of elite sport. They are not separate traits or abilities that predispose an athlete to success but they are manifestations of a particular worldview, characterized by a strong sense of purpose beyond the self, total determination in pursuit of that purpose, the development of a distinct form of intelligence required for success in sport, and a profound sense of faith that embraces one's destiny as an active response to divine initiative.

Despite our tendency to search for universal principles that govern sport expertise and excellence, we have come to realize that every individual athlete has a unique perspective of the world, of himself, and of the sport. Some may prefer to call this a worldview, mindset, framework, or paradigm. Whatever we choose to call this internal reality, the athlete, within a cultural context, actively construes it. The appreciation of this perspective as the vantage point from which the athlete makes sense of events and circumstances allows us to understand his motivations, inclinations, choices, decisions, and actions toward specific goals. Hopefully, this key principle will better inform our future investigations and practice.

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