

Tough times, tough sell

De La Hoya goes for the tough sell in bad economy

by TIM DAHLBERG
AP Sports Columnist

LAS VEGAS—Richard Schaefer is a Swiss banker by trade, and an optimist by nature. While he certainly understands that the world financial system is in serious trouble, he doesn't feel the same about Oscar De La Hoya's fight Saturday night against Manny Pacquiao.

"I'm starting to see some very encouraging signs," Schaefer said. "I think there's light at the end of the tunnel."

It helps that Schaefer's business partner is De La Hoya, who has sold more big fights than anyone in boxing history and can generate thousands of pay-per-view buys simply by flashing a bright smile. He did it so well a year ago against Floyd Mayweather that their fight was the richest ever.

But times are tough, and discretionary income is down. Christmas is coming, and people are more worried about their jobs than whether Pacquiao can avoid De La Hoya's left hook.

Suddenly, there are seats available at the MGM hotel arena that was declared a sellout two hours after tickets went on sale in September. Suddenly, there are whispers that perhaps even De La Hoya's great charms and Pacquiao's David vs. Goliath story won't be enough to make this the megaevent it was supposed to be.

It's boxing, so any answers will have to wait until receipts are added up and the fighters are given their money.

But it's telling that rooms are readily available at regular rates this weekend at the MGM Grand, and that ringside tickets usually available only to high rollers and top celebrities can be bought online from the hotel in a package (\$3,399) that includes two tickets, two nights lodging and VIP entry to the post-fight party.

That doesn't happen when times are good and tickets and rooms are in short supply. Las Vegas is mired in a deep tourism slump to begin with, and casual fans who might have come just to soak in the atmosphere of a big fight may just as easily stay home.

That was the case last month when just 9,000 showed up at the same hotel to watch Ricky Hatton fight Paulie Malignaggi in an arena Hatton and Mayweather sold out a year earlier.

Boxing can be a tough sell even in the best of times, though De La Hoya has proven he is the one fighter who can consistently sell tickets—and lots of them. But with ringside seats at \$1,500 and a pay-per-view of at least \$54.95, some De La Hoya fans might look at his recent record and his much smaller opponent and decide to take a pass this time around.

If they do, it's not for a lack of trying on the part of De La Hoya and others. The promotion for the fight kicked off with a national tour of iconic spots like the Statue of Liberty and the Alamo, HBO is hyping it with a four-part "reality" series, and the two fighters have been more visible lately than even Britney



AJPress Photo by Robert Macabagdal

Spears.

The fight does have some promise. Though Pacquiao is moving up two weight classes and is much smaller than De La Hoya, he's considered by many the best pound-for-pound fighter around and his all-out style guarantees this fight will have more action than last year's fight between De La Hoya and Mayweather.

And while the argument could be made that De La Hoya hasn't won a significant fight in six years, no one argues that he will not come to fight. De La Hoya has a lot of pride and knows that at the age of 35 his time to make a statement in the ring is running out.

"The clock is ticking," De La Hoya said Monday after arriving in this gambling city. "It's kind of like you're running out of time and you only have a few fights left to find that perfect performance."

Those could be fighting words, or they could be promoting words. De La Hoya does both, so sometimes it's hard to tell if he really believes it, or is just trying to convince people to spend money on the fight that could be spent elsewhere.

But he does understand the economy is in the tank, which is why if you buy enough of a certain beer, tequila and soda you can get \$50 in rebates on the cost of the fight from sponsors.

Some people will buy if only because it's De La Hoya—the one fighter who still sells.

So despite the bad times, this fight should put up decent numbers. De La Hoya may not make as much as he might like, but he'll make enough.

But what happens when De La Hoya retires and boxing is left without a superstar? Who will pay \$54.95 for a fight then?

"That's the million dollar question," De La Hoya said. "Who will take my place as the next star in boxing? It's a real problem for us as promoters."

De La Hoya gets statue, Pacquiao gets shirt

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL
AJPress

THE Golden Boy Oscar De La Hoya is now bronze and the pound-4-pound king Manny Pacquiao branded.

A 14-foot bronze statue of De La Hoya was unveiled last Dec. 1 in front of the Staples Center in Downtown. Meanwhile, not to be left short, this Saturday, Nike will unveil a special Pacquiao t-shirt to commemorate his match against the Golden Boy.

In front of a mid-afternoon sparse crowd, De La Hoya looked amazed the moment officials pulled the black cover to unveil the large statue. The 14-foot bronze statue shows De La Hoya with both arms raised up in victory standing on a corner rope.

"Wow. I think I'm going to have to grow my hair a little longer," joked De La Hoya about the likeness of the statue.

De La Hoya, a Mexican-American born in East LA, joins other Los Angeles greats Ervin "Magic" Johnson and Wayne Gretzky as the only figures to have a statue in front of the Downtown arena.

"We believe this man has already earned iconic status in our community," said Tim Leiweke, chairman of AEG, which owns and operates Staples Center. "We at Staples Center and LA Live are very proud to be able to go to work everyday [and] very proud of the 20 million people who will go through this campus everyday to honor who we consider one of the greatest leaders, entertainers and certainly one of the best boxers ever from this community."

De La Hoya was almost in tears when he took the microphone. He spoke about how much the statue means to him but most importantly to the young kids who share his background.

"Never in my wildest dream did I ever imagine standing here and having my own statue next to the great Wayne Gretzky and Magic Johnson," said De La Hoya. "Kids are going to see that [statue] and say 'wow Oscar De La Hoya from East LA made it. He made it through a lot of hard work, with a lot of dedication and never giving up. Maybe one day I'll have my own statue.' That's what this represents. All the kids

that are going to walk, all the people going to the Staples Center it's going to mean something special."

Nike Pacquiao Shirts

In anticipation of the biggest bout in Pacquiao's career, Nike, a Pacquiao sponsor, will honor the Filipino icon with a commemorative t-shirt to unveil this Saturday.

The t-shirt will only be available at the Nike Store At The Montalban in Hollywood.

"Manny is a Nike athlete whose presence resonates around the world, particularly in Los Angeles," said Tanya Lopez, a Nike media relations manager. "In creating an exclusive shirt for him, we wanted to offer our support and appreciation for him, as well as the Filipino community in LA."

"Manny Pacquiao has achieved great heights as an athlete and has been catapulted as an icon into the international boxing scene," added Mae Dichupa, Nike Philippines Country Marketing Manager. "Nike is in full support of what could probably be the greatest fight of his life this December." ■

Heat in Las Vegas

PAGE 1 ◀

Even then, watching the fighter from General Santos City unload voluminous power punches with blinding speed, De La Hoya hardly had any inkling he would face that very same person in the ring someday.

"I never thought that this fight would happen," said De La Hoya.

But it will. On December 6, boxing's undisputed box office king faces the pound-for-pound champion of the world at around 9 a.m. local time (1 p.m. Saturday in Manila) in an aptly-titled card as far as both boxers as are concerned.

"That's why it's called the Dream Match," Pacquiao told journalists at the end of a press conference staged Dec. 3 at the Hollywood Theater of the MGM Grand, which will host the bout at its Garden Arena.

Seated at the other end of the stage and swarmed by journalists and bursting flashbulbs, De La Hoya, almost as if on cue, uttered the very same line.

"That's why it's called the Dream Match."

It could be, indeed, the kind of fight fans can only dream of. Both camps have not only predicted knockouts, but the kind of phone-booth brawl the intriguing matchup conjures will make De La Hoya upset if he wins by a mere decision.

"I would be disappointed if I don't stop him because this type of fight calls for a knockout," De La Hoya said. "This type of fight, you get two fighters who are going to fight. If Manny Pacquiao hits me with a good shot, hey, let's fight. I'm going to bite into my mouthpiece and let's fight."

Although Pacman trainer Freddie Roach and promoter Bob Arum, chief executive officer of Top Rank, have both boldly blurted out the word knockout, Pacquiao predictably stayed true

to form, shying away from making promises about the outcome of the match.

"I just want to give a good fight and do my best for the honor of my country," Pacquiao said.

As a gesture of goodwill, in an afternoon when De La Hoya paraded Mexico's best world champions past and present with him on the stage to show that—contrary to reports—Mexico supports him and not his opponent, Pacquiao even said he was ditching the term "Mexicutioner."

"It's nothing personal," he said of his current string of devastating victories over fighters of Latino lineage. "It just so happens that a lot of Mexican fighters are in my division. I don't want to be called a 'Mexicutioner.'"

Arum, though, downplayed the show of support by the Mexican greats. Not only did De La Hoya seem to knee-jerk a publicity stunt to negate the show of support vowed by Mexico's greatest boxing warrior, Julio Cesar Chavez, for Pacquiao, but the Top Rank chief also belittled the cast that was present as "a little long in the tooth."

Moreover, two of the 11 fighters De La Hoya brought with him had previously lost to Pacquiao: Juan Manuel Marquez and Oscar Larios.

The showdown between boxing's biggest stars at present was previously overshadowed by critics who called it a mismatch. But De La Hoya thinks Pacquiao has what it takes to pull this match as far away as possible from a mere schoolyard bullying.

"Manny Pacquiao can handle the weight gain because of his power and his speed," De La Hoya said. "He's probably the fastest fighter out there. A Manny Pacquiao who's going to jump up 10 pounds, 20 pounds or 30 pounds is still a fast Manny Pacquiao."

And just to underscore his

point, De La Hoya said he did not enter the Big Bear training facility to learn how to beat up on a smaller foe.

"I prepared for King Kong," said the Golden Boy. "We don't need trash-talking. My motivation is his speed, skill, power and relentlessness. That's what drives me to the gym"

Both fighters seemed headed for a trouble-free weigh-in on Friday. De La Hoya reportedly is just 143.8 lbs now while Pacquiao allegedly tipped the scales at 145.

NOTES: The other fighters Oscar De La Hoya paraded were Israel Vasquez, Rafael Marquez, Gato Gonzalez, Pipino Cuevas, Daniel Zaragoza, Chango Carmona, Humberto "Chiquita" Gonzalez, Carlos Zarate and Ruben "Rock-abye" Olivarez... Bob Arum not only mocked the roster as being old, he also compared it to losing presidential candidate John McCain, who the Top Rank chief said was a solid choice if not for the fact that he was "A little long in the tooth and boring..." Naturally, Arum likened Manny Pacquiao to US President-elect Barack Obama, saying both figures "get the blood flowing..." Arum also showed a little knowledge of history as he attempted to trace the source of Filipino bravery: "I remember that Filipinos always had a reputation for courage. After the fall of Bataan in World War II, US troops were forced to surrender. But the Filipinos? They never surrendered. They fought and fought until Gen Douglas MacArthur could come back and make good on his promise. That fighting spirit is what Manny represents..." De La Hoya, the businessman, spend a bulk of his speech during the press conference explaining how fight fans can get pay-per-view rebates by purchasing the fight's sponsors' products. And to make sure everybody understood, he repeated his entire spiel in Spanish. (Inquirer.net)

All aboard the 'Pacquiao...

PAGE 1 ◀

And this may be the best time to do so, said Top Rank President Bob Arum

"Las Vegas has been struggling to bring in people [because of the economic downturn]," he said. "[But hotel] rooms are at an all time low now. There are plenty of rooms all over town. This is an opportunity to come, enjoy the weekend, watch the fight on closed circuit or live inside the arena. This is a good opportunity to come to Vegas."

According to the Oil Price Information Service, the average price of a gallon of unleaded gasoline in Los Angeles County fell to under \$2 for the first time in two years. The \$2 a gallon price is 21 cents less than a week ago, \$1 a month ago and \$2.62 less than the record high of \$4.626 set on June 21.

The low gas prices means that driving to Las Vegas for the fight may be more cost efficient.

Regalado expects more than "half of the arena" to be filled with Filipino fans.

"I think there's about 20,000 seats at the MGM arena, I think 12,000 will be Filipino, the majority," he said.

Arum said that there are still a lot of people who plan on staying home to watch the fight "Whenever times are bad, entertainment does very well," he said. "On a pay-per-view fight even one with a price tag of \$54.95 it is very inexpensive especially if you follow the lead of the Filipino and Hispanic groups who watch the fight in groups, the evening is cheaper than going to a movie."

Filipino 32-year-old Joseph Sabino said that is exactly what he's planning to do. He said he would have gone to Las Vegas to watch the Pacquiao fight live or in closed circuit however, he has work.

"There's going to be like 10 or 15 people at my

house," he said. "This [fight] is going to make it or break it for Pacquiao. It'll prove that he's the best fighter, the best Filipino fighter ever."

Arum said that although people are still apprehensive about spending money especially in these economic dire times, people should try to make it out to Las Vegas anyways.

"There is nothing as exciting as going to Vegas for a big fight," he said.

Pay-Per-View deals

Fight sponsors Coca-Cola, Tecate beer, and Cazadores tequila are each offering mail in rebate coupons worth \$10 to \$20 toward the cost of the \$54.95 pay-per-view price.

The rebate coupons can be found on six-packs of Coke's Full Throttle energy drink and 18-packs of Tecate beer. Multiple coupons can be combined, according to Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer.

Closed circuit tickets

For those who plan to head to Las Vegas but don't have the dinero to watch the fight live inside the arena, several hotels (MGM properties) are hosting closed circuit telecasts of the bout. Mandalay Bay, The Mirage, Circus Circus, TI, Monte Carlo, Excalibur, Luxor and New York-New York will all host a closed circuit viewing of the "Dream Match." Tickets are on sale at each individual property's box office outlets or by phone with a major credit card at (866) 799-7711. The price to watch the closed circuit at the MGM Grand is \$100 for preferred viewing and \$60 for regular seating. Tickets are available at any MGM Grand ticket office outlets at the Concierge desk and the K&A Theatre box office. Tickets also are available by visiting www.ticketmaster.com or by calling (702) 474-4000. ■

Comprehensive Staffing Solutions, LLC

TAKE YOUR CAREER A FEW NOTCHES HIGHER!!

Comprehensive Staffing Solutions offers rewarding careers in nursing, therapy and home healthcare in New York and New Jersey

We have openings in major cities for:

- RNs •LPNs •PTs/OTs

Immediate Placements for US Licensed Physical/ Occupational Therapists on W2/1099/ Per Diem Basis for Local Residents

We Offer:

FREE H1B OR IMMIGRANT VISA SPONSORSHIP TO QUALIFIED CANDIDATES

Personalized service

Excellent pay rates

Direct Deposit

Free 2-week hotel accommodation for foreign recruits upon arrival

Solid support system

DONT WAIT. CALL OR VISIT US TODAY FOR ASSIGNMENT DETAILS!



Comprehensive Staffing Solutions, LLC

460 Grand Street., New York 10002

TEL: (212) 566-8855

FAX: (212) 566-8856

Alex@comprehensivecenter.com

