

Brian Vilorio

The comeback kid

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

WALKING around the MGM Grand Casino, you can't miss boxer Brian Vilorio. The short Fil-Am guy is sporting a frohawk, the latest 'cool' hairstyle and wearing a grin from ear to ear.



career better than the first world title I won because of all the struggles I had to do to get to this."

Rise and fall

For those who have never heard of Brian Vilorio, he was the Manny Pacquiao hype before Manny Pacquiao. He was one of Freddie Roach's original Filipino prodigy (other than Gerry Penalosa).

Fresh from his trip to the Philippines where he captured a championship belt from a "Filipino Killer," the newly crowned IBF Junior Flyweight champion is beaming.

"It just feels good. It feels really, really good," said Vilorio to the *Asian Journal* about his win. "It feels right."

Vilorio (25-2 15 KO's 2 NC) should feel great about his impressive win over Ulises Solis. Solis is nicknamed the "Filipino Killer" after besting many of Vilorio's kababayans. Rodel Mayol, Bert Batawang and Glenn Donaire didn't stand a chance against Solis.

But Vilorio did the impossible.

Battling the overwhelming odds against him before the fight and through 11 tough rounds, Vilorio ducked underneath a wild Solis, performed a faint and connected on a beautifully thrown sweet straight right hand to the head of his opponent's chin.

Solis was down and out for the count.

After the referee signaled the fight over, Vilorio lay on the canvas and wept openly with his arms raised in victory like a snow angel on the ground. The full house at the Araneta Coliseum in Quezon City roared.

Members of Vilorio's team picked the newly crowned champ and carried him over their shoulders.

For Vilorio, winning the fight against Solis meant more than being a champion.

It was redemption.

"If people knew what I had to go through to reach this point again," said Vilorio. "I mean this is the best victory in my

Vilorio was the National Junior Olympics champion at 100 pounds in 1995, the National Golden Gloves Flyweight Champion and Amateur Light Flyweight Champion in 1999. He was a member of the US Olympic boxing team in 2000.

In his eighth professional bout, Vilorio captured the WBC Youth World flyweight title. In his 10th bout, he won the vacant NABF title. He racked up 17 wins in his first 18 bouts (1 no contest). Boxing reporters nicknamed Vilorio the "Hawaiian Punch" for his devastating, fast hands.

And in his then biggest fight of his career, he knocked out Eric Ortiz in the first round to capture the WBC Flyweight title in 2005.

Everything seemed too easy for him, admits Vilorio.

"I won the world title by a first round knock out. I didn't even have to work for it," said Vilorio.

But with fame comes misfortune especially if one is not prepared.

A few months before his title match against Ortiz, Vilorio sent a man to the hospital. Vilorio was facing Ruben Contreras. It would be Contreras' last match.

Vilorio overwhelmed the Mexican and cruised in for an easy victory. Contreras quit in the sixth round.

After complaining of a headache, Contreras immediately fell into a seizure. The Mexican boxer was immediately rushed to a hospital where he fell in a coma for almost a week before reviving.

"It was tough for me," said Vilorio about that ordeal. "You know, I'm Hawaiian and Filipino. You know we're all about family. It's one thing to hurt a boxer but another to hurt a family. I know hurt is the name of the game in boxing but I never want to hurt a family... I had a lot of sleepless nights lafter that fight!"

Vilorio said that experience of winning the title so early in his career and putting a man to the hospital changed him.

Expectations of him rose through the roof. Family members began to give him "issues" he did not want to disclose.

Being on top of the boxing world, Vilorio said he began to grow complacent.

"I don't know. I just didn't have that love and passion anymore for boxing," said Vilorio. "It's human nature to grow complacent."

Vilorio lost the title to Mexican boxer Omar Nino Romero in his second title defense. He tried to regain it but the bout was scored a no contest after Romero tested positive for drugs.

In 2007, Vilorio again tried to go for a championship. He fought Edgar Sosa for the vacant WBC title but lost a decision.

Comeback

After the fight, Vilorio knew it was due or die time.

He was still 27-years-old and was at a crucial point in his career. Does he continue to box

or pursue a different career?

Vilorio's manager Gary Gittlesohn met with Vilorio. Gittlesohn, one of the most respected managers in boxing, was wondering the same thing about his once prized fighter. Gittlesohn said Vilorio's fall from grace and needed answers.

Gittlesohn sat Vilorio down and was forthright about the Fil-Am's options.

"It was like he was going through the motions," said Gittlesohn to the *Asian Journal*. "He didn't care, didn't have the passion. I told him 'do you have the interest of being a professional fighter? If this is what you want to be, you have to solely focus on this. You're going to have to take two steps back in order to take three steps forward.'"

"I said just give me that signal now," added Gittlesohn. "If you're not 100 percent interested in boxing we're going a different direction."

Vilorio thought for a moment. He was being challenged. This time it wasn't in a boxing ring but life.

"That's when I put my foot down. I said, 'let's do it,'" said Vilorio. "I wanted to be a champion again. I wanted to be back up there."

Gittlesohn warned Vilorio of what the Fil-Am had to do in order to get back on top.

"That means you have to eat nails, go to training camp where you're not going to be the big star," said Gittlesohn. "You have to be just one of the boys. You're going to be on the undercard and not make a lot of money."

Thus began Vilorio's journey into the boxing abyss.

After the Sosa debacle, Vilorio took a few months off and began training with Roberto Garcia in Oxnard.

Vilorio wanted to get away from the distractions in Los Angeles. He had to refocus and maintain discipline. Vilorio said they also had to deconstruct everything about him before building him back up.

The first bout Gittlesohn sent Vilorio was at the Alameda Swap Meet in Los Angeles.

"I was like what the heck is this," said Vilorio about the venue. "We were boxing in a parking lot of a swap meet. I think there were only 20 people in the stands."

"I've fought in some of the best places in the world—New York, Las Vegas, Staples Center Los Angeles—I couldn't believe I was fighting in a parking lot."

It wasn't the first and it wouldn't be the last time Vilorio fought at the Swap Meet during his comeback.

After fighting in a Las Vegas undercard, Gittlesohn sent Vilorio to Mexico. This time at a bullring turned boxing venue. Vilorio said the stench was horrible. His locker room was next to the stable where they kept the bulls. Then Vilorio fought in a parking lot overlooking a San Diego Native American casino. Due to Native American customs, fighters were not allowed to douse themselves with water in between rounds, among other things, said Vilorio.

"It was weird. They told us we couldn't do a lot of stuff," said Vilorio.

Vilorio finally got his big break. Top Rank wanted to host a boxing event in the Philippines and Vilorio and Nonito Donaire Jr. were the co-main events.

While many expected Donaire Jr. to knock out his opponent, it was the complete opposite for Vilorio.

Solis had a reputation to live up to—the Filipino killer—as he was called.



Galing Pinoy showcases the triumph of the Filipino spirit—the Filipino's innate perseverance to rise above. A double entendre, **Galing Pinoy** literally translates to both coming from (or brought to you by) the Filipino and Filipino ingenuity.



Vilorio wasn't sure if he was ready to face the champion but he had no choice. This is the moment he wanted when he began to make his comeback more than a year ago—a chance to win the championship.

If Vilorio had doubts about winning, his trainers certainly didn't. Throughout training camp, they told Vilorio he was going to be the next champion. They filled his head everyday with positive thoughts. "Come on, champ. You're going to be the next world champion," recalls Vilorio what Garcia said to him. "They kept saying, 'And the new World Champion.' Everyday I told them not to jinx it but he was very serious."

"And the more and more I watched film on Solis, the more I started believing in myself," added Vilorio.

Vilorio stepped into the ring that Sunday morning in Araneta Coliseum determined to bring home the belt.

Solis was a tough opponent, said Vilorio.

Throughout the match Solis was taking all of Vilorio's best punches. He couldn't believe the Mexican's resiliency.

But finally in the 11th round, Vilorio knocked out Solis.

If you want to watch a man tear up, watch Vilorio's reaction after the referee signaled the fight over. It was like the ending of Rudy when the walk on finally had his chance and was carried off the Notre Dame field by his teammates.

After the match, Top Rank President Bob Arum walked up to Vilorio and said, "That took a lot of guts, kid."

"Everyone who followed my career closely knew what I had to go through to get back there," said Vilorio nearly choking up. "This time around it wasn't spoon fed... I had to fight for it and it felt like I had to fight more for this world championship that's why this is more special than my first one."

The day after the match, Vilorio was still in disbelief.

Vilorio's fiancé Erica Navarro said that Vilorio woke up wondering if it was all just a dream.

"I told him to look at his face and see all the bruises," said Navarro. "I saw what Brian went through and when he was contemplating about his career. I was there when he cried. I was there in all of his lowest points and to see him go through that it was hard for me but to see him comeback and overcome all of those obstacles was just amazing. I told him, 'they should make a movie about you.'"

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Job openings scarce even as layoffs slow

by CHRISTOPHER S. RUGABER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — Companies may be laying off workers at a slower pace, but that doesn't mean more businesses are hiring.

There were 2.7 million jobs available nationwide in March, according to a government report released Tuesday, May 12, down from 3 million in February and 4 million a year ago. It's also the lowest number in the eight years the Labor Department has tracked job openings.

Other recent reports indicate that while layoffs may be slowing compared with the waves announced earlier this year, hiring hasn't picked up much since the department gathered the job openings data in March.

Without new hiring, the un-

employment rate will continue to rise. That's because many people who were discouraged and stopped looking for work at the depths of a recession customarily return to the labor market once a recovery begins. If jobs aren't available, those new job seekers are added to the total of unemployed workers.

The Society for Human Resource Management said last Friday, May 8, that its monthly survey found slightly more manufacturers plan to cut jobs in May than add workers.

While about one-third of service sector companies plan to hire this month, the survey found, that's still below last May, when about half planned to hire. Another 15 percent plan to cut jobs. The figures are based on a survey of about 1,000 companies.

Gad Levanon, senior economist for the Conference Board, said the job market has improved from earlier this year, but he doesn't expect job openings to increase for several more months.

Employers are continuing to eliminate thousands of positions in an effort to cut costs. The economy lost a net total of 539,000 jobs in April, the Labor Department said Friday, May 8.

While elevated, that figure was the lowest in six months and below an average of 700,000 job cuts per month in the first quarter. All told, employers have eliminated 5.7 million jobs since the recession began in December 2007.

The unemployment rate reached 8.9 percent in April, and many economists expect it to reach 10 percent by next year. ■