

Brian Viloría

The comeback kid

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress



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

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 Viloría to the *Asian Journal* about his win. "It feels right."

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

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

Solís was down and out for the count.

After the referee signaled the fight over, Viloría 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 Viloría's team picked the newly crowned champ and carried him over their shoulders.

For Viloría, winning the fight against Solís meant more than being a champion.

It was redemption.

"If people knew what I had to go through to reach this point again," said Viloría. "I mean this is the best victory in my 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 Viloría, he was the Manny Pacquiao hype before Manny Pacquiao. He was one of Freddie Roach's original Filipino prodigy (other than Gerry Penalosa).

Viloría 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, Viloría 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 Viloría 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 Viloría.

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

But with fame comes misfortune especially if one is not pre-

pared.

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

Viloría 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 Viloría 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 [after that fight]."

Viloría 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, Viloría said he began to grow complacent.

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

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

Comeback

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

He was only 27-years-old and was at a crucial point in his career. Does he continue to box or pursue a different career?

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

Gittlesohn sat Viloría 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."

Viloría 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 Viloría. "I wanted to be a champion again. I wanted to be back up there."

Gittlesohn warned Viloría 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 Viloría's journey into the boxing abyss.

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

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

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

"I was like what the heck is this," said Viloría 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 Viloría fought at the Swap Meet during his comeback.

After fighting in a Las Vegas undercard, Gittlesohn sent Viloría to Mexico. This time at a bullring turned boxing venue. Viloría said the stench was horrible. His locker room was next to the stable where they kept the bulls. Then Viloría 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 Viloría.

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

Viloría finally got his big break. Top Rank wanted to host a boxing event in the Philippines and Viloría 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 Viloría.

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

Viloría 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 Viloría had doubts about win-

ning, his trainers certainly didn't. Throughout training camp, they told Viloría 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 Viloría 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 Solís, the more I started believing in myself," added Viloría.

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

Solís was a tough opponent, said Viloría.

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

But finally in the 11th round, Viloría knocked out Solís.

If you want to watch a man tear up, watch Viloría'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 Viloría 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 Viloría 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, Viloría was still in disbelief.

Viloría's fiancé Erica Navarro said that Viloría 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 come back and overcome all of those obstacles was just amazing. I told him, 'they should make a movie about you.'" ■



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GMA signs Tourism Act

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Visitors Corporation (PCVC) will be reorganized as the Tourism Promotions Board (TPB), a corporate body responsible for the marketing and promotion of the Philippines as a global tourism destination, highlighting its tourism products and services.

The Philippine Tourism Authority (PTA) would now be known as the Tourism Infrastructure and Enterprise Zone Authority (TIEZA), a corporate body mandated to designate, regulate and supervise tourism enterprise zones (TEZs) as well as develop and supervise tourism projects in the country.

Duty Free Philippines will also be reorganized and renamed the Duty Free Philippines Corporation (DFPC), a corporate body mandated to operate the duty- and tax-free merchandising system in the country.

R.A. 9593 provides that the TPB and TIEZA will each have capitalization of P250 million subscribed by the national government.

Funding for TPB will be sourced from investment. The capitalization for DFPC was set at P500 million and funding for its operations will be sourced from internally generated income and other receipts.

New incentives for investors

Tourism Secretary Joseph Durano noted that some new incentives for investors in the tourism sector would be provided on top of the existing ones given by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

Durano admitted that there would be some revenue implications with the new incentives as he noted that investors were already happy with the existing incentives. ■

RP is ok thus far, says New York Times

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was also a weakness in that the country failed to use its abundant labor force.

Industry accounted for only 33 percent of output and has been declining for three decades. Philippine infrastructure is poor because of low budget revenues and the dominance of a few big groups in its commercial life has become a disincentive, the *NYT* report said.

It said that Philippine labor will continue to be sought overseas—particularly in East Asia, which is aging fast. The country may be able to build on gains in fiscal stability and balance of payments equilibrium.

Remittances will remain less vulnerable than manufactured exports to global developments, it said. ■