

Filipino boxing red hot for 2012 after banner year in 2011

Written by RYAN SONGALIA



Star boxer Nonito Donaire Jr. celebrates victory with a second-round knockout of Fernando Montiel on Feb. 19, 2011. (AP photo)

Whether or not you agreed with the decision of the third Pacquiao-Marquez encounter, it's indisputable that Filipino boxing had a banner year in 2011.

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Those worried that the Philippines will cease to be a major force in professional once The Pacman hangs up the gloves for good need just to take a look at 2011, which saw Nonito Donaire Jr., and Brian Vitoria grab as many headlines for their successes inside the ring as Pacquiao has outside of it.

Both Donaire and Vitoria fought twice in 2011, highlighting the year by knocking out pound for pound rated fighters en route to capturing world title honors.

Donaire, 29, of San Leandro, California, kicked off the year with a second-round knockout of unified bantamweight champion Fernando Montiel on Feb. 19 to pick up the World Boxing Council and World Boxing Organization bantamweight titles.

That performance would win Ring Magazine's Knockout of the Year honors, replicating the feat he accomplished in 2007 against Vic Darchinyan.

Eight months later he made the first and last defense of those titles, winning every round against formerly undefeated Argentinian champion Omar Narvaez in his New York City debut this past October.

Donaire, who has now won world titles in three divisions, will try to conquer his fourth as he moves up to 122 pounds to face former champion Wilfredo Vazquez Jr., on Feb. 4, with a title opportunity likely to follow that.

The 31-year-old former-light flyweight champ Vitoria (30-3, 17 KO) of Waipahu, Hawaii also moved up in weight in 2011, defeating Julio Cesar Miranda to pick up the WBO flyweight title in Hawaii.

Vitoria returned just five months later to face the heavily-favored reigning 108 pound champion Giovanni Segura, this time in Pasig City, Philippines.

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For eight rounds, Vilorio dominated Segura, producing an enormous welt on the right side of his face that forced the referee to halt the bout.

Pacquiao didn't have a bad year himself, having scored decision victories over "Sugar" Shane Mosley and Juan Manuel Marquez.

Still, with Floyd Mayweather in a Las Vegas jail by the time this article comes out, the "Fight of the Millennium" that people have clamored over for years appears once again unlikely to happen.

Donaire and Vilorio weren't the only *Pinoys* to move up in weight to conquer new territory.

Donnie "Ahas" Nietes (29-1-3, 16 KO) of Bacolod City, Philippines relinquished the WBO minimumweight title that he had held for three years and wrested the same organization's light flyweight title with a unanimous decision victory over Ramon Garcia Hiraes in October.

Outside of the titleholders, several Filipinos are poised to make runs at world titles in 2012.

Undefeated lightweight Mercito "No Mercy" Gesta (24-0, 12 KO) of San Diego has garnered the most attention of non-champion *Pinoys* stateside due to his explosive southpaw style and affiliation with promotional organization Top Rank.

Gesta made a lot of noise in 2011 with four victories over journeymen opponents and his pursuit of WBA lightweight champion Brandon Rios.

With Rios moving up in weight, Gesta is in good stead to pick up where Rios left off.

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Unbeaten Filipinos Froilan Saludar (14-0-1, 11 KO) of General Santos City, Philippines and Milan Melindo (25-0, 9 KO) of Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines are rated number 1 and number 2, respectively, by the WBO rankings, right behind the champion Vilorio.

While Melindo, 23, has the experience edge with victories over former world champion Carlos Tamara and title challenger Francisco Rosas, the 22-year-old Saludar is highly celebrated by pundits for his one-punch knockout power with his right hand, which draws comparisons to Luisito Espinosa.

Minimumweight contender Denver Cuello (29-4-6, 19 KO) of Iloilo, Philippines remains on the cusp of a world title after scoring four victories in 2011.

Cuello, who has knocked out eight straight since losing by disqualification last year in Mexico.

Cuello is rated number two by the WBC rankings at 105 pounds and may get his shot some time this year.

So the next time people tell you that Filipino boxing is dead once Manny Pacquiao is gone, hand them this newspaper.

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