



STILL GOT IT: Pacquiao is winding down but far from shot

I DEFINITELY don't want to say I'm going to stop Manny Pacquiao! But, yes, I do think I'll win. I'm very confident of that." Jeff Horn isn't one to blow his own trumpet. The Brisbane welterweight is as grounded as they come, which befits a former schoolteacher who did not turn professional until just after his 25th birthday.

But life as he knew it changed last week when it was announced he will not only have his first world title bout, but it will be against one of the most decorated fighters to have laced a pair of gloves. The venue is yet to be confirmed but all parties have agreed to the unexpected showdown.

"My first world title fight against a legend of the sport - Manny Pacquiao. It's bigger than I could have imagined," said Horn, who turns 29 in February. "This is a dream come true for me. You have a lot of world title fights these days but this is more than that, it is on a premium level - he is one of those champions who has been around for such a long time in the sport and who has done it all."

It's no surprise that facing the "Pac Man" on April 23 for his WBO welterweight title will be several levels above anything the 16-0-1 (11) "Hornet" has experienced. But those in the know Down Under have earmarked him for the top from the days he represented Australia at the 2011 world amateur championships and the London Olympics a year later.

In only his seventh pro fight he travelled to Perth to take on the still dangerous Naoufel Ben Rabeh - then 37-3 - who had twice challenged for the IBF super-lightweight belt.

It was seen as an unnecessary risk for a future prospect being brought along nicely, especially when Rabeh's party upped the ante a few days out.

"That was a big thing for me just to take that fight so early in my career, then they insisted it be winner-takes-all for the money," Horn said. "So I just said, 'let's do it'. It was a hell of a fight. I was really in the deep end in the first round, he was jabbing me in the face and it was an education. I just told myself, 'let's get to work'. I had to really dig deep but

thankfully I did and won a six-rounder." Horn's dad Jeff Snr explained the thinking behind taking his son to the other side of the country to face such a polished pro.

"Jeff had been boxing at a high level as an amateur representing Australia, so the last thing we wanted to do was waste two years just to pad out his record while he picked up bad habits and got sloppy."

That confidence was justified and Horn's career took another leap forward when he signed with the New Zealand-based Duco Events, who also promote new WBO heavyweight champion Joseph Parker.

Impressive wins last year over veteran Randall Bailey, where he survived an early knockdown to defeat the American in seven, Rico Mueller and Ali Funeka brought him to the cusp of a title fight, and with Pacquiao's Top Rank promoter Bob Arum in Auckland to see his last win, the signs were there that he could be next for the Filipino.

Horn was still taken by surprise by how fast things happened.

"It came about pretty quickly," he said.

"Bob came to my last fight in New Zealand in December and he didn't even say then that the fight was anywhere near being made. He hadn't mentioned anything. Then the fight was pretty much getting spoken about I didn't realise how fast it would be coming around. But it's good timing and so I decided to take the fight straight away."

Talking of good timing,



NO STRANGER AT HOME: Australian fight fans know how talented Horn is

“BOB ARUM CAME TO MY LAST FIGHT IN NEW ZEALAND BUT HE DIDN'T MENTION ANYTHING ABOUT PACQUIAO. IT ALL HAPPENED SO FAST”

with Pacquiao turning 40 next year, is this a case of getting a great champion at the right time? Horn isn't so sure.

"Yes, but he is still up there with the best. He has had massive fights right through his career but you couldn't say based on what he's done lately that he is now a bad fighter. Remember Manny beat a young world champion in Jessie Vargas in his last fight."

While Horn is reluctant to talk about turning Pacquiao into a floored genius, he is willing to explain why he thinks he will win.

"We have similar styles, I have modelled myself on the likes of Pacquiao and other fighters. But I think my movement will be the key," he said.

The fight is a no-brainer pay-per-view for Australia but the chances are it will go on terrestrial TV in the US. However, the final details are still to be resolved. There has been talk of taking it to the Middle East but Horn is desperate to grab home advantage and have it at Brisbane's Suncorp Stadium.

"I think it's very important. If I have to go overseas to fight Manny Pacquiao then fine, but to have him come here would be massive," he said. "What could be better than fighting for a world title, against Pacquiao, in front of your family and friends in your own country? And I think it would be great for him, too. He has so many fans here. I'm hoping it's going to be in Brisbane, although I'm hearing a lot of other states [in Australia] are interested."

For the past decade the boxing landscape Down Under has been dominated by Danny Green and Anthony Mundine, with even the likes of two-time world champion Daniel Geale complaining that no one else gets a look in. Horn sees his fight with Pacquiao as the beginning of a new chapter, with timing again his friend.

"Green and Mundine have been the biggest things in Australian boxing for so long," he said. "Their rematch in Adelaide on February

3 will be a massive thing down here and it should be an entertaining fight which Danny Green should win. It's a big pay day for both of them and will probably be both of their last fights.

"But after that it's a new start and it gives fighters like me the chance to get out there. And what better way than fighting Manny Pacquiao?"

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NEW KID ON THE BLOCK: Horn is only his fourth year as a pro - which is 17 less than Pacquiao

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