



Filipino boxer Larry Abarra, left, throws punches with trainer Morovan Viorel at the Round 10 Boxing Club ahead of his bantamweight bout on Thursday night in Dubai. Christopher Pike / The National

Dubai boxer Larry Abarra draws inspiration from Manny Pacquiao

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It is not often you get words of encouragement straight from a world boxing champion – and not just any champion, but perhaps your country’s greatest hero.

For Filipino fighter Larry Abarra, reaching the highs of Manny Pacquiao is just a tantalising dream.

Abarra, who is tuning up for his debut Dubai fight at May Day Mayhem on Thursday night at Emirates Golf Club, is pounding the punching bag at Round 10 Boxing Club in Al Quoz, in the heart of the city’s industrial area.

The bantamweight fighter looks lean, his hand movements sharp and, with a major break in sight, you can detect in his eyes that most prized of boxing qualities – hunger.

To get to this point has been a rough ride for Abarra. No one can accuse him of not grabbing this opportunity with both hands.

Abarra is the son of a Filipina mother and an American marine, who was based at Subic Bay naval base in Olongapo in the 1980s. He never met his father and was abandoned by his mother at the doorstep of a Filipino couple, Bienvenido and Mamalie Abarra.

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May Day Mayhem event information

What: May Day Mayhem, a night of boxing in Dubai

Where: Emirates Golf Club

When: Thursday, starting at 7pm

Card: At least eight fights including a double main event of Francois Botha v Danny Williams for the WPBF inter-continental heavyweight title and Antonio Mesquita v Nordine Arik for the WPBF inter-continental super welterweight title

Tickets: Available at all TicketMaster locations and online at [TicketMaster.ae](#).

He found direction in the ring.

"I started boxing when I was 10," he said. "I had my big break in the Philippines when I was 16, after I was spotted fighting an exhibition match."

He became an amateur fighter in Baguio City and his career has been on a steady, if unspectacular, upwards trajectory since. Fights came his way, at least locally; 35 over the next few years.

"I joined the Philippines national team for two years, between 2008 and 2009, and I turned pro in 2010," he said.

He has had five professional fights for three wins, including a first-round knockout, and two losses on points.

Last year he moved to Dubai, where he has been based at Round 10, training with and helping Morovan Viorel, a former Romanian amateur champion.

At 27, Abarra said he is in the best fighting shape of his career. His style, too, has been honed by his new trainer. Viorel, who was recruited by the UAE Boxing Federation in 2001 to promote sport in the country, has big plans for Abarra.

"We only started working together three or four months ago," Viorel said.

"He already had some experience from the Philippines and I'm glad to be training him because he's a very hard working boxer. I hope in the future we can help him climb up to the best in the world."

In the ring, Abarra and Viorel perform a dance, their moves seemingly already in synch. The coach keeps the boxer on his toes. Loosen the shoulder, protect, jab, keep moving. The instructions come as fast from Viorel as the punches come from Abarra.

"Training is very good, I have a great coach," Abarra said at the end of the session. "He knows me well, he knows what my weaknesses are and how to improve my technical abilities."

The trainer is pleased with his protege and clearly proud of his progress.

"His standards are very good and he's also at a very good age," Viorel said. "He's on a good schedule in his preparations. I hope in the next two, or two-and-a-half years, to get him his first fight for a belt."

Neither Viorel or Abarra will be getting ahead of themselves. Abarra has come a long way in the past four years but the next step up in his development promises to be even tougher. He has not made it yet, Viorel said. He must maintain the hunger.

"He is very good but he needs more training," the trainer said. "Without continuous practice you cannot succeed in boxing."

Ability is one thing, unleashing its full potential another, Viorel said. That goes for all the fighters in his Dubai gym.



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