

Obama receives Pacquiao at White House

Written by RODNEY JALECO and EDDIE ALINEA



PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

WASHINGTON — In a town where symbols mean a lot, the Philippine flag flew at the Hay Adams Hotel just across the White House last Tuesday, a home away from home for kings and presidents, and for today, people's champ Manny Pacquiao.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid delivered a privilege speech on the Senate floor extolling Pacquiao the politician and citizen of the world.

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He acknowledged that Pacquiao's last-minute endorsement in last year's mid-term elections put him over the top against his Republican opponent.

The Senate leader said he doesn't usually bother President Barack Obama, but insisted he see Pacquiao.

Pacquiao and wife Jinkee got a chance to meet the President and Vice President Joe Biden over lunch at the White House, a private, closed-door meeting.

Pacquiao is the first reigning boxing champion to be invited to the White House.

When Muhammad Ali got the same privilege, he was no longer a champion.

With his successful visit to Washington, D.C., Pacquiao appears to have arrived as a world-class politician.

"A lot of that is the enthusiasm Manny created. Sharon Angle, who was running against Sen. Reid, elected to have at her final rally, John McCain. I don't know what to think of John McCain but he's no contest against Manny Pacquiao," said Top Rank's Bob Arum, Pacquiao's boxing promoter.

Reid said Pacquiao should remind Americans about the contributions of Filipinos to America, from fighting side by side in World War II, to the millions of Filipino-Americans who help enrich America.

According to wire reports, on his way to the White House to meet with the President last Tuesday, Pacquiao inadvertently caused a multi-car pileup that, fortunately, left nobody injured.

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According to his publicist Fred Sternburg, the eight-division world champion was standing at a light on 17th Street, waiting to cross the street to the White House when passing motorists recognized Pacquiao and started shouting, waving and snapping photos of the Filipino boxing star using their cell phones.

The lead car then stopped, causing a chain-reaction that left three cars piled into each other.

Police asked news photographers if any of them filmed the accident, but were told none of them had a good angle of it since they were concentrated on Pacquiao.

The accident caused headlines that marked Pacquiao's tour of the United States capital that included meetings with Mr. Obama and Reid.

As reported by Yahoo! Sports, Pacquiao, accompanied by his wife Jinkee and promoter Bob Arum and his wife Lovee spent 10 minutes with Mr. Obama in the Oval Office and talked about basketball and boxing.

"I invited him to my fight (against Shane Mosley at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas on May 7), but he said he didn't think he could make it," Pacquiao was quoted as saying by Yahoo! Sports.

"But he said he would definitely watch the pay-per-view."

Mr. Obama told Pacquiao he'd visit him in the Philippines, said Sternburg.

Pacquiao and Jinkee posed for pictures with Mr. Obama and even struck a boxing pose.

Jinkee didn't speak but Pacquiao chatted with the President.

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“It was very impressive being in the Oval Office, and I was surprised by how tall (Mr. Obama) is,” said the 5-foot-6 Pacquiao, who estimated Mr. Obama to be 6-foot-3.

“This is an unforgettable moment in my life,” Pacquiao told mediemen earlier in the day.

Sternburg said Mr. Obama gave Pacquiao three grocery bags full of light blue M&M’s with the presidential seal, along with a watch adorned with the seal, and said he hopes to visit the Philippines someday.

“Manny said it was very impressive being in the Oval Office, seeing it first hand. He said it was a great honor to meet the President of the United States.”

Pacquiao had earlier roamed the halls of the Capital as the personal guest of Reid, a Democrat whose re-election bid received a big lift from the Filipino icon.

Reid and Pacquiao later exchanged national flags.

Arum said Pacquiao’s visit was reminiscent of the heyday of boxing great Muhammad Ali, who was also promoted by Arum.

“He comes at a very fortuitous time. If anybody can bring boxing back to the mainstream...it’s Manny Pacquiao,” Arum said.

Pacquiao was in Washington to wrap up a press tour that started in Los Angeles and had stops in Las Vegas and New York.

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While Pacquiao was making the rounds in Washington, D.C., Mosley worked the New York City scene, appearing as guest on various shows with trainer Naseem Richardson.

After that, Mosley showed New York Knicks star Amar'e Stoudemire some fancy ball handling at the Knicks training facility in Tarrytown, N.Y.