

ZAPPA – TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL – DANIEL LANE

LENNY ZAPPAVIGNA gained an invaluable insight into the power and might of a true champion when, as a humble apprentice, the Sydney-sider trained alongside Manny Pacquiao for an unforgettable month.

Zappavigna had fought only a hand-full of professional bouts when he was invited to live and breathe the world according to the 'Pacman' at the iconic Wild Card boxing gym in Hollywood, home to the likes of Pacquiao, James Toney, Amir Khan, Bernard Hopkins and Peter Manfredo Jr. Three-years later Zappavigna holds the IBO world lightweight title as testimony he absorbed many of the lessons doled out to him during his month-long stay in California.

"It took me to another level," said 22-year-old Zappavigna of his stint with Pacquiao in the build-up to the Filipino super-champion's fight with Jorge Solis. "I'd had only eight professional bouts so it was an intense experience. It was unreal just to see how an elite fighter lives and conducts himself.

"He opened my eyes to a lot of great things and it was an honour; Manny Pacquiao is a very humble man. He's very religious and he has an aura. I did roadwork with him every day, I trained alongside him and sparred with him. He's very sharp; hits you quick.

"It was a golden opportunity. I've been fortunate to spar against him and another great world champion in Vic Darchinyan. Both are southpaws; Vic is very awkward; Manny has a big hand and Vic is incredibly strong. They have both helped prepare me well."

Zappavigna needed that quality of preparation – and his trademark toughness – when he was given his crack at the title earlier this year against rugged Ecuadorian Fernando Angulo in Californian. Angulo was almost a kilo over the weight limit and despite the justified protests of his trainer Tommy Mercuri, Zappavigna insisted the bout went ahead.

"Tommy was just looking out for me," he said. "Angulo is a strong boy, an experienced opponent and a big puncher. Tommy wanted to call the fight off – I didn't blame him because if I'd lost people would've asked what was he thinking – but after all the hard work I'd gone through I didn't want to go home without fighting.

"I trust Tommy. As a trainer he has always believed in me and backed me. He keeps me in line and trains me well. He's been my only trainer since I started boxing 10-years ago and our relationship has been described as like a father-and-son. Tommy has taught me a great range of punching combinations and he's built on my natural aggressiveness as a fighter. But I really wanted to fight Angulo . . . it was for the world title . . . and it paid off."

Though, it was a war as Angulo pulled out every trick – fair or foul – he'd gleaned during a 31-fight career that has taken him to boxing stadiums throughout Venezuela, Argentina, South Africa, Mexico and the USA.

"It was tough," Zappavigna

recalled of the world title victory. "He [Angulo] opened me up with a head-butt that needed about 10 stitches but the referee ruled it a punch. I was worried the fight might be stopped because of the blood but I refused to panic. Some fighters might've panicked, but I stuck to the plan."

By sticking to the plan Zappavigna now stands alongside Danny Green, Vic Darchinyan, Lovemore N'dou and Jackson Asiku as Australia's IBO champions. While Tommy Mercuri has proven to be an outstanding mentor for one of Aussie boxing's bright young lights, Zappavigna's team received an extra boost recently when renowned conditioner/dietician Ray Kelly joined them. The work champ raves about the impact Kelly, who helped Adro Sarnelli win the first Biggest Loser [weight loss] reality television show, is having on his career.

His fan base is growing at a remarkable rate, and apart from the Penrith Panthers rugby league players it seems as if the nation's best cricketers are also among them.

When he visited Thump Gym at Five Dock to do this interview Zappavigna met one of cricket's emerging stars in batsman Peter Forrest, who was selected for Australia A in a two-match series against Sri Lanka A in Queensland – and the fighter made an immediate impression.

"Peter, Brad Haddin, Nathan Bracken, Burt Cockley and Doug Bollinger are all becoming great boxing fans and I know they're all keen to support Lenny," said Thump's Christian Marchegiani, who trains members of the NSW cricket side. "They're already mad Danny Green supporters but they're all very keen to see Lenny do well."

While it's likely some of them will be in England playing in the Test series against Pakistan when Lenny next fights on July 22, some of the cricketers will be able to salute Zappavigna when he defends his crown at the Penrith Panthers Leagues Club.

The humble apprentice, who is now a humble world champion, has promised to put on a show that will hit everyone for six.

