

Cotto Defeats Abdullaev in Garden Debut

Written by Jake Donovan
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It was a night of Madison Square Garden debuts, but an all-too familiar result transpired in the end of the main event between Miguel Cotto and Mohammad Abdullaev. One week after Kostya Tszyu was forced to quit on his stool, and one hour after Mike Tyson did the same in Washington, DC, Abdullaev decided to make his exit 57 seconds into the ninth round, enabling Cotto to make the third defense of his WBO junior welterweight title and avenge his loss to Abdullaev in the 2000 Olympics.

Both fighters made their Garden debut on a night where HBO's Boxing After Dark played the main room for the first time in their nine-year history. The Garden party was a subdued one for the most part, as a disappointing turnout and minimal action resulted in a not-so-memorable evening on the eve of the Puerto Rican Day parade, aside from the Cotto victory.

To his credit, Cotto danced as hard as he could. The undefeated Puerto Rican superstar started out the fight as the aggressor, serving an early reminder that he is not the same 19-year-old kid Abdullaev faced in the amateurs. Abdullaev had his moments midway through the round, but Cotto dominated for the most part with his accurate right hands and a flurry toward the round's end.

The large Puerto Rican contingency on hand erupted for the first time in the fight with chants of "Cotto! Cotto! Cotto!" early in the second round. They seemed more into the fight than the participants, as the round was uneventful through the first two minutes. Abdullaev plodded forward through much of the round, while Cotto was content to fight from the outside. The action picked up in the last minute, as Cotto established his jab and right hand. Abdullaev let his hands go for the first time in the fight, and managed to keep Cotto honest even in losing most of the exchanges.

Abdullaev closed the gap in the third, landing a straight right that got Cotto's attention. It had nowhere the effect of the big right hand that DeMarcus Corley was able to land on Cotto in the same round of their February fight. What it did instead was make Cotto weary of possible future incoming punches, as he fought the rest of the round with Abdullaev's right hand power and accuracy in mind. Cotto was effective with his body work, but it wasn't enough to overcome Abdullaev's effective aggression throughout the round.

Cotto was far more effective from the outside in rounds four and five, though still fighting to avoid Abdullaev's right hand. Cotto was bouncing on his toes, coming in with hooks to the body in an attempt to slow down the Uzbek fighter. Abdullaev continued to come forward and force Cotto to the ropes, but spent too much time looking for openings that weren't there.

The action slowed in the sixth, but was still largely dominated by Cotto's effectiveness from the outside. Abdullaev had his moments when he was able to pin Cotto on the ropes. Those moments, however, were few and far between, as he was unable to force Cotto to stand his ground long enough to mount a significant attack.

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Cotto started round seven with a combination upstairs before returning to the outside and offering good lateral movement. Abdullaev began to show early signs of swelling under his right eye as Cotto was able to repeatedly score upstairs. Mohammad kept plodding forward throughout the round, but offered little offense. He looked to atone for it in the eighth round, fighting with more urgency as his right eye began to swell shut. He enjoyed perhaps his best round of the fight since the third, though his best shot was a right hand that came after referee Johnny Callas was breaking the two apart toward the end of the round. Abdullaev drew a warning, but it wouldn't matter in the end.

The end came less than a minute into the ninth. Cotto asserted himself, as he sensed the end was near. Abdullaev's right eye was now swollen shut. After eating several shots upstairs, Abdullaev signaled to the ref that he didn't want anymore. Callas called time and summoned the ringside physician to take a look at Abdullaev's eye. After a brief examination and discussion, Abdullaev reaffirmed that he had enough, making Cotto a winner by ninth-round knockout.

For months, promoter Top Rank insisted that this fight was important for Cotto. It was sold as Cotto defending against the last man to beat him in the ring. In the end, Abdullaev can still lay claim to that, though the series is now even at one. A tiebreaker is highly unlikely, as is the possibility of Cotto ever breaking out of his shell. Wearing the same poker face whether fighting or simply walking down the street, Cotto seemed unfazed at the fight's end, having avenged the last loss of his amateur career.

"I feel the same," insisted Cotto (24-0, 20 KOs) during the post-fight interview. "(Abdullaev) offered more pressure, but I knew how to deal with it. His eye began to shut, and he was forced to quit."

If we are to take Cotto's word at face value, then perhaps he is prepared to quit as well - though not boxing; just the 140 lb. division. Having struggled to make weight in the past, Cotto came in at a trim 138¾ for this fight. Yet at fight's end, he suggested that a bigger weight - and fight - may be in store.

"I never make plans. My company makes the plans. We'll address the issue and move forward. That said, Oscar de la Hoya has been talked about. If that can come to fruition that would be a great bout. I've been thinking about moving up to 147, and I believe it would be a great bout."

Indeed it would. But until it happens, Cotto will merely have to settle for a great weekend. The TKO victory comes twelve hours before he is to serve as Grand Marshall for Sunday's Puerto Rican Day Parade. It beats the future of Abdullaev (15-2, 12 KOs), who at age 31 does not have much time left to establish his pro career. Suffering his second stoppage loss in two years, Abdullaev's debut with HBO, Madison Square Garden and the title picture may very well be his last across the board.

In the co-feature, former junior lightweight champion Joel Casamayor and undefeated 2000 Olympian Almazbek "Kid Diamond" Raiymkulov fought to a twelve round draw. Like the participants in the main event, both fighters were former Olympians making their Garden debut.

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The first half of the fight was tough to sit through, despite a first round knockdown scored by Casamayor. Raiymkulov was wobbled midway through the first round, and hit the deck toward the end of the round courtesy of a Casamayor right hand. Raiymkulov shook off the knockdown and seemed to dominate the next four rounds. Kid Diamond was the aggressor throughout each of the four, while Casamayor was in retreat mode, limiting his punch output to awaiting Raiymkulov's mistakes, which were occurring less frequently.

Almazbek came out aggressively in the sixth, believing his power was starting to get to Casamayor. Instead, Joel decided to stand his ground and fight back for the first time since the opening round. He did enough to earn the round on all three official scorecards - one of the few the three judges would agree on.

Raiymkulov came back at the start of the second half and appeared to have the fight on cruise control, as Casamayor started fading with each passing round. However, the Cuban managed to turn the tide once the rounds hit double digits, as Raiymkulov's activity dropped considerably.

The two saved the best for last, as several exchanges took place during the twelfth and final round. Casamayor came out swinging early, believing he needed a big round to pull out the fight. Raiymkulov came on late, wobbling Casamayor toward the end of the fight, but he ran out of time, and hoped that it was enough to take the round and the fight.

Only one judge supported his cause. Former junior welterweight champion Billy Costello scored it 116-111 for Kid Diamond. Tom Schrek continued his trend of absurd scorecards, seeing the bout 115-112 in favor of Casamayor. Luis Rivera scored it even 114-114, resulting in a split decision draw.

Kid Diamond remains unbeaten at 20-0-1 (12 KOs). Casamayor is now 31-3-1 (19 KOs), with only one win in his last four contests.

The two bouts were carried by HBO's Boxing After Dark series, and promoted by Top Rank, Inc.