

They each made the walk, that long, short, glorious, adrenaline-pumping walk toward the unforgiving bright lights of center ring. They made it at approximately the same time and not even all that far apart. They made the walk to cheers and adulation.

It was eerily similar. The walk back, though, was a world apart.

Miguel Cotto and Mike Tyson each made memorable footsteps in their careers Saturday night — Cotto in Madison Square Garden, Tyson over at the MCI Center. Cotto's star, as expected, continues to soar. Tyson's troubled star tumbled into oblivion.

While no one really expected Cotto to lose, this was a defining moment in his career. He was fighting in front of a Puerto Rican crowd, one literally brimming with hopes and expectations. He was fighting Muhammad Abdullaev, the man who put the blemish on Cotto's amateur career with that victory in the opening round of the Sydney Olympics.

As usual, no one really knew what to expect with Tyson. No one knows that these days. He was fighting big, ponderous Irishman Kevin McBride. It seems no matter how many train wrecks Tyson has — in his life and in the ring — fans still plunk down their money to see him exchange bombs. Until Saturday night.

Cotto certainly answered his challenge, fighting well and showing the perfect amount of poise as he steadily dismantled Abdullaev. In the beginning, it was slow going. Each fighter was using that peek-a-boo style. Still, Cotto continued pounding away, many times working with his back to the ropes. He threw more and he gradually landed more — whap, whap, pow, pow, pow.

Abdullaev, a great amateur but only a good professional, continued to put pressure on Cotto. But the pride of Puerto Rico continued to pile up the rounds and continued to pepper his Olympic nemesis. His punches were faster and simply had more pop. It became clear that this was merely going to be a matter of time. And, when Cotto took control in round eight, time was growing short for Abdullaev ... his right eye rapidly becoming a mess.

And then, just like that, time was up.

The clock said there was 2:08 remaining in round nine when he backed away and raised his left hand. It read 2:07 when he raised his right hand, though not as high. It read 2:06 when referee Johnny Callas stepped in. The trip to the corner to see the doctor was just pomp and circumstance. That right eye was shut. This fight was over.

HBO's Larry Merchant accurately pointed out that "Abdullaev's lumps have lumps."

And HBO's Emmanuel Steward said, "I'm very, very impressed."

Written by Bill Knight
Sunday, 12 June 2005 19:00

And so Miguel Cotto's night went, success swooping down and embracing him.

Over at the MCI Center, though, Tyson was having no such success.

Mike Tyson has mesmerized fans for two decades, throwing those incredibly efficient, incredibly fierce punches with bad, bad intentions. For the past few years, though, fans have been more curious than anything. What will he do next? They still show up, hoping to see those jaw-breaking punches or, if not that, hoping to see a circus act. Perhaps at the end, on a Saturday night in the nation's capitol, maybe they just showed up out of some morbid curiosity.

Iron Mike was busy in the early going, throwing those big body shots that would have paralyzed huge men a decade ago. They were rib-wreckers and liver laceraters. But, Saturday night, they just thudded off McBride's sides. And he kept coming.

Tyson was trying desperately to turn back the clock, to rekindle that old flame ... trying to be that man who, a decade ago, ripped mere mortals apart and did it quickly and easily.

No go. That clock only goes in one direction.

Then he became the Mike Tyson from the streets. He worked in an elbow or two. He tried the old arm-breaker tactic. Then he threw his best punch of the night — a headbutt. At least that one opened a cut on McBride. At least he got some kind of result. But referee Joe Cortez was having none of this.

Finally, Tyson simply gave in. He is 38 rapidly pushing 39 and he was not in the greatest shape of his life.

The sixth round was erasing itself from the history books. It was winding down. And so was Tyson.

McBride shoved the former heavyweight champion of the world to the canvas and Tyson just sat there, too tired and too discouraged to get up. Finally, like a man of 68 and not 38, he labored his way back to his feet. He went to his corner, sat on his stool and said goodbye to boxing.

It was over. Mike Tyson was done. He said he didn't have the "fighting guts" anymore. He said he didn't have "the heart" for it anymore. He said he didn't want to "disrespect the sport" anymore. He said he was just "fighting to pay bills" (all those millions and millions of dollars sifting through his fingers like sand through an hour glass).

Then the two men made very different trips, taking that walk from center ring back to the dressing room.

Miguel Cotto is a young star, a young man with so much future staring him in the eyes. His walk back to the Madison Square Garden locker room was all too short. It ended too soon as he disappeared from his adoring fans. Cheers walked with him, every step of the way. And Cotto

Tyson-McBride/Cotto-Abdullaev

Written by Bill Knight
Sunday, 12 June 2005 19:00

knows. He knows there will be other nights, other triumphant trips; hopefully, many more. The cheers are still out there, still his.

Mike Tyson is the man who stayed too long at the dance. His walk back to the MCI locker room, bare-chested as usual, must have been interminably long. No cheers. Just jeers. Some even rained debris down on the man they had cheered a half hour earlier. It was a sad ending for a former champion.

Boxing is a tough business. Tough, though it is, Tyson has wrapped himself up in the protective warmth of the sport. It has been his identity for most of his life. And now?

Miguel Cotto will reach the end of his career someday. But not this day, not this June New York night. The lights are still on for a young, talented, up-and-coming champion. They shine brilliantly.

As Mike Tyson took that final long walk Saturday night, it was almost as if you could hear someone clicking off the lights, one by one. Gradually, the stage went dark. The curtain closed. And there were to be no more curtain calls.

Now this man who spent so much of his life in the glare of center ring will get a taste of real life. For his sake, we can only hope that real life is far more kind to Mike Tyson than the semi-tragic drama that unfolded and unraveled during his boxing career.

Two men. Two similar walks to the ring. Two very, very different walks back.