ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. -- The difficulty in watching an icon fall, before his legion of worshippers, in such definitive fashion, was evident in the misty eyes of promoter Kathy Duva, the slumped shoulders of manager Pat Lynch, the mid-ring breakdown by matchmaker Carl Moretti, the resigned decision by trainer Buddy McGirt to end the fight at its midpoint, and of course the battered face of their beloved warrior Arturo Gatti.

Floyd Mayweather Jr.? Of course, he was nothing short of magnificent, as most everyone outside the 12,675 loyalists at Boardwalk Hall anticipated.

By stopping Gatti after six rounds of a scheduled 12, and lifting the WBC super lightweight championship, Mayweather cemented his claim to pound-for-pound supremacy, if not the linear 140-pound title which still belongs to Ricky Hatton.

But what of Gatti?

Fifteen years as a professional fighter, a Fight of the Year seemingly every time the calendar turns, and the one-way beating he absorbed from Mayweather, have led Gatti to yet another career crossroads.

He has chosen the correct fork in most previous applications, of which there have been several. At 39-7 overall, and 32 years of age, Gatti said he has one more championship run left in him, at welterweight.

That is no certainty now, not after the lopsided beating delivered by Mayweather, whose 23rd inside-the-distance win on a 34-0 record was the second-briefest stoppage loss of Gatti's career (surpassed only by his fifth-round loss to Oscar De La Hoya in 2001), as well as the second-briefest stoppage win in a championship fight for Mayweather (surpassed by his second-round blitz of Angel Manfredy in 1998).

Gatti's run at 147 pounds will provide box-office success because of his incredible drawing power here.

Yet the possibility is clear that Gatti saw the end of his last world-title claim Saturday night, which left a wistful, nostalgic air.

"There's an old rule in boxing that you don't fall in love with your fighter," said Moretti, whose tears flowed freely in the ring afterward. "I think for this whole team -- Buddy, Pat Lynch and the whole family -- that goal went out the window about 20 years ago, when we met Arturo. He just kept fighting and fighting. There's no shame in losing to the best fighter in the world."

Gatti never got started because Mayweather never let him. A first-round knockdown, while Gatti complained about Mayweather hitting on the break, set the fight's tone. In fact, referee Earl

Morton never ordered the break -- Mayweather's quick combination landed after the fighters separated themselves -- and while Gatti complained, Mayweather landed the left hook which floored him.

Gatti broke rule number one and paid for it.

"I think it threw me off a little bit," Gatti said of the knockdown. "But the referee always says, 'Protect yourself at all times.' I guess I learned the hard way."

McGirt called that moment the difference in the fight, saying Gatti grew immediately and unnecessarily concerned with rallying to cover the two-point deficit on the scorecards, although judge John Stewart somehow scored the round only 10-9.

"After that little mishap, everything went out the window," McGirt said. "He lost total focus after that. He started the first round the way he should have, then he lost concentration. When you're fighting a guy like Floyd, you've got to stay focused every second. You can't get off track, because once you get off track they get a rhythm, and once they get a rhythm that's it."

That rhythm pounded almost ceaselessly for the remaining five rounds.

Mayweather swept every round on every scorecard, including two 10-8 scores in the first round, and 10-8 on all three cards in the sixth round.

CompuBox statistics had Mayweather landing 57 percent of his punches (168 of 295), to Gatti's 17 percent (41 of 245). Worse yet for Gatti was the disparity in power punches landed -- 115 for Mayweather, 10 for Gatti.

On the rare occasions Gatti tried to open up offensively, Mayweather found counterpunching opportunities bountiful. And when Gatti didn't open up, Mayweather took the lead and controlled the action with even greater ease.

"He gave Floyd time to think, which made the fight that much easier," said Roger Mayweather, who trains his nephew. "Now, he's not being the aggressive guy, he's trying to outthink you -- and it's hard to outthink a guy who's a pure boxer."

McGirt watched the fight unfold even as he pondered when to stop it. During the break between the fifth and sixth rounds, McGirt asked Gatti to tell him what was wrong. McGirt recalled looking at the puffy-faced fighter, whose left eye was swelling shut quickly, and hearing him respond that, "I just can't get off."

McGirt decided right then to give Gatti one more round. When it ended up being Gatti's worst round of the fight, McGirt told Gatti he was stopping it.

Gatti asked for one more round. McGirt told him no. The fighter slumped and dropped his head into his trainer's chest, though he never questioned the decision.

"My trainer decided I was getting hit too much, punched too much," Gatti said. "I think it was the right decision because I want to come back at 147 pounds one more time. If I had gone a couple more rounds, I might've gotten hurt.

"I'm 32 years old and it's not the first time that I've taken a beating."

It was a tough night for Main Events, the New Jersey promotional company which lost two title claims in the same weight division on the same night. Colombia's Carlos Maussa, 19-2 (17) lifted the WBA 140-pound title from Vivian Harris (25-2-1) on a seventh-round knockout. The fight exposed a gross lack of conditioning by Harris, who appeared on wobbly legs as early as the third round.

All four of the alphabet titles at 140 pounds were defended within a three-week period, with three of them changing hands. Only WBO titleholder Miguel Cotto was spared.

Amid the concern for Gatti's future, Mayweather's future grew exponentially.

At just 28 years old, and with his third title claim in less than nine years as a pro, Mayweather already is on the cusp of taking over the mantle of boxing's senior elite warrior, with such big names as Tyson, De La Hoya and Hopkins at or near the end of their prizefighting journeys.

"I feel it's my time," Mayweather said. "I knew eventually it was going to happen. I just kept taking my time, kept racking up victories, kept beating the best they could put in front of me, and eventually I knew it would be my turn. And now it's my turn.

"I only want to fight big fights and I want to be on pay-per-view until the end of my career. This was a beginning. I think I put on one hell of a show and I think I showed people I deserve to be on pay-per-view, I deserve to be up here, I deserve the center of attention, and my hard work and dedication have paid off."

Mayweather called out Hatton in a fight that would end all debate about the 140-pound champion, though Hatton voiced a preference for fighting Cotto.

"Obviously, I'm here to generate publicity and try to get fights with the top guys in the division," said Hatton, who attended Saturday's show. "Cotto is a fight boxing fans would want to see. We're both great fighters. Hopefully, we'll be able to get it on."

While not the linear champion, Mayweather said he believes fans should compare his win over Gatti to Hatton's upset of Kostya Tszyu, and make a subjective determination who is more worthy of being called the division's true champion.

"After tonight, I believe I'm the 140-pound champion," he said. "You've got to look at the performances, how Ricky Hatton performed and how I performed, then you take the two and say, 'Who performed the best?' I feel I performed the best. It wasn't a wrestling match. I went out there and proved myself and I boxed. I showed this sport is boxing, not wrestling."

Mayweather, just as he predicted, quieted the crowd with an early offensive outburst. It was a calculated plan, based on Gatti's penchant for feeding off his home crowd's energy.

"A lot of fighters play to the crowd," Mayweather said. "Even like with basketball, the (home) team always plays to the crowd. I said, 'I'm going to stay focused, I'm going to block everybody out, and I'm going to imagine it's just me and him in here.' And that's what I did."

Meantime, McGirt said speed -- the distinguishing characteristic in this and many other Mayweather fights -- was the variable for which Gatti could not prepare, even during a three-month training camp.

"You can't simulate it. You can't. It's impossible," McGirt said. "So the key is (to) get guys who are fast and work on what you need to do to beat Floyd. He did well in camp but Floyd was the better man tonight. I'd say he's the best out there right now. He's earned it. He beat the best. I can't take anything away from him."

McGirt made the decision to stop the fight, though that call was not nearly as difficult as witnessing the six rounds leading up to it.

Gatti's boxing ambassadorship has been a rare phenomenon, mixing uncommon determination and bravery with just enough talent to make the formula work. He parlayed that into two world-title claims, even though his career seemed scrapheaped in the late-1990s.

He isn't on the scrap heap now. His career can absorb a seventh loss far more easily than Mayweather could have absorbed a first loss.

But where Gatti goes from here is a question to be answered in the months to come.

For the time being, Gatti's many fans and admirers are no different than Team Gatti's inner core, as they salve the pain of the defeat, and hope Saturday's unsightly loss is not the one from which their hero can not bounce back.

"You know, it was hard for everyone," McGirt said. "But they still love him. So if he fought next week, it would still be sold out."