

King Cotto and the Boardwalk shuffle

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.

Sunday, 03 December 2006 19:00

Atlantic City -- Pressure. Saturday night was all about pressure. It suffocated Carlos Quintana and it broke Joshua Clotney. There are few fighters in the game right now who can apply the pressure in the same manner of Miguel Cotto and Antonio Margarito. That should make a fight between them extremely interesting.

If they are able to plow through their mandatory defenses -- or have Bob Arum buy them off with step-aside fees -- Cotto and Margarito will attempt to unify the welterweight division June 9 at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Earlier on in the opener, it seemed that Arum and Margarito picked the wrong guy to end 10 months of inactivity against. Clotney started fast and looked as if he had the power and speed to outslug WBO champion Margarito in the trenches. That all changed after the fourth round. Clotney damaged his left hand, but some ringside observers weren't convinced. It may have been simply too much Margarito that inspired the change in his approach. Maybe he broke his hand, or maybe Margarito, who never backed off Clotney's chest, broke him down mentally.

Either way, the fighter from Ghana basically stopped fighting. Margarito did not. He walked forward, winging punches every step of the way. Yes, his job was made easier because Clotney wasn't firing in return, but Margarito nonetheless churned on and on and deserved the unanimous decision.

It's hard to judge a man when it's not your broken hand inside the glove, but other fighters have fought more effectively with damaged mitts. Given the stakes -- a world title fight on national television and an early points lead -- it appeared from this corner that Clotney allowed a good opportunity slip away.

In contrast, Cotto seized his opportunity and devoured it. He opened the fight launching wicked rights and lefts to the body. Quintana was overwhelmed from the start. After absorbing one particularly violent right hand, he moved about the ring on legs like those of a Kentucky-bred yearling.

To his credit, Quintana fought back and even stopped Cotto in his tracks at the close of the round. But there are some forces that are not to be denied. Destiny and Cotto's left hook are two. It may very well be Cotto's destiny to rule the welterweight division. And it was certainly his left hook to the liver that earned him the WBA title on this night. That punch was responsible for the first of two knockdowns in the fifth round and essentially ended the fight. Quintana never came back out for the sixth round.

"It's not my job to choose my opponents or who I will fight next," said Cotto after the fight. "You saw Antonio Margarito. Margarito is a strong fighter, a great fighter, but I'm going to beat him if we fight. Whoever my promotional team chooses to put in front of me I will beat."

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It was hard to argue with that assessment on Saturday night.

Tough call. Juan LaPorte, the great former featherweight champ from Puerto Rico, was on hand to watch two of his compatriots in the main event. "If Quintana can get past the sixth round, he may have a chance to outbox Cotto down the stretch," said LaPorte before the fight. Cotto never allowed LaPorte's theory to be tested.

Friendship. Author Ron Ross' phone rings during one of the undercard bouts. It's unbeaten junior welterweight Dmitriy Salita on the other end. After observing Shabbos, Salita leaves New York City at sundown in an attempt to get to Atlantic City in time to see his good friend and fellow Jewish boxer Yuri Foreman fight. Moments later, Jesus Rojas scores a first-round TKO over Ubaldo Olivencia in a scheduled six-rounder. The odds of Salita making it look slim.

Flags of our Fighters. Meet Tomas Mendoza, Top Rank's official flag bearer. Whenever a Top Rank fighter enters the ring with a flag, you'll see Mendoza leading the procession, enthusiastically waving the flag. On Saturday night, he carried the Mexican flag into the ring for Margarito and then the colors of Puerto Rico for Cotto.

Fistic envy. George Foreman once said that boxing is that sport to which all others aspire. That would explain why last month at the Garden baseball players -- David Wright, Paul LoDuca -- and former football star Jerome Bettis were in attendance. On Saturday, Mets all-star centerfielder Carlos Beltran, a native of Puerto Rico, was in attendance to watch Cotto. The two athletes forged a friendship last year when Cotto caught a game at Shea Stadium while in town to fight Paulie Malignaggi.

Text me. Thank goodness for text messaging, I was able to get updates on the HBO card while in A.C.

A nod of the head. It used to be that a fighter would shake his head "No" after he was nailed with a good shot. That was usually an indication that the punch got his attention. Each time Margarito was caught flush, he nodded at Clottey and kept moving forward. What he was saying was, yes, you caught me with a good shot, but I'm still coming forward.

No cheering in the press box. That is generally the rule. But when you've traveled all the way from Ghana, I guess you get a pass. The small contingent of journalists from Clottey's home country rooted openly for their man. Although there wasn't much to cheer about after the fourth round.

They're Ghana get it. Tough night for Ghana. Clottey loses in Atlantic City and Ike Quartey is beaten in Tampa.

Friendship, Part 2. Thanks to the crafty driving of Eli Toushteyn and his navigation system, Salita makes it to Boardwalk Hall during the first round of Foreman's fight. The traveling party, which also included Toushteyn's wife, Vera, almost missed the bout. Eli was so consumed with a story that Salita was telling him on the way down, he missed the exit for the Atlantic City

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Expressway. The navigation system, though, quickly got him back on course. They left NYC at 5:35 p.m. and arrived in A.C. at 7:53.

Still unbeaten. Ending six months of inactivity, Foreman pitched a shutout against Donnie McCray to cop a unanimous 10-round verdict. Foreman scored a knockdown in the third round and put forth a Willie Pep-type boxing exhibition.

Postfight postscript: Drinking coffee with Salita, Ross and their respective parties at Trump Plaza after the fight, Salita said that "Cotto looks completely rejuvenated at 147." He pointed out that the extra seven pounds not only enhanced Cotto's power, but also his chin. "Because he's no longer dehydrated." I asked Salita, who still makes 140, if he was considering the comforts of the welterweight division. He smiled and said, "Maybe." I then ordered a double-brownie sundae with my coffee, Salita, did not.

Postfight postscript, part 2: Miguel Cotto's welterweight experiment is thus far a success. He seemed strong and confident carrying the extra seven pounds. "Every punch I threw was hard," said Cotto. "I felt very strong at this weight. I can do anything I want to do."

Evangelista Cotto, Miguel's trainer was more succinct. "Miguel can destroy every fighter in this weight division."

But before we anoint him the heir to the throne, remember that Margarito was coming off a 10-month layoff and that injured right wrist may have hampered his performance.

To be continued June 9.