As far as Kermit Cintron is concerned Miguel Cotto vs. Alfonso Gomez is the walkout bout at Boardwalk Hall Saturday night.

Although the IBF welterweight champion's rematch with former WBO title holder Antonio Margarito is technically the semi-main event on the HBO-televised card, it is in the opinion of not only Cintron but of most people in boxing that the most significant fight of the night will be Cintron's attempt to not only defend the title he's held for 18 months but erase the memory of the only loss of his career.

That defeat came nearly three years ago when an ill-prepared Cintron was not only destroyed by Margarito in five rounds at Caesars Palace, he was humiliated. Only 25 at the time and having never faced the strain of a big fight in Las Vegas, Cintron unraveled like a badly knitted sweater as Margarito took him apart in humbling fashion, dropping Cintron four times and cutting his eye before the bout was stopped with Cintron turning his back on the then champion.

To his credit Cintron came back from that performance in short order, winning the IBF title he now holds barely 18 months later by stopping Mark Suarez to win the vacant championship. He has defended it twice since and stopped both Walter Dario Matthysse and Jesse Feliciano, although the latter was a disappointing performance until he managed to finish the game Feliciano in spectacular fashion in the 10th round six months ago.

But now Cintron is facing more than the best opponent of his career. He is facing a dark shadow from the past. What happens when that shadow passes over him again will tell the story.

Margarito believes he knows the ending already however. He has made clear that he believes the memory of what he did to Cintron will quickly return to the IBF champion after he touches his chin a few times and perhaps he's right but when Cintron posted a challenge to Margarito on YouTube long before this rematch was signed he didn't seem to be suffering from any loss of self-confidence.

Of course, he also hadn't yet been hit again by Margarito, a situation that will no longer exist on Saturday once the first bell sounds. Until that happens who can really know what is in Cintron's mind?

Still, despite the obvious difficulty and danger in agreeing to the rematch, Cintron's manager insists he had no choice but to accept despite the fact he knows it is a night fraught with danger for his fighter.

"This fight had to be made,'' Emanuel Steward insisted this week. "When you mention Margarito and say what was his signature fight it's Kermit Cintron. When you mention Kermit Cintron's signature fight it's the loss to Margarito. Everywhere he goes he hears, 'What about

Margarito?'

"It's like Alexis Arguello. Great as he was when you say his name what do people say? Aaron Pryor (who stopped him in two brutal fights). All his other fights don't exist. That's why this is a fight about redemption.''

It is also a fight about a 30-year-old former champion trying to find his own reputation after being upset by Paul Williams nine months ago. If Margarito can do that at Cintron's expense he will very likely lay claim to a shot at Cotto, who one has to assume will handle the game Gomez without significant problems. But for Margarito (35-5, 25 KO) to do that he must first handle a different Cintron than the young, inexperienced kid he beat down in Las Vegas three years ago.

That Cintron was undefeated but also untested. Worse, he was fighting away from the East Coast for the first time and doing it after the longest layoff of his career, a nine-month hiatus while his twice surgically repaired right hand healed. In Steward's opinion, it was a fight Cintron never should have been in in the first place and it showed.

"I looked into the circumstances before I went to work with Kermit,'' Steward said. "Cintron had never been out West. He'd never been in a situation like that, fighting outdoors at Caesars Palace with a big pro-Mexican crowd cheering for Margarito.

"He was coming off an injury without even a tune-up fight to test his hand. He had no chance to win that fight. Psychologically he wasn't prepared at all for a solid fighter like Margarito.''

When that bout ended, Cintron dissolved into tears in his corner, shattered mentally as much as physically by what had befallen him. But that inexperienced former college wrestler has been replaced by a more confident and more polished champion, one who seems to understand why he was beaten and what must be done to erase the memory of that result.

While Cintron still has an alarming tendency to load up on his punches in search of the spectacular knockout rather than concentrating on putting punches together and keeping up a steady work rate, he believes he is no longer the lost person he appeared to be when last he set eyes on Antonio Margarito.

"I definitely feel different,'' Cintron (29-1, 27 KO) said. "I was immature as a fighter back then. I'd only had four or five years of fighting. He'd had 13. He'd had 100 championship rounds. I'd had zero.

"Now I've been with Emanuel for a while. I've learned a lot. I've traveled to training camps all over the world with (heavyweight champion) Wladimir Klitschko. I've seen a lot of things. I'm more prepared now.

"That loss shocked me. I expected to win. I'd never thought about losing. But I was coming off two hand surgeries and I only had four weeks to train for him. Now that I look back on it, I had no chance to win that fight. You learn from that kind of experience.

“Losing was painful but it made me a lot better than if I won. I had to ask myself, ‘Is this really what you want to do as a career?’ The answer was I did.

“I have the tools for this. I know I’m a better fighter now than I was that night while he’s the same Margarito. He’s still a big welterweight with a good chin who likes to come forward and pressure you. Do I think he’s gotten better? No. He’s the same Margarito but I’m not the same Kermit Cintron.’’

That is what he and Steward are counting on, yet the latter concedes that the same Margarito remains an untamed Margarito. He is still a slow starting package of aggression who, as the rounds go along, dishes out pain in large measure.

At 30, Margarito seems to have shown no real signs of slippage. Certainly the loss to Williams came as a shock to some but it was a terrible stylistic match up for him, one that put him at the kind of disadvantage Cintron’s style does not.

“I can’t think of a worse style for Margarito than Williams, a tall southpaw who can box,’’ said veteran matchmaker Carl Moretti. “Cintron’s style fits more to his liking.

“This will be a true test of Cintron’s mental toughness. He has good punching power but what if he’s hit Margarito for five or six rounds and nothing’s happened? If Margarito’s still standing after six rounds what does Cintron do? He’ll have to figure out a way to beat him without knocking him out.

“It’s a very interesting match. I think it will be much more competitive than the first fight but it wouldn’t take much for that to be the case.’’

What it will take is focus, patience, a strong mind and discovering a way to parry the kind of constant assault Margarito at his best can put on you, especially to the body. Although Steward believes his fighter is ready to answer the questions still whispered about him - the ones Margarito will ask Saturday night - he concedes it will be a difficult exam.

“Credibility comes from fights like this fight, where you come back and beat the guy who beat you,’’ Steward said. “This is the kind of fight that gets me excited.

“I feel good about this fight but not as comfortable as I’d like to feel. This is one of the best fights in the welterweight division in a long time. Two guys who are punchers and action fighters. This is a risky fight but it’s a fight Kermit wanted and it’s one he has to win.’’

Nobody understands that better than Cintron himself. But while the betting public sees him as the underdog, he sees himself as a surprise waiting to happen.

“Right after I lost to him I wanted him again,’’ Cintron recalled. “I’m glad I waited. I’m glad I made the moves I did in my career, joining up with Manny and learning the craft of boxing.

“This is a difficult fight but it’s coming at the perfect time for me. It’s definitely the most

important fight in my career. This is how I'll be remembered.''