

## This Won't Be Dancing With The Stars

Written by Ron Borges  
Sunday, 20 July 2008 19:00

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With the temporary retirement of Floyd Mayweather, Jr. it became fashionable to bemoan the continually eroding state of prize fighting once again. Long ago this became a popular pastime of traditional sports editors, whose product is not-so-slowly dying on the vine and on the newsstand itself, as well as others who know little about the sport yet continue to predict its extinction when in fact things have been improving for the past several years.

That this renaissance has escaped traditional newspapers is one of many examples of why that business, which remains my first love, is slowly becoming extinct itself. As they were with the rise of the internet, newspapers sit behind the story these days instead of getting ahead of it. While they try to bury boxing by ignoring it, the fact is the temporary retirement of Floyd Mayweather (who will soon enough be doing his version of Brett Favre, only with more expletives and fewer tears) actually opened up the welterweight division to new possibilities, more energy and, frankly, the making of the best fight the division could have hoped for.

That fight will arrive with great anticipation this weekend in Las Vegas when Puerto Rico's undefeated Miguel Cotto and Mexico's Braveheart, Antonio Margarito, square off in what figures to be a candidate for Fight of the Year as well as being the best welterweight fight that could be made.

This would have been true even if Mayweather were still active because we're talking about the best FIGHT, not the best HYPE or the highest GROSSING match. We're talking only about the best fight in every meaning of that most dangerous word, which Cotto-Margarito has no choice but to become.

Where Mayweather had morphed from prize fighter into calculating businessman both inside and outside of the ring, the WBA and IBF champions have remained fighters first. They want to get paid as much as the next man – and in this case they will be – but they want just as much to prove to themselves and to the world who is the best fighter at 147 pounds.

It had become clear in the past several years that this was no longer of primary interest to Mayweather because his circle of advisors, sycophants and towel carriers had successfully convinced him it no longer had to be proven inside the ropes but could simply be loudly declared and thereafter be considered a given.

Once that began, actually facing down serious challengers in the way all the great fighters of the past had done – Ray Robinson, Ray Leonard, Muhammad Ali, Henry Armstrong, Roberto Duran, Marvin Hagler and on and on – was no longer of much interest to Floyd, nor did it seem particularly necessary to him.

This is no effort to argue that Mayweather dodged anyone, even though that's what the people around Cotto believe. It is simply to argue that a Mayweather-Cotto unification fight was not on the horizon for a guy who, since winning welterweight titles from Zab Judah and Carlos

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Baldomir, forgot to fight any welterweights.

While legitimate opponents like Cotto, Margarito and Paul Williams languished waiting for him, Mayweather chose to fight a super welterweight who has lost three of his last six fights (Oscar De La Hoya) and a blown up junior welterweight (Ricky Hatton) who had already proven he was not effective at the higher weight when he was awarded a debatable decision against light-hitting Luis Collazo and quickly returned to sparring at 140 pounds.

To be fair, these were notorious B.I.G. fights, as in some of the biggest grossing numbers in the sport. What they were not were real tests of Mayweather's ability to survive in one of boxing's most storied divisions.

Even at that, his win over De La Hoya is highly debatable and his knockout of Hatton only proved that pudgy 5-6 guys who drink too much will never be much of a problem for Mayweather. What neither fight proved is what would happen if he was in there with a guy who has the nerve, skills and inclination to fight with the grinding style of a relentless wrecking ball, as Cotto does.

Emanuel Steward, who is a great admirer of Mayweather, said often he did not believe Floyd wanted any part of Cotto because it was simply too much of a risk to all that he had built up. While Mayweather's supporters will dismiss such a thought out of hand consider these facts: Floyd went the distance with Judah, Cotto stopped him; Floyd went the distance with DeMarcus Corley, Cotto stopped him; Floyd never faced Shane Mosley, Cotto gave him a 12-round beating.

Who can know but Mayweather what his reasoning was for not accepting challenges from Cotto and Margarito but if Steward's suspicions are true it's a sad commentary on a guy who has claimed he was the new Sugar Ray (fill-in-the-blank depending on your age).

Either Sugar (Robinson or Leonard because one assumes Mayweather was never referring to Seales) would have faced Cotto, as Robinson did everyone you can think of and Leonard did Hearn, Hagler and Duran. The latter match is what seems likely to be the best definition of Cotto-Mayweather and they split their two meaningful confrontations. Perhaps Mayweather remembered that and said, "No mas." Perhaps not, but it will take more time to ever know, although in the end it seems logical to assume he'll come back and face the winner.

Cotto-Margarito is a fight of a different type than Leonard-Duran or what a fight between either of them and Mayweather figured to become. It will be more compelling than even Cotto-Mayweather because it has more of the properties that made Hagler-Hearn eight of the most exciting minutes in boxing history.

Margarito is all about forward motion. He attacks in a whirlwind style, throwing punches as often as time will allow and doing a lot of damage in the process. The one time he seemed to abandon that in recent years cost him his WBO title to Williams but he mended his ways and soon after assaulted then IBF champion Kermit Cintron, knocking him out for the second time to reclaim a portion of the welterweight title.

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Cotto, meanwhile, is a more patient but no less lethal assassin. He beats men down in the way Julio Cesar Chavez once did, assaulting them round after painful round until they implode and simply collapse from the weight of the damage. He has, unlike Mayweather, been forced to prove his worth in hard moments as well, having been knocked down and gotten up to win and been left bloody and woozy, and still triumphed.

That Mayweather has avoided those tests is evidence of his skills and is not meant to imply a weakness on his part because years ago at Cobo Hall in Detroit I saw him hold up from repeated assaults from relentless Emanuel Augustus and fight back until he stopped him in the ninth round of a 10-round bout. It is only meant to remind that Cotto has proven both his willingness and his ability to walk through fire and still win, while Mayweather has yet to spend much time in that hot cauldron where the truth is revealed.

That is why, in the end, Cotto will beat Antonio Margarito and elevate himself to his rightful status as the best welterweight in the world if not the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world. He will, very likely, face difficult moments before his hand is raised, moments Floyd Mayweather, Jr. seemed disinclined to face most recently, but he will survive and triumph.

Margarito will attack and while Cotto will counter him he will also stand and fight at some point in a way Mayweather not only never would have, but probably will think is foolhardy. Mayweather is a consummate boxer with physical skills and tactical advantages that are admirable. Sugar Ray Leonard and Sugar Ray Robinson had the same skills but they had something more. They were fighters, too.

Leonard and Robinson were guys who wanted to know what Antonio Margarito and Miguel Cotto are willing to find out. They wanted to know who was best in a sport where that can only be determined in one way. By fighting. They assumed the same things Floyd Mayweather, Jr. did about themselves but they were also willing to take the risk of proving it.

That Cotto and Margarito share those same feelings is a blessing to the sport of boxing and it's fans. It's also why the two of them agreed to meet this weekend at the MGM Grand Garden Arena to engage in the best welterweight FIGHT that could be made knowing that that is what it will be for as long as it lasts – a fight, not dancing with the stars.

In the end, that's still what sells best in boxing.