

Margarito=Good, Or Great?

Written by John Nguyen
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When it comes to boxing history, fighters are placed in two categories: those who are great, and those who are not. While the classifications for how fighters are remembered are simple enough, the criteria for determining greatness are anything but clear-cut. A fighter's historical standing is dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and is as subjective as any matter involving human opinion.

Some of the factors considered when evaluating a fighter's place in history almost go without saying: exceptional physical talent and skill, consistency, longevity, and established dominance over quality opposition. If a fighter can achieve the necessary combination of these factors, the rarest of boxing titles can be attained: ring immortality.

A boxer's career, then, is basically their case for greatness in boxing's court of public opinion. Often times, the verdict is reached quickly and conclusively, with the vast majority of fighters falling short. Other times, however, the deliberation regarding a fighter's historical standing lingers.

Antonio Margarito is one such case.

A long-time player in a division as deep as the Pacific floor, Margarito has been a tough fighter to assess when it comes to his place in history. According to the usual criteria for greatness, Margarito fits the bill for almost all the prerequisites.

The Tijuana native clearly possesses exceptional physical gifts. His hulking frame looks like that of a middleweight, an asset he uses to his advantage in brutalizing his opponents.

As far as consistency, fans know what to expect from Antonio Margarito each time he steps between the ropes. The Tijuana Tornado brings his trademark style with him into every fight: relentless, savage aggression, indomitable will, and the pride that has defined generations of Mexican warriors.

If longevity is a component of greatness, Margarito's tenure at the top of the welterweight division is proof positive of his staying power. His stay among the elite 147-pounders has spanned the title reigns of Mosley, Forrest, and Mayweather. That is a long time to be hanging around some of the sport's biggest guns.

So far, the case for Margarito's admittance to the hallowed halls of boxing immortality seems like a solid one. That is, until the issue of career-defining wins comes up.

To be fair, Antonio Margarito's hard luck in finding a great foil has largely been beyond his control. As mentioned earlier, Margarito has been a looming presence during the title reigns of some of the sport's biggest stars, none of whom thought it to be sound business practice to take on a threat like Margarito. There are now fabled reports of high-profile superstars Shane

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Mosley and Floyd Mayweather turning down multi-million dollar offers to fight Margarito. This shameless avoidance of Margarito gained him the well-earned tag of the most feared man in boxing.

Obviously, it's hard for a guy to net a significant win when the top guys sidestep him with the swiftness of a presidential candidate. Margarito was left to make do with what he could, which meant beating the tar out of B-level opponents. Unfortunately for him, crushing the Sebastian Lujans and Golden Johnsons of the world do not make for a lasting legacy. Even Margarito's two beatdowns of the hard-punching, but very limited Kermit Cintron do not seal his place in history. It takes a whole lot more to be remembered alongside the great ones.

It's abundantly clear that a lack of willing foes has hurt Antonio Margarito in his quest to be recognized as this era's top welterweight, but not all of the blame can be cast off Margarito so easily. He bears some responsibility in the stalled momentum of his career.

In his two biggest fights against his two best opponents to date, Margarito came up short on both occasions. In his 2004 venture up to junior middleweight, Margarito dropped a razor-thin technical decision to tough title-holder Daniel Santos in a fight that went to the scorecards after a headbutt caused a severe cut over Margarito's eye. The fight itself was an exciting, give-and-take affair, and the result could have gone either way.

In 2007, Margarito lost a close, but clear-cut decision to then undefeated Paul Williams, which initially cost him a shot at Miguel Cotto. Against Williams, a slow start by Margarito proved costly, as a late rally by the Mexican star was not enough to turn the tide.

Now, it is worth mentioning that neither of these fights were anything for Margarito to be ashamed of. He was competitive for every second of each bout. But that isn't the point.

The losses that Margarito suffered to Santos and Williams are the types of fights that the great ones are supposed to win. Leonard found a way to beat Hearns. Ali, then Cassius Clay, rallied through adversity to stop Sonny Liston. Great fighters find a way to win when good fighters can't. Maybe the best of this era did avoid Margarito, but the incontrovertible fact of the matter is that, when faced with two huge opportunities to make statements regarding his legacy, Antonio Margarito came up short.

Where Antonio Margarito will find himself on Saturday night is a place where any fighter would long to be: one of possible redemption. He will find himself in the position to set all things right if he can win one fight. The problem is, he will be standing across from a fighter in Miguel Cotto who is making his own charge for boxing history. A win for Margarito doesn't quite close his case for ring immortality, but it sure helps, and would serve as his biggest win by far. A victory places his career trajectory into another stratosphere of the sport.

Thus, Antonio Margarito is at the proverbial crossroads. It isn't that a loss on Saturday puts an end to Margarito's career. Regardless of the outcome on Saturday night, big fights likely still await the fighting pride of Tijuana. Realistically, though, his upcoming fight with Miguel Cotto will be his last opportunity to stake his claim in boxing history. A loss ends all talk of greatness,

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and Margarito's legacy will suffer the same fate met by most fighters who didn't make the cut.

In boxing, there is a very discernible difference between good and great, and, one way or another, his battle with Miguel Cotto will show us how history will remember Margarito. Some fighters go an entire career without a chance at achieving greatness. Antonio Margarito hopes to make the most of his last dance with destiny on Saturday night.