

Cotto Might Wonder: Is Boxing Still For Me

Written by Ron Borges

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Your past is not always easy to escape. Sometimes you can shake it. Other times you can never let it go.

That is what Miguel Cotto has to worry about in these final days before he returns to the ring for the first time since Antonio Margarito stripped him bare and left him kneeling on the floor in front of him, looking for mercy in a sport that offers none.

Defeat can be reconciled. Losses can be overcome. But the memory of the kind of beating the now disgraced Margarito put on Miguel Cotto last July 26 in Las Vegas does not easily fade. Sometimes it never does.

That, more than any problem a sprightly young fellow from Great Britain named Michael Jennings poses, will be the real issue Cotto must confront when he steps into the ring at Madison Square Garden Saturday night. He must confront himself or at least that part of himself where he has buried the memory of a night that was both painful and deflating.

“What happened with Margarito last July is in my past,” Miguel Cotto insisted recently and he had best hope that is true yet what lingers is the fear that he absorbed the kind of beating that left a piece of himself behind in the arena at the MGM Grand, a piece that cannot be replaced.

In the end, Cotto, once dominant over the welterweight world, dropped to a knee in front of Margarito as he closed in on him again without being hit. He surrendered, although not without good reason.

He surrendered in the way Gen. Custer might have if given the chance by Sitting Bull at the Little Big Horn. He did it with just cause but the fact remains he did it.

The world of mixed martial arts allows for tapping out. It is an accepted practice to quit when all hope is lost. But there is no tapping out in boxing. Your corner can stop a fight. A referee or ringside physician can stop a fight. A fighter? Not acceptable.

All the rest should have stopped what was happening to Cotto long before he stopped it himself by genuflecting in front of Margarito, praying he would assault him no further. That they didn't seemed to suggest they were blinder than Cotto was becoming round after bloody round.

Finally Cotto said “No mas” without uttering the words. He simply took a knee, which was wise, but after 11 rounds of savagery Miguel Cotto was bloodied, broken and beaten down in a way the spirit has a hard time shaking.

Perhaps he can come back from that against Jennings when the two square off to fight over the vacant World Boxing Organization 147-pound title. Jennings himself is not the problem. He has never faced anyone that resembled the kind of fighter Cotto used to be and it figures that

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Jennings will soon enough show he doesn't belong in the same ring with him.

That was the point of making the match. It is a soft landing spot for Cotto, a place promoter Bob Arum felt he could safely bring him back to after the kind of loss he'd just suffered. He could win a belt back and hence again feel like a champion without putting himself at much risk.

The wildcard is that the risk is all internal now. Will Cotto (32-1. 26 KO) react the same way to pressure as he did before? When he first gets hit flush, assuming he does, will something inside him over which he no longer has any control say, "Get out of here! This is not a safe place any more!?"

If that happens, will he listen?

There have been worse beatings than the one Miguel Cotto took from Antonio Margarito and fighters have triumphed over them. There have been lesser ones from which the recipient was never the same. You never know what the next night will bring after a grim encounter like the one Cotto had with Margarito.

No one who is honest knows how Cotto will respond to what happened seven months ago and that includes him. Joe Louis took a terrible beating from Max Schmeling and came back to destroy him in just over two minutes two years later.

All you know is that Cotto knows what happened that night - or at least how it felt - better than anyone else. What he does with that knowledge will determine what he does with the remainder of his career.

"It was a tough, difficult time inside the ring," Cotto admitted. "You have to make some decisions in there. I think we're all going to learn from this. In the long run I think you're going to see a better Miguel Cotto. I can't wait to get in the ring and fight."

Perhaps so but later he also admitted, "This is a very rough sport no matter what anyone says. You get hurt when you get hit. It's a dangerous sport and the sooner you get out is going to be the better."

Miguel Cotto is right about that but he never used to talk that way. That he is now doesn't mean, in itself, that he looks at boxing differently than he did before he got in with Antonio Margarito. They were only words uttered on one end of a telephone and hence carry no real weight.

The weight will be felt Saturday night when the bell rings and the leather starts to fly in earnest and Miguel Cotto is reminded how right he was when he said, "You get hurt when you get hit."

Yes, you do. That's the business he chose. Now, after the most painful night of his life, he will have to decide if the hurt business is still his business.