Joshua Clottey's struggles in the ring mirror his struggles with finding a suitable nickname. Americans, nonplussed by the nuances of accent despite our multicultural reputation, heard Clottey say that his nickname is "Heater" but thought we were hearing "Hitter" –and the latter stuck. Perhaps Clottey should consider using a more appropriate nickname that pays tribute to his penchant for cutting his opponents (including Corrales, Cruz, Judah, and now Miguel Cotto): Joshua "Blood" Clottey.

Clottey danced into the ring Saturday with his alternative alias, "The Grand Master", though if you were looking for flash from the Ghanaian warrior, what you got was flashes in the pan. Clottey allowed an injured Miguel Cotto to survive because he fought at two speeds: stalk and hide, stalk and flurry. Despite the bulls' eye of the gaping wound over Cotto's eye that appeared in round three; despite the effective though sporadically-applied left uppercut and left hook-right cross combination, this secular Joshua didn't fit the battle nearly as passionately as his biblical namesake. Instead, he was content to move into range only to erect two walls of well-muscled arms. His corner should have packed rams' horns in their spit bucket and blew into them liberally throughout the bout. Perhaps those walls would have come tumbling down, forcing Joshua to battle more and block less. Even a cautious craftsman understands that the best defense is a good offense.

Clottey, a member of the Ga tribe that gave us Azumah Nelson and Ike Quartey, lost the fight more than Cotto won it. By my estimation, Cotto was up by one or two points at most. Clottey was within smelling distance of victory –only a few combinations short of improving his destiny and supersizing his next purse. Now comes the penance reserved for all fighters who let victory slip through their grasp –they are sentenced to watch the tape and feel the pangs of regret. Or, he can live in everlasting denial, continue claiming that he was robbed, and shake his fist at phantoms. We can only hope that he has a moment of truth with himself and then learns to trust his power and provoke more 'moments of truths' in the ring. He is already a good man and an elite welterweight, but he'd prove to be a better man and a fiercer fighter.

The drama in this fight was not in the exchanges so much as it was in a series of unanticipated interferences. Boxing is indeed a "theatre of the unexpected" and fans both dread and pine for surprises. In recent years, Oliver McCall demonstrated what a nervous breakdown looks like at ring center, Mike Tyson provided spectacles of temper tantrums and cannibalism, Riddick Bowe had every male viewer "feeling his pain" after Golota mistook his groin for a speed bag and sparked a riot, and who can forget the Fan Man descending like a doofus from the heavens during round seven of Holyfield-Bowe II?

Although the interferences here were not nearly so dramatic, they suggest that the trend continues. For Clottey, the first surprise was his being sent to the canvas for the first time in his career –in the first round, on a jab. When he got up, Clottey couldn't have looked more dismayed if the Fan Man had returned from the dead and was dangling on the ropes again. In round five, he wrapped up Cotto in the corner, Cotto stood up straight and shrugged him off,

and Clottey twisted and landed hard on his knee. He appeared to be in significant pain and stayed down long enough to cause general concern about the fight resuming. In the last round, he was hit on the back of the head by a relatively harmless punch, and reacted as if someone had hit him with the ring post. Thankfully, Arthur Mercante handled these oddities with skill and insight. He is fully justified in dropping the “Jr.” from his name; his father’s bowtie fits him well.

A concurrent drama began in round three when Cotto’s left eyebrow was sliced open by an accidental head butt. A comparison is in order here: In Clottey’s last bout, he caught Zab Judah with a left uppercut and cut him over the right eye. The doctor at ringside took a look at it, wiped the blood away, covered his other eye, held up two fingers, and asked Zab how many fingers he was holding up. Zab said “three”. The bout was stopped and it went to the scorecards. Clottey won a decision. It should have been ruled a TKO but that is beside the point. Here, Miguel Cotto suffered a cut worse than Judah’s, fought nine more rounds half-blinded by blood, and won the fight anyway. The bout could have been stopped based on the length and width of that wound, but it is clear that Cotto preferred to fight on. He could have claimed that he couldn’t see when he sustained the cut and the bout would have been declared a no-contest. His corner could have emphasized the cut to the doctor soon after round four and the fight could have gone to the scorecards early, which would have made a points win more likely for Cotto. None of that happened.

In the eleventh round of his fight against Antonio Margarito, Cotto surrendered after Margarito made a mess of his face … as if his hands were encased in plaster… What happened in the aftermath of that fight is what distinguishes Miguel Angel Cotto as a man among men: He resisted the very human tendency to blame blameworthy third parties for his loss. He would not point his finger at Margarito, who stands guilty before the whole boxing world for betraying a basic code of fistic chivalry. Nor would he blame his uncle and chief second Evangelista Cotto despite the fact that it was his responsibility to send a representative to the other dressing room, despite also Miguel’s having since fired him after longstanding tension between them blew up last April.

In sum, after taking the worst beating in his professional career and with an easy excuse presented on a platter, Cotto took the high road. He demonstrated dignity, unconditional respect, and humility to a crooked-nosed congregation not known for cardinal virtues.

As a Catholic, Cotto is not too proud to bend his knee before his God. But he is not the type of fighter to bend his knee before any opponent. It was the family man in him that took the knee that ended the brutal fight with Margarito. Questioning Cotto’s heart after that fight would be out of line either way because suspicion rightly clouds Margarito’s recent wins. If his gloves were loaded in their fight, Cotto could have died in that ring. Kamikaze missions are the stuff of martyrdom and fanaticism, not heroism.

Perhaps Cotto wanted to prove it to himself, perhaps he only wanted to prove it to his fans, but what was absolutely confirmed in the Clottey fight is that the spirit that lives in this welterweight’s chest is as heroic as it gets. Indeed, any man who follows Virgil’s invitation to “come forward, lace on the gloves and put up his hands” in a boxing ring is unusually brave. Judah and Clottey are unusually brave men. However, at fight’s end, Clottey should have

offered his nickname to Cotto. After all, a “Grand Master” is the supreme head of various old military orders of knights, and if anyone proved himself a grand master among the order of knights we call boxers on Saturday night, it was Miguel Cotto. *Sir* Miguel Cotto.

Jim Lampley touched the transcendent quality of boxing at its best with his closing words: “It’s a confrontational sport. It’s about humanity and human qualities… Ultimately, Cotto gets this decision… because of his human qualities: His fortitude, his strength, his honesty with himself, his ability to keep going through the toughest of circumstances.”

This is chivalry. These are modern knights. Knights rarely lived up to their codes of chivalry, but this Boricua is proving to be an exceptional example. Miguel Cotto’s performance, in the ring Saturday night and in his life over the past year, reminds us that boxing at its best …is a reflection of man at *his* best.

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