Let’s get the worst part over with first. He quit.

No matter how Victor Ortiz tries to recreate it as time passes or how his apologists try to spin it in the days and weeks ahead, that’s what happened Saturday night at the Staples Center.

He quit.

The doctor didn’t stop the fight. Neither did referee Raul Caiz, Sr. Ortiz stopped it when he fell down for the second time from, frankly, a less than thunderous body shot, got up and turned his back on Caiz and walked away, pointing at his eye, although it was unclear whether it was at the badly sliced right one or the left that had suddenly developed a huge contusion under it.

Everything after that – the calling over of the doctor, the wiping of the eye, the grim shaking of heads from side to side - was just a formality. An act, really. Face saving for a kid promoted by the most powerful company in the sport, Oscar De La Hoya’s Golden Boy Promotions.

Ortiz had already declared he was not willing to fulfill the contract all fighters accept when they decide to pursue boxing as an occupation. He wasn’t willing to go out on his shield.

He made a wise choice if he was in any profession but prize fighting. It is what separates real fighters from those guys in MMA who flail away with their elbows when they get a guy down but are allowed to quit without recrimination by using a more sanitized phrase when they can’t take it any more. In MMA they say he tapped out. Tap out in boxing and they say you quit…which is what happened Saturday night.

Victor Ortiz tapped out in a sport that doesn’t allow it. He made a split-second decision he will have to live with for a long time. How long? Ask Roberto Duran. He may be the greatest lightweight of all-time yet you mention his name and it doesn’t take long before the words “No mas’’ come up because that’s what he said when he quit against Sugar Ray Leonard nearly 29 years ago.

For the first time in his professional career, Ortiz was in with live fire. He was in with 25-year-old Marcos Maidana, who had just lost a disputed decision to WBA junior welterweight champion Andriy Kotelnik in his last fight. In Maidana’s mind he was still undefeated and not even Ortiz knocking him down three times could dissuade him from the decision he made when he arrived at the Staples Center – he would win or die trying.

That is a stark statement but it is the sad fact of what boxing, at its most elemental, is about. It is what made stars out of guys like Arturo Gatti, Micky Ward, Joe Frazier, Marvin Hagler, Ray Robinson, Carmen Basilio and thousands of others. It isn’t fair to ask such a price from a man but it’s what boxing is about.

You fight until you cannot go on or until someone other than yourself decides he's seen enough. You have but one choice. To fight on. Victor Ortiz made a different choice.

"I'm young but I don't think I deserve to be beat up like this,'' Ortiz said in the ring after the fight with his usual frank honesty. "I have a lot of thinking to do.''

Yes he does, which is where the humanity of it all comes in. As Ortiz sat in his corner between the fifth and what would prove to be the sixth and final round he was bleeding from one eye, had been knocked down once and, worse, had begun to realize he was in with a guy who would never make the choice he was considering.

As he sat there, clearly unfocused, his mind somewhere other than the Staples Center, his trainer, Danny Garcia, barked at him from outside the ropes. He said he would stop the fight if Ortiz didn't start doing more. Fact is the fight was already over.

Yet when you consider the life young Ortiz has lived who could blame him? After it was over my wife, a compassionate and reasonable person, said, "Maybe he's just tired of being beaten. Maybe he just decided he didn't want to put up with it any more.''

Maybe he didn't and who could criticize him for feeling that way? The sad fact is Victor Ortiz has been beaten on since he was a little boy in Kansas. Beaten by his father, psychologically abused by his mother, abandoned by both of them by the time he was 12. Beaten down, as he has said, until he felt like a dog.

The two people who were supposed to protect him from the world left him adrift in it. A society that is supposed to look out for waifs in such sad circumstances took three years to figure out he was a living with his sister and brother alone in a trailer that had no electricity, scrambling to get by while trying to do the right thing in the ring and in high school. You try that and see how many more beatings you want to take if you think you don't have to.

Long before Victor Ortiz ran into Marcos Maidana he'd been beaten up plenty. Just not yet in a boxing ring. That was always the one safe place for him.

There he shined, 141-20 as an amateur, 24-1-1 as a pro with the one loss a disqualification for hitting on the break in a fight he was winning easily. In that place, with all its inherent dangers, he was in control. And then one night he wasn't and it all came crashing down on him. All the beatings and all the doubts that all the beatings left him with, had no place to go.

He had been protected by a powerful promoter and managed by experienced men from California and New York who knew how to move a young man into the position he found himself in last Saturday night – into a fight he was really ill-prepared for - without having him really tested.

He had beaten some decent names – former world champion Carlos Maussa, rugged journeyman Emmanuel Clottey, Mike Arnaoutis – but every one of them was less than he appeared by the time Ortiz got to him. That's how it's done these days in boxing. Maybe it's how

it was always done.

Maussa had lost three of his last five, been stopped by Miguel Cotto and Ricky Hatton and was on the way out. Clottey, a journeyman even at the best of times, was 33 and has lost three straight, Ortiz being the middle fight in his decline. Arnaoutis was one of those guys with a good record – 21-2-2 – but the only number that meant anything was the two losses. He'd lost to everyone he'd faced who was going anywhere in boxing. Ortiz was by then just a guy you fight for money.

Maidana (26-1, 25 KO) was different. He was young and stubborn in the way a fighter is when he thinks he's still championship material. He got dropped in the first round by Ortiz but got up and did the same to him. Although he would go down twice more in the second, both times he got up again and threw punches, especially right hands, with bad intentions.

As the rounds wore on, Ortiz wore down. He was winning on the scorecards but losing in his mind. Not even the boxing ring was a safe haven for him any more. It was becoming just another place to take a beating and, frankly, this time he knew a way to stop it.

He quit.

Frankly, can you really blame him?

So where does Victor Ortiz go from here? As he said, he has a lot of thinking to do. Sometimes this can happen to a young fighter and he becomes stronger from it. He made a choice he probably regrets and can only redeem himself by not repeating it when the punches are coming at him hard again and the doubts put inside him by a world that didn't care about him are whispering that it's all right to lay down because, well, you never were much of anything any way.

Or there is the other possibility. Maybe he woke up Sunday morning, his face battered and bruised in an all too familiar way, and didn't regret the decision he made. If that's the case, he's a civilian now and would be best to remember it when all the people who thought they were going to make money from his sweat and his blood try to convince him he didn't do what he knows deep inside he did.

He quit in a sport that doesn't allow it. Where he goes from here is up to him. Just like it's always been.