

Cotto Still Believes In Cotto

Written by Ron Borges

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NEW YORK - It may all be a mirage but for the moment he believes and, in the end, isn't that what's most important in boxing?

Faith and fierceness, as much as anything else, is what it takes for a prizefighter to win at the highest levels. Talent, of course, is what's central to success in boxing but you do not get to fights the size of the one Miguel Cotto will be involved in Nov. 14 in Las Vegas without the talent so that, in this case, is a given.

What is not anymore is whether the Cotto who will square off with the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world, Manny Pacquiao, at the MGM Grand Garden Arena is the same one who existed before his long, terrible night with Antonio Margarito 14 months ago.

Until that fight, Cotto seemed to be the next great product of the steamy gyms of Puerto Rico, factories that have given boxing some of its greatest and most charismatic practitioners. But that evening was one of the longest of Cotto's life, a night in which he took a terrible beating before finally taking a knee without being hit again and surrendering in the 11th round.

It was the kind of beating, and the kind of ending, that leave scars. Not just physical ones but also the deeper mental ones that can change a fighter in ways that cannot be fixed.

When he finally returned to the ring against Michael Jennings seven months later Cotto won in five rounds but did not look good. Same was true in his last outing against Joshua Clottey in June. Although he won a split decision, Cotto seemed to fade at the end, fighting back but too often wearing the expression of a man unsure of why he was still doing what he was doing.

Yet Cotto had asked for Clottey, a tough fight, when he could have taken a lesser opponent and then quickly agreed to face Pacquiao despite the pound-for-pound king's recent track record of wiping out one Goliath after another since moving up from junior lightweight to lightweight to junior welterweight and now to welterweight in a span of a year and a half.

Clearly, Cotto wants to test himself and the reason is simple. Although he has struggled with the fallout from his harsh night with Margarito's potentially loaded handwraps, he still believes in what is most important in boxing. He still believes in himself.

"I heard Bob Arum saying the guy stopped Oscar De La Hoya, the guy stopped Ricky Hatton. I'm not Oscar De La Hoya. I'm not Ricky Hatton. I'm Miguel Cotto. Everyone knows what Miguel Cotto is capable of doing."

What he once was capable of doing was breaking down his opponents with a steadfastness that was akin to waves slamming against a seawall. No single wave destroys that wall but the relentlessness of the sea eventually breaks it down, small crack by small crack until it suddenly collapses. Cotto fought much the same way.

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But does he still? The world will find out on Nov. 14 but he, at least, remains the one true believer. He remains sure that he is not what others have whispered he's become. He is not a shadow. He is not a mirage. He is still Miguel Cotto, which if he is right means he is a formidable challenge for anyone, including Pacquiao.

"I know Manny will be ready," Cotto (34-1, 27 KO) said. "I'll be ready, too. My mind is my biggest weapon. I'll be ready for him.

"Fighting Margarito is in my past. What happened that night only he knows, but to me it's the same as when you catch a batter using screws in his bat. He didn't use it for the first time (against Shane Mosley). He did it a long time ago.

"But that fight is the past. This fight with Manny is like a new beginning. It will bring good things for my career."

Either that or bigger doubts than the ones so many outside Miguel Cotto's tight circle already carry with them.