

Cotto Trainer Santiago's Point: The Fighters Will Do The Fighting

Written by Rick Folstad
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Joe Santiago looks like a guy who might sell you insurance or do your taxes or fix your car.

There are no serious scars on his face or wrinkles under his eyes, and he doesn't have one of those crooked, telltale noses that says he's been in a few ring wars. His fingers are all pretty straight, and if you passed him on the street, you wouldn't look at him twice.

He looks young and educated, someone you might meet at a stockholders meeting.

So how did this guy become head trainer of one of the best fighters in the world? Aren't trainers suppose to look like Mick from the Rocky movies? You know, the gravelly voice, the cauliflower ear, maybe a stogie stuck in the corner of his mouth. A real trainer should be older than dirt and he should wear tired shoes and a watch cap. He should be someone who could tell you how he almost won the middleweight title back in 1959, but he got cut in the 13th round when he was fighting Kid Savage at The Garden, but damn, he was so close. If they just could have stopped the cut from bleeding.

That's not Joe Santiago.

Bet a few eyebrows popped up when he suddenly took over the responsibility of getting Cotto ready to fight Joshua Clottey this past June. Wasn't Santiago a nutritionist or something? So how did he get this job?

Well, he pretty much inherited it.

When Cotto's uncle/trainer, Evangelista Cotto threw a cinder block through the car window of Cotto's new Jaguar after the two had an argument and threw a few punches back in Puerto Rico earlier this year, their relationship became a little strained. The uncle was let go, camp was moved to Tampa and Santiago was handed the franchise.

Santiago passed his first test when Cotto beat Clottey despite a bad cut he suffered in the early rounds. But there were some problems in the corner that night.

"Sometimes in the corner we were a little late getting in and getting out and being where we should be between rounds," Santiago said on a recent conference call. "We had different people going in there and at times, it was difficult to work."

With the biggest fight in Cotto's life just up ahead, they need to smooth out those rough edges.

The franchise will earn about \$10 million on Nov. 14 when Cotto (34-1, 27 KOs) defends his WBO welterweight title against Manny Pacquiao (49-3-2, 37 KOs) at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, though the fight should carry an asterisk since Pacquiao's corner demanded they fight at a catch weight of 145 pounds instead of the welterweight limit of 147 pounds.

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But Cotto and his camp don't seem too concerned about the catch weight. Cotto weighed 146 for his last fight, that gutsy win over Joshua Clottey.

So what about Santiago. Is he in over his head?

"I have known (Cotto) for seven years and I know they talked about bringing in well-known trainers," Santiago said from their training camp back at the Fight Factory in Tampa where they trained for the Clottey fight. "But I think the fact that I have known him for a long time and he feels comfortable with me gave me an advantage over all those guys. I think it's a question of getting everybody on the right page and I think we've done that."

While Santiago is still learning his way around as a head trainer, Pacquiao will be sitting in his corner listening to Freddie Roach, one of the most respected trainers in the game. But Santiago said he doesn't feel intimidated.

"I have a lot of respect for what Freddie Roach has done, but it has nothing to do with us," Santiago said. "It's the fighters that are going to do the fighting. They have their work to do and we have our work to do. As long as our guy wins, we are going to get recognized for it."

Promoter Bob Arum, who promotes both Pacquiao and Cotto, said Roach, who has talked about a first-round knockout, is a great trainer, but he's also a great psychologist.

"A lot of what Freddie says is to get in camp Cotto's head," Arum said on the same conference call. "There is nothing wrong with that. That's boxing. The fight could go a lot of different ways, and that's why it's going to be a great fight."

Any predictions from Cotto's camp?

"On the 15th, we will be at 145 pounds, no question," Santiago said. "On the 14th, it's going to be a great night. And on the 15th, we are going to celebrate with the country of Puerto Rico."