LAS VEGAS – No one has to tell 32-year-old Joe Santiago that he is sorely lacking in Big Fight Experience but someone seems to be yelling it in his direction every few days anyway, just in case he hasn't heard. While the young trainer of welterweight champion Miguel Cotto says he is unmoved by the constant speculation about what he is lacking, frankly he could do without it.

Chief among those speculators has been one of the craftiest trainers in boxing, the one Santiago must try to outwit Saturday night at the MGM Grand Garden Arena while much of the boxing world is waiting for him to waver under the weight of a type of pressure he has never felt before.

Freddie Roach, three-time winner of BWAA Trainer of the Year honors and the man who has prepared Manny Pacquiao for all of his recent Big Fights, including this weekend's confrontation with Cotto, has regularly pointed out the Grand Canyon sized hole in Santiago's resume, surely hoping these reminders will create in Cotto the most dangerous thing in boxing – doubt.

They have been the opening rounds of the game within the game, one that will continue at the final press conference and the rules meeting and the weigh-in and into the locker rooms on fight night when hands are being wrapped and reminders of what that may have once meant to Cotto may be hinted at.

Both the champion and the man he chose to replace his dismissed uncle, Evangelista, as his chief second insist this is all merely gamesmanship on the part of Roach. They say it does not affect them, that they are unwavering in their faith in each other. Perhaps this is so, yet still Santiago has had to answer the questions about his fitness for the task he is undertaking again and again and that can wear on a guy.

For seven years an assistant to Evangelista Cotto, who handled his nephew's boxing career until he was replaced after making the ill-advised business decision to throw a punch at the champion during a disagreement in a San Juan gymnasium, Santiago believes he has served his apprenticeship and thus looks upon his elevation not as a trial but as an opportunity.

One man's misfortune is another's chance and that is how Santiago sees the chance he's been given but where he sees an opportunity to prove his mastery of the dark art of boxing, many, including his chief rival, see a bigger likelihood that he is more overmatched than his fighter, who is facing the pound-for-pound best fighter in the world according to anyone who opines on such matters.

Certainly there seemed to be some confusion in Cotto's corner in his last fight, Santiago's first as chief second, when potential disaster loomed. Although Cotto ultimately outputted Joshua Clottey to position himself for the biggest payday of his career, the fight was more difficult than some expected and was punctuated with high drama and unexpected disorder in his corner after he was seriously cut by Clottey.

Santiago acknowledges those problems but insists they had nothing to do with his inexperienced or, worse, any sense of panic in his mind. They were, he says, logistical problems caused by outside forces.

"Sometimes in the corner we were a little late getting in and getting out and where we should be in between rounds,'' Santiago acknowledged recently. "We had different people going in there and at times it was difficult to work. The way the New York Commission set things up was a problem.

"Overall it was just a question of how (cut man Joe) Chavez would get in there and how we want to use him and how we want to work. I think that having Joe Chavez here for most of the training camp was important. We are going to know him and he is getting to know us and he knows how we work. That is going to be beneficial.

"There were really no mistakes about the way we wanted to do the fight. I think the strategy was fine.''

It was at least fine enough that the bloodied Cotto survived, fighting well enough in the end to move on to this opportunity. Frankly, he looked better than he had in his first fight following the terrible beating he took from Antonio Margarito last year, a defeat many of his doubters believe he has been unable to shake.

No one will ever know if the fists that beat him that night were loaded with the same hardening substances later found on Margarito's hand wraps before he fought Shane Mosley but he was suspended for at least a year for that and it not only disgraced him but left a schism of doubt between Cotto and his uncle because it was his cornerman's responsibility to examine those wraps before the fight, as Nazim Richardson had done for Mosley. That he did not* and that an hour later Cotto was forced to quit on one knee, his face beaten to a swollen and bloody pulp for the only time in his career, may be unrelated but then again this is boxing and who knows?

As Cotto has said, only Margarito knows for sure just as only Santiago knows for sure what he is feeling on the inside as the biggest fight of Cotto's life nears. What everyone knows is that Cotto could have picked from a wide assortment of the world's best trainers, all anxious to work with someone who only three fights ago was considered to be the best welterweight in the world.

He still may be but to regain that place he must put Pacquiao in his place, which is why so many in boxing were surprised that he chose the inexperienced Santiago in the end to prepare him. The young trainer was not however, believing he held an edge over all of them that will benefit his fighter come Saturday night.

"I've known him for seven years and I know they talked about bringing in well-known trainers but I think the fact that I have known him a long time and he feels comfortable with me gave me an advantage over all those guys,'' Santiago said. "I think it's just a question of getting everybody on the same page. I think we've done that.

"I had been around camp for seven years so I know how he prepares himself. I know him very well. The confidence that the Cotto family had in me made me feel good. I know I was well prepared and I know I have the capacity to do this job.''

In a few days he will have the opportunity to prove that although, in the end, Roach has always said the fighter makes the trainer and not the other way around. Santiago could be eminently qualified to train a boxer and simply have the wrong fighter this night. But in a fight of such magnitude the trainer's actions and reactions in the corner as problems arise will have much to do with the outcome.

If it goes as Roach has predicted, an early knockout, then trainers will have had little to do with it. But if it is the kind of pitched battle fans hope for, with the ebbs and flows of blood and sweat that come with it, then the trainer's work will be of pivotal importance.

Joe Santiago understands this, just as he understands the world is full of skeptics and doubters. When it came to him, Miguel Cotto was not one of them. Soon the world will see if it is rewarded or if the wise old trainer across the ring knew what he was talking about all along.

"A lot of people are picking Pacquiao to beat him and he is motivated by that,'' Santiago said of his fighter. "Without question all the fighters want to be great and all the fighters want to be the best. Miguel has that little extra because the people don't think he can win this fight. We know he can win and he knows he can win but he'll have to show everyone what he's capable of doing against this type of opponent.''

Joe Santiago was talking about Miguel Cotto and Manny Pacquiao when he said that but he could have been talking about himself and Freddie Roach. On the night they will, in a way, be one and the same. Fighter and trainer melded together, their fates and their future intertwined.

"I don't see this as me fighting Freddie Roach,'' Santiago said. "I know he has a done a lot in boxing. I have a lot of respect for what Freddie Roach has done but it has nothing to do with us. It's the fighters that are going to do the fighting.

"They are going to do the work and we have our work to do. As long as our guy wins we are going to get recognized for it. Once Miguel wins, they are going to recognize that we have a great corner, a great team. That's the way I look at it. It has nothing to do with me and Freddie Roach. I am preparing Miguel Cotto to fight Pacquiao. That's my job.''

Indeed it is and soon we will learn how well that job was done.

*ED NOTE---It has been reported by Robert Morales that Evangelista was in fact in the room, watching Margarito get his hands wrapped. This according to Keith Kizer, Nevada commissioner, and NVAC employee Jack Lazzarotto. Promoter Bob Arum still insists Evangelista was not present.