

It is rare that a fighter finds himself in the boxing spotlight for his entire career. Miguel Cotto is one such fighter, and has found that blinding spotlight to be both a blessing and a curse.

A 2000 Olympian representing his native Puerto Rico, Cotto entered the professional ranks with much hype and high expectations from all who saw his potential as an amateur. With many of his early fights televised, Cotto became accustomed to the scrutinizing eye of the boxing public during the prospect phase of his career. It wasn't long before Cotto's name was mentioned as a potential successor to the great Puerto Rican fighters from years past. This attention was certainly a catalyst in his accelerated rise to stardom.

Cotto's career has also seen the hardships the spotlight can bring. Following his high-profile loss to Antonio Margarito in 2008, Cotto has seen his stock plummet from being considered a potentially great fighter to a just another welterweight in a loaded weight division. The fact that so many fans and boxing insiders are choosing Pacquiao to triumph over Cotto this weekend is a testament to that.

A closer examination of Cotto's attributes as a fighter shows that he is still a dangerous fighter, and certainly still deserves to be considered among the best welterweights in the world. The question rests on whether greatness is still within his grasp.

Power:

Even when he was at junior welterweight, Miguel Cotto was never considered a one-punch knockout artist. Since moving up to the welterweight division, Cotto's knockouts have continued to come by an accumulation of punishment.

However, it would be unfair to Cotto to characterize him as just an average puncher judging by his welterweight résumé. Consider that three of his recent opponents were of the anvil-chinned variety: Joshua Clottey, Antonio Margarito, and Shane Mosley. It would take an extraordinary puncher to pierce the armor of those fighters.

While Cotto is not a prodigious welterweight puncher, his punches are of the clubbing, bruising variety. When they land, his punches have the thudding impact of a sledgehammer instead of the cracking of a whip. This is most evident when observing Cotto's body attack. His power-punches reflect his overall fighting style: methodical, purposeful, and effective.

Usually, when a fighter is described as a cumulative-effects puncher, it's a nice way of saying they're a light hitter. Cotto is definitely not in that category. When firing on all cylinders, the effects of Cotto's punches stack up quickly. For proof, look no further than his fights against Carlos Quintana, Alfonso Gomez, and Michael Jennings. Granted, those aren't world beaters, but they're good enough to show that Cotto is a destructive force when he is able to unload.

Power Grade. A-

Speed:

Miguel Cotto has always been a very capable combination puncher. From his early days as a professional, he's proven himself quite proficient when it comes to landing more than one punch at a time. However, even at his best, Cotto has never been known as a speed demon.

The fact that Cotto commits so fully to his punches sacrifices a bit of his handspeed. There isn't much pitter-patter in Cotto's game. When he lands, he wants it to mean something every time, and if it means he lands one hard shot instead of two or three relatively meaningless punches, so be it.

Another reason for Cotto's somewhat pedestrian handspeed is his tendency to throw wide punches when exchanging with his opponents. The precision usually present when he methodically stalks his opponents is usually absent when he throws with abandon, which can obviously hamper the speed of his delivery.

The inevitable result is that Cotto can be beaten to the punch. Against quicker-handed fighters like Zab Judah, Ricardo Torres, and DeMarcus Corley, Cotto paid dearly for his commitment to his punches as well for his habit of punching wide.

When fighting a strategically measured fight, Cotto's speed can be an asset. However, in the heat of battle, it's also proven to be a liability.

Speed Grade. B

Boxing Ability:

Perhaps the most underrated element of Cotto's game is his technical prowess. Probably the most impressive attribute early in Cotto's career was his maturity, patience, and ability to execute a strategic gameplan. As a young fighter, his shrewdness in the ring suggested intelligence beyond his years.

Sure, it was easy enough to show all the right moves against the limited likes of Kelson Pinto and Muhammad Abdullaev, but Cotto's ring smarts and precision were also on display against perhaps the most technically savvy opponent in the game: Shane Mosley. For extended stretches against Mosley, Cotto was outboxing and outfoxing one of the best fighters of this era. He couldn't do that unless he had a lot of tricks in his bag, and it's quite clear that he does.

The biggest technical knock on Cotto is that he isn't the most elusive fighter you'll ever see. At times, he'll be so offensively preoccupied that his head will be sitting perfectly still for counters. Defensively, his game could use some rounding out. Head and lateral movement would help him avoid taking unnecessary punches. But at this point, it isn't second nature to him. He has to consciously think defense in order to elude attack.

He may not be the slickest guy in the game, but Cotto is a very complete fighter. He knows how to create openings, work off the jab, and implement an effective body attack. If nothing else, Cotto is an offensive technician. That's not really up for debate.

Boxing Grade: A-

Chin:

While his soundness as a boxer might not be in question, the same cannot be said for his chin. Cotto has had some perilously close scrapes with defeat due to lapses involving his chin, most of which came when he was campaigning as a junior welterweight. The troubles he experienced against Colombian bomber Ricardo Torres were forgivable, considering that Torres could drop pretty much any 140-pounder he clips on the chin.

Less forgivable, though, were the dire straits Cotto found himself in against the light-hitting DeMarcus Corley. In that fight, a swarming, unusually aggressive Cotto got tagged on numerous occasions with counter hooks by Corley, who, luckily for Cotto, was unable to finish the job.

The good news for Cotto is that such dangerous moments have largely been avoided since his move up to welterweight. It seems that the extra seven pounds have somehow anchored his chin, as it's held up much better against infinitely harder punchers than DeMarcus Corley. Aside from getting buzzed a couple times by Zab Judah, it's hard to remember too many instances where Cotto has been wobbled by a single shot as a welterweight. Against Shane Mosley, it was a combination of fatigue and cumulative punishment that had Cotto backpedaling in the late rounds. Even in his only defeat (under still questionable circumstances) to the disgraced Antonio Margarito, it took eleven rounds for Margarito to pound Cotto into submission.

It looks like Cotto is a bit more durable at 147 than he was at 140. Still, it seems fair to say that even Cotto's most dedicated fans hold their collective breath each time he takes one flush in the mush.

Chin Grade: B+

Heart:

This, too, is an area that many debate about Miguel Cotto. There is much ammunition for both sides of the argument.

For those who question Cotto's heart, they point to two telling fights. First, against Shane Mosley, Cotto found himself riding out an early lead in the championship rounds when a surging Mosley tried to overwhelm Cotto down the stretch. While Cotto was able to squeak out a close points victory, some were turned off by Cotto's clear concern for self-preservation.

TSS Report Card—Miguel Cotto

Written by John Nguyen

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And then there's the Margarito fight, which many point to as the truly damning evidence against Cotto's heart.

(Author's Note: I, like countless others, have serious questions about the legitimacy of Margarito's victory over Cotto in light of his disgusting attempt to plaster his hands against Mosley. However, in discussing Margarito-Cotto, I really have no choice but to approach it as a legitimate win for Margarito. Cotto himself has gone on record as choosing to believe that Margarito won the bout cleanly. If Cotto doesn't want to use the questionable circumstances to excuse his loss, for the purposes of this article, I won't either.)

Many have chastised Cotto for kneeling it out against Margarito in the eleventh round after sustaining a terrible beating. In a sport where quitting is never acceptable, Cotto's decision to stay down against Margarito was an act of surrender. Such moments linger in the minds of fans, and are acts for which fighters spend the remainder of their careers searching for redemption.

This all seems a bit unfair to Cotto, who has proven himself to be a warrior in other trying moments in his career. In the aforementioned fight against Corley, Cotto showed much poise in getting himself out of a very unexpected situation he'd never faced to that point. And his battle with Ricardo Torres was the type of grueling shootout that Cotto never would have won had it not been for his heart. Even in his last bout with Joshua Clottey, Cotto had to battle through a nasty cut early in the fight against a tough, skilled opponent in another physically draining encounter.

It seems ridiculous for anyone to assert that Cotto has no heart. Sure, the Margarito fight showed that Cotto does have a breaking point, but it also showed that it takes an extraordinary amount to get him there.

Heart Grade: A-

On Saturday night, Cotto will find himself in the blinding spotlight again. With the eyes of the boxing world on him once again, it will prove to be a telling moment in his career. The hopes for greatness once so high will rise once more, or be put to rest. As has been the case in the past, the spotlight for Cotto will prove to be a blessing or a curse once more.