

## It Is All Over Now But The Fighting

Written by Ron Borges

Friday, 13 November 2009 19:00

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LAS VEGAS – It is all over now but the fighting, which has always been the only thing of importance between Manny Pacquiao and Miguel Cotto.

Friday afternoon, with 6500 screaming fans packed into the MGM Grand Garden Arena, Pacquiao weighed in at 144 pounds after eating a late lunch while Cotto tipped the scales at the agreed to limit of 145. No gamesmanship by Cotto, as Floyd Mayweather, Jr. pulled in September when he came in above the contracted catch weight to face Juan Manuel Marquez. Just two earnest men ready to bleed for themselves, the honor of their countries and to make considerable paydays in exchange for putting themselves in serious jeopardy.

Both fighters understood all along this is not about weight. This is not a little man against a big man. It is a question of speed and the man who best exhibits it and counters it will win not only the WBO welterweight title Cotto presently holds but also a ticket in the Get Me To Floyd Mayweather Sweepstakes.

“Speed conquers all but I also have the power,” Pacquiao said confidently after the weigh-in and he has the resume to prove it. Just ask Oscar De La Hoya or Ricky Hatton, his last two victims.

“Cotto's size and power need to be respected, but I will leverage his size against him. We have numerous plans to do this depending on the style of fight he presents Saturday night. We are prepared. As important as it is to have advantages, knowing how to use them is even more crucial.

“The second Marquez fight made me think. I never looked at my opponents' tapes before that fight but now I do. At this level, hard gym workouts are not enough. I need to go to school for every opponent. I need to study them. I consider myself a student of boxing now, not just a fighter.”

The student understands tonight is about speed above all else. That is what allowed him to dominate De La Hoya and Hatton, two fighters who are not at the moment on the level of Cotto because one had begun to show his age and was really a part-time fighter and full-time businessman by the time Pacquiao got to him while the other was always an overhyped product of a big British fan base who didn't take care of his body and lived to pay a dear price for it.

Cotto may be damaged goods himself because he has never seemed to be the same since he took that hellacious beating from Antonio Margarito a year ago but at 29 that has yet to be fully established. He claims he is fully recovered, both mentally and physically, and as fit as he's been in some time for the challenge he knows Pacquiao poses. Tonight will tell the story of that.

Yet even if he is, that doesn't mean he'll be fast enough to deal with what Pacquiao brings into the ring and that is really the only issue that will matter in the end.

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“Manny's right (hand) has become so strong there will be nowhere for Cotto to go,” trainer Freddie Roach insists. “Manny's prepared to throw his right hook all night long, but believe me his left will be ready to chill Cotto the minute he moves into range.”

“Manny's body punching has gone to a new level and he is an expert at counterpunching from any stance. I honestly don't know where Cotto can go to escape Manny's onslaught. And unlike previous opponents who have hurt Cotto, Manny is the best finisher I have ever worked with. If Manny shakes up Cotto in round one, he'll finish the job.”

“We know the bad habits in Cotto's style and we will exploit all of them. Believe me, there are enough of them, like with Hatton and De la Hoya, to give Manny plenty of targets.”

If all of that is true why bother with the fight? That, at least, is what Cotto must be thinking today as he awaits what will be the biggest moment of his career because if he loses in the same one-sided way De La Hoya and Hatton did bringing him back to the level he once held in the eyes of Puerto Rican fight fans will be a difficult task, even for a promoter as adept at hype as Bob Arum.

“I am facing a great fighter in Pacquiao,” Cotto (34-1, 27 KO) conceded. “He has great hand speed and a big heart. It will be a battle.”

“I began boxing when I was a little boy, just 11 years old. I always dreamed of fighting for the world championship. I have fought in world title fights, won championships, but this fight is very special. I am ready to fight. We have a great game plan and we will win.”

Although he is a 3-1 underdog Cotto believes the problems being predicted for him will not be so one-sided. Just two years ago he outboxed two of the fastest fighters in the division, Zab Judah and Shane Mosley. He stopped Judah and easily beat Mosley, out jabbing him despite the fact that has always been Mosley's best punch.

That was of course before the fierce beating he took from Antonio Margarito but Cotto's supporters look at those fights and insist Pacquiao (49-3-2 37 KO) is no faster than Mosley. Time will tell about that and we now are down to hours so all the talking means nothing.

Tonight the fighters will decide. The fighters and the most lethal thing in boxing – speed. If Cotto can negate it and hurt Pacquiao to the body, as he did Mosley and Judah, things could get interesting. If he cannot, it will be a re-run of Oscar Night with Manny, a punishingly one-sided evening that will last only as long as the slower man is willing to let it.