

Miguel Cotto's Fistic Future Is In Doubt

Written by Ronan Keenan

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LAS VEGAS -- Hours before he entered the ring with Manny Pacquiao on Saturday, Miguel Cotto admitted in an interview that if victorious, his post-fight celebrations would comprise his penchant for salsa dancing. Little did Cotto know that long before the bout's climax, he would be forced to frantically quick-step around the ring at the MGM Grand Garden Arena.

For the better part of four rounds Cotto circled in broad retreat under the duress imposed from the naturally smaller Filipino. Referee Kenny Bayless' intervention brought a belated halt to the contest at 55 seconds of the twelfth round after Pacquiao launched a furious volley into Cotto's disfigured facial features, marking the official acceptance of a surrender that was signaled much earlier.

The conclusion should have arrived after the ninth round when it was apparent that Pacquiao's abnormally fast punches were too much for Cotto to accept, both physically and mentally. His wife and son could no longer withstand the spectacle, and took one last look as blood spurted from Cotto's mouth and nose before leaving the arena. From that point onwards, the Puerto Rican had no intention of making an effort for victory. Cotto's sole concern was the preservation of his health, a commodity that was in rapid decline over the closing stanzas.

Cotto's chief second, the relatively inexperienced Joe Santiago, seemed on the verge of calling a halt to the beating after the eleventh round, but the battered fighter insisted the bout continue, thus confirming Pacquiao trainer Freddie Roach's pre-fight hypothesis that Miguel was the sole arbiter of "Team Cotto." "[Cotto is] the boss. He calls the shots," said Roach. "It's not good. You always need someone to correct you."

The event's promoter, Bob Arum, also criticized the actions of Cotto's handlers.

"[The fight] should have been stopped sooner," stated Arum. "I question whether the corner should have stopped it sooner."

Such was the alarming nature of the damage inflicted on Cotto that upon returning to his dressing room, officers from the Nevada State Athletic Commission insisted he go to a nearby hospital for a thorough examination. The 29-year-old, nursing grotesquely swollen eyes and mouth and a damaged shoulder, gingerly made his way to his bus with close to thirty of his followers. Before departing the MGM's premises, Cotto made a brief statement that reflected a sincere acceptance of his profession's brutal consequences.

"I know I'm cut and swollen, but I just had a fight; that's how I'm supposed to look," he said through Top Rank's translator Ricardo Jimenez.

The image of an anxious Cotto backpedalling through the final rounds in a desperate exercise in survival belied the steely prizefighter that had posed a dangerous threat to Pacquiao's invincibility just minutes earlier.

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During the opening four rounds Cotto attacked Pacquiao with a ramrod jab and traded furious salvos that initially swung the bout in his favor. The extent of his early success saw Pacquiao enter a post-fight press conference with noticeable battle markings on his face for the first time in four bouts. The Filipino's left eye was swollen, while his right ear was heavily bandaged following a procedure to drain it of congealed blood that had formed as a result of Cotto's heavy left hooks.

The version of Cotto that troubled Pacquiao in the early stages was strikingly sharp and sturdy, effectively removing any doubt that he had been diminished as a fighter by the heavy hands of Antonio Margarito last year. Yet despite Cotto's extensive preparation and effective gameplan execution, he could not contend with the natural gifts that make Pacquiao a freakish physical specimen. Cotto's transformation from antagonist to defendant was a swift decline spurred by a brutal left hook that felled him in the fourth.

It marked the start of Manny's violent domination, which was characterized by Cotto's constant recoiling and Pacquiao's blazing two-fisted assaults. Similar punches have ostensibly ended the careers of Oscar De La Hoya and Ricky Hatton, and Cotto's fistic future must now be in doubt.

"Miguel will need a long rest," said Arum. "But to see his face and the damage done to him shows how much courage he has."

The fortitude displayed by Cotto throughout his 34-2 (27) career has helped him amass inestimable respect from his compatriots and enviable wealth, including \$6.5 million plus for Saturday's work. Despite the loss, the loyalty of Cotto's cornermen and band of followers will remain stout, but supporting a fighter's instincts is often the sport's most dangerous practise.

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