

## Blue-Collar Boxing Hero: Robert Wiggins in Conversation

Written by David Payne

Sunday, 14 August 2005 19:00

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Polar opposites; there is no other way to describe the respective careers of much hyped, highly paid Olympian Audley Harrison and Robert Wiggins, a fighter so blue-collar he still works seven days a week on the Rhode Island docks.

On Thursday, August 18th, in San Jose, California, as the headline bout on Goossen Tutors "Night of the Olympians," these two southpaws from opposite ends of the promotional spectrum meet center ring in a must-win bout for both. As you'd expect, the press releases are about Harrison the Olympian, the hype is about Harrison the contender, the interest is Harrison, Harrison the would-be world-champion. As an Olympic gold medalist he's supposed to be the fighter with the future, the pedigree dog in the show.

But rugged southpaw Robert Wiggins deserves more attention and is keen to stress that he's more than just the opponent in the fight. I caught up with the veteran shortly after he finished training last Wednesday direct from Casey's Gym. In conversation, Wiggins was quiet, patient and humble and didn't once commit the sin of referring to himself in third person, a habit big Audley has thankfully suppressed recently too.

Wiggins lives and operates in a very different reality to Harrison. There were no million pound cheques welcoming him to the professional ranks. As a youngster his amateur career was fleeting and far less illustrious than the Olympian he faces next week. *"I only had eleven fights amateur. I won ten and I lost one before I left boxing. I was outta boxing for about ten years. From the age of about twenty 'til thirty, well, probably eighteen or nineteen years 'til I was about 28, 29,"* Wiggins explained.

For those readers presuming Wiggins was simply another young man who went off the rails, becoming another predictable statistic, another lost soul, the 36-year-old heavyweight is going to disappoint. Wiggins simply chose to give up boxing. *"I just got outta boxing because I couldn't settle in any of the gyms I tried. I moved around, I got a job and I just looked after my family ... a man gotta get paid. I just wanted to provide for my family."*

In truth, Wiggins has continued with his fulltime employment to this day, electing to maintain his position down on the Rhode Island docks pretty much throughout his fistic career. *"Yeah, I still work in the docks, seven days a week, fulltime,"* he said. Something I suggested must give him a very real sense of reality, keeping him firmly grounded? *"Oh yeah, definitely. I'm a family man and I have to look after my kids."*

A ten-year hiatus and regular work begs the question why did Wiggins return to boxing and begin punching for pay? *"I just missed it so much, I realised how much I enjoyed it and I found a gym I liked and felt comfortable in and pretty soon I was in tough fights. I've had some fights, mixed in good class, and lost some decisions. I only been stopped once*

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(by Derek Bryant).

*I wasn't hurt, he never hurt me, I just got tired,*" stressed a clearly proud Wiggins.

With Monte Barrett's ascent to contender status in the heavyweight division, Wiggins' split decision loss to him on just four days notice has gained greater respect. Further evidence of Wiggins' blue-collar honesty shone through when I pressed him about the fight. Was he jealous of Barrett's progress given how close he pushed him? *"It was a close fight, a real close fight; I thought maybe I shoulda got the decision by a point or so, but they gave it to the other guy. That's it, it was a close fight, he got it and I wish him well. He's a good man. It was a good fight but they gave it to him. I ain't got any bitterness to Barrett, and we might meet again down the line. We'll just have to see."*

It's clear when you talk to Wiggins that he's very serious about the sport. His answers, whilst friendly, were clipped and to the point, illustrating either his all-business approach or the fact that interviews and interest aren't common visitors down at Casey's Gym. His honesty and old-school attitude are disarming in an era of spoilt television fighters and multi-media coverage for just about every kid who can lace them up and talk trash. No excuses and buck passing here.

At 36 years of age, even in the modern era of fossilised heavyweights and ageing retreads, Wiggins realises he hasn't got too long left to make a big payday or an impression on the top 20; and before the Barrett fight in 2003 he claimed he had just two years left. Begging the question, what changed or perhaps more accurately, what didn't? *"Yeah, I'm 36, but I feel good and things change. I ain't getting hurt. I don't get no injuries. And while I feel good I can be fighting. If I was getting injured I can't provide for my family, but while I feel good and strong and I ain't getting injured I'll carry on. I got maybe a year, maybe two. I want to try and get a good shot in somewhere."*

With former opponent DaVarryl Williamson (37) only just past the prospect stage and veteran Ray Mercer (44) and Thomas Hearn (46) returning to trade on their names, Wiggins could be forgiven for believing he has plenty of time left. But he was quick to denounce the old-timers. *"That's just silly, stupid. No way I'll do that. Maybe two more years. Not sure what I'll do after that. We'll have to see."*

Maybe the docks? I chimed.

*"Maybe the docks, yeah, hard to say."*

Wiggins added with a hint of resignation.

This self-imposed deadline, a common theme amongst fighters determined to retire on their own terms, does mean Wiggins has to make the most of opportunities like this one against Harrison.

Following his recent victory over Courage Tshabalala, his promoter, Joe DeGuardia made reference to Wiggins being a handful for any heavyweight out there when focused; so, did focus prove a problem in the past? What was DeGuardia driving at? *"I think what Joe means is I need to wake up in fights, be fully focussed and, ya know, sometimes you need a name to motivate*

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*you, a big name fight to wake me up.”*

So the preceding defeat to five-fight novice Kevin Johnson was simply because he didn't have a big name in front of him?

*“I don't know. Maybe. I don't like excuses though. I just wanna fight, trade some shots, ya know, take some/give some,”*

mused Wiggins, clearly ill at ease with the loss to Johnson, but reluctant to excuse it or blame anything or anyone for the reverse.

In terms of an opponent, they don't come much bigger or much more high-profile than Audley Harrison, and Wiggins certainly sounded like this fight had his undivided attention, though getting much more than sound bites about his 26th opponent had proved difficult. *“I don't know much about him. I haven't seen any video; he's got big friends in high places and we can't get any videos. I wish I could. But I know he's big, he's a southpaw, he got a good uppercut, likes to throw the uppercut, he's a boxer, that's about it. We'll just have to see on the night.”*

Fans of Harrison, and he does still have them, will wonder what the stubborn dockworker will bring to the ring to test their favorite. Wiggins may not have seen Harrison, but British fans will have seen even less of his opponent. Based on his own description, Wiggins could prove an interesting night's work and provide at least partial solution to the million-dollar question: Can Audley actually fight?

*“I'm a southpaw, I like to be busy, I like to stay inside. I come forward. I throw shots. I'll take a few to get my own off.”* When asked how he'd apply this style to Harrison's formidable physical advantages of height, reach and weight, Wiggins was typically pointed. *“I gotta get inside the jab, stay inside, take a few shots to land some, try and hurt him. If I stay outside I got problems. I gotta get in, take it to him.”*

It certainly seems as if Wiggins is ready to go, and if he can force Harrison to fight at a fast pace for three minutes per round he'll achieve what few have done before – get Harrison out of the comfort zone. I suggested that the fans, writers and critics would thank him if he could ask Harrison those types of questions. *“Well he's a big name, he's 18-0, he's unbeaten and he has that Olympic background. I've known about the fight for three weeks or so, so I'm in good shape. I'll weigh about 220 maybe 222, 223. I feel pretty good. We'll just have to see on the night.”*

The interview wrapped, I returned to my notes a day later, and couldn't help thinking about the guy I spoke to, the family man probably grabbing some sleep before another shift. Surely he couldn't be working in fight week, could he?

One thing, however, seems possible; he may just make Harrison work harder than he's ever worked before. But whatever the outcome of the fight, Harrison will find it hard to return the compliment.

*(My thanks to Joe DeGuardia and Dottie Raven at Star Boxing for their assistance in setting up my time with Robert Wiggins.)*