

Boxing in Ireland

Written by George Kimball
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

DUBLIN, Ireland – The fighters were already in the ring when they struck up the music for the respective anthems, and if there had been any doubts in Sean Hughes' mind about his role on this night they were quickly erased by the crowd's reaction to the opening chords of "God Save the Queen."

It may have been the first time the British anthem had ever been played before a professional fight in Ireland's National Stadium. The cozy, 2,300-seat boxing-only venue on Dublin's south side had been transformed for the evening into a raucous pub. Whistles and boos cascaded down from the rafters, effectively drowning out the offending tune, and it was clear enough that if the audience had ambivalent feelings about the visiting English boxer, they didn't much care for his theme music.

Hughes had been procured on short notice as Bernard Dunne's opponent in the main event of what had been billed as a world title fight doubleheader. That the titles in question were vacant belts on offer from the IBC seemed to be of scant consequence to the Irish crowd, for whom professional boxing remains something of a novelty.

("What can you tell us about the IBC?" an Irish journalist asked the visiting American scribe. "Well," we replied, "they make an excellent root beer.")

The evening brought out an interesting combination of hardcore fight fans and the glitterati of Dublin society. Barry McGuigan had flown in for the weigh-in, and Steve Collins was present as a commentator for Irish television, along with Olympic gold medalist Michael Carruth. (In addition to being telecast throughout the Republic, Friday's fight was also broadcast live on a Dublin radio station, for which we provided the analysis.)

Sean Mannion and Dave "Boy" Macauley were at ringside, and the Irish actor-comedian Niall Toibin did a stint as the celebrity ring announcer for one undercard fight. The National Stadium was clearly *the* place to be on this Friday night, and Dublin's tonier night clubs must have been deserted, given the profusion of bottle-blondes in slinky black dresses in the audience.

Dunne is an undefeated Dubliner who spent most of his early career boxing in the United States. After signing him out of the amateur ranks, manager-promoter Brian Peters had farmed him out to trainer Freddie Roach, and the young featherweight for the most part cut his professional teeth performing on Sugar Ray Leonard-promoted ESPN2 undercards around the country. More importantly, he was absorbing a wealth of top-flight sparring experience as he engaged in the daily wars at Roach's famed Wild Card gym.

Dunne's early rise had been marked by a succession of astonishingly quick knockouts as he put away eight of his first nine opponents inside two rounds, but as he moved up in class he struggled somewhat. Between a series of nagging injuries and the increasingly more difficult level of his opposition, Dunne continued to win, but going into last Friday night's encounter with

Boxing in Ireland

Written by George Kimball
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

Hughes, six of his last seven opponents had survived to hear the final bell – including Yuri Voronen, the Ukrainian who put Dunne on his backside in the 10th round of their May fight at the National Stadium.

Dunne's return to Ireland had been occasioned by the dissolution of SRL Boxing after Leonard abandoned his company to cast his lot with "The Contender," accompanied by pangs of homesickness. The Hughes fight would be his third since returning to Ireland. It would not only be his first 12-rounder, but his first at junior featherweight, Peters having elected to drop him down to campaign at 122 pounds.

Dunne had originally been scheduled to face Noel Wilders, the 30 year-old former European bantamweight champion. Wilders, said to be contemplating retirement, withdrew a week before the bout. Hughes, like Wilders a southpaw and conveniently from the same gym, was available, and was quickly approved by both the Boxing Union of Ireland and the IBC, despite questionable credentials.

On paper Hughes' 10-2-1 record appeared respectable enough, since both of his losses had been to undefeated fighters, but in his last outing he had fought to a draw with Peter Buckley. A legendary figure in European boxing circles, Buckley is a 36-year-old professional opponent from Birmingham who has lost well over 200 fights. In his last 40 bouts he was beaten 39 times. The only one he *didn't* lose was the draw with Sean Hughes.

Two evenings earlier, the Irish capital had hosted an Ireland-Switzerland soccer qualifier in which the home side had been eliminated from next year's World Cup courtesy a disappointing 0-0 draw at Landsdowne Road. Given what was at stake, it was a disappointing and listless performance by the Irish, which one national newspaper proclaimed a "Disgrace" on page one on the morning of the weigh-in.

"I won't be playing for a draw," promised Dunne. "If Mr. Hughes sticks out his chin at all, he'll be looking at the lights of the National Stadium."

Which is pretty much happened on Friday night. Hughes, bone-dry during the introductions, never did get his engine started. He spent the first round retreating as Dunne pressed forward, waving his right jab like a feather duster in a vain effort to keep the Irishman at bay.

Hughes survived that round, but not the next. Early on Dunne rocked him with a left hook, followed up with a right hand, and as Hughes cowered in a vain attempt to ward off the blows, landed at least a dozen unanswered punches before referee Paul Thomas stopped the fight and took him into protective custody.

Thomas' intervention might have been a bit precipitate, but it hardly altered what had become an inevitable outcome. At the end of it Hughes had a bloody nose to show for his night's work, but it could have been much worse.

It was Dunne's 17th win in 17 pro fights, and unlike most of the gullible crowd, he had no illusions about the import of his "world" championship: With the gaudy belt newly wrapped

Boxing in Ireland

Written by George Kimball
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

around his waist, he was already talking about the next step up the ladder – like perhaps fighting for a European title next year.

IBC supervisor Bernie LaFratta had arrived in Dublin with two of the root beer organization's title belts, and they both stayed there. Irish middleweight champion Jim Rock outpointed Welshman Alan Jones over 12 rounds to capture the other.

While Dunne had promised victory, Rock was more guarded in his prediction. Asked by an Irish journalist for a "forecast," The Pink Panther replied "I'd say it's going to rain tomorrow," which is usually a pretty safe bet in Ireland.

A year earlier at Ulster Hall in Belfast, Rock had been upset by Jones, with the referee scoring the bout 76-75 in the Welshman's favor. Asked if revenge might be a factor in their Dublin rematch, Rock replied "I wouldn't use the word 'revenge.' Alan Jones didn't do anything wrong. If it was revenge, I'd be looking for the referee."

Rock got his revenge in any case. In their Belfast fight, an admittedly under-trained Rock had piled up a big early lead and then allowed it to slip away, and it looked as if the same thing were going to happen again.

In the early going Rock worked nicely off his jab, no mean feat against an opponent who carries his right hand welded to his cheek to guard against precisely that weapon. The Irishman dominated the first five rounds, but in the sixth Jones caught him with a counter right and then moved in to land a left-right combination that left Rock staggering.

Referee John Keane seemed to be closely scrutinizing Rock and might have been on the verge of stopping the fight, but, spurred on by the crowd, the Irishman fought on and survived.

He was still woozy when he came out for the seventh, and lost the next two rounds, but in the tenth he rallied and carried the action down the stretch to win going away. The judges had it 117-112 and 116-112 twice. (Our scorecard had Rock winning 115-113.)

Dunne is only 25, and for him the root beer title was admittedly "a steppingstone," but Rock, who is 33, has no illusions about fighting for a real world title. Friday's fight left his career mark at 26-4, and it may well have been his last. Jones, perhaps sensing this, grasped the winner about the waist and hoisted him into the air at the conclusion of the spirited 12 rounds. The Welshman's record fell to 9-2-1 with the loss.

Peters provided an entertaining undercard, one which saw Belfast light-heavyweight Brian Magee (23-2) stop Armenian Varuzhan Davtyan (5-21) in two, Dublin 130-pounder Paul Hyland (5-0) outpoint Slovakian Peter Feher (19-43) over four rounds, and another Northern Ireland boxer, welterweight Stephen Haughian (2-0), stop Turkey's Imad Khamis in the walk-out bout. Dublin junior lightweight Paul Griffin (22-3) was awarded a first-round TKO when his Scottish opponent John Bothwell (2-5-2) was cut twice above his right eye. (Blood was gushing forth in such profusion that the referee halted the action and summoned the ringside physician, but before he even got there, John Breen, who was working Bothwell's corner, took one look at the

Boxing in Ireland

Written by George Kimball
Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

damage and told the referee "forget it.")

The best performance in a supporting role may well have come from Oisin Fagan. Fagan is a Dubliner who went to the States on a soccer scholarship, but upon graduating found himself jobless. Having had a couple of amateur bouts back in Ireland, he offered himself up as an opponent on a card the AMC Flea Market in Oklahoma City two years ago, hoping to earn enough money for a plane ticket back to Ireland.

To his own surprise he knocked his opponent out, a performance that led to two careers. In the audience was the principal of a local high school who had a vacancy for a PE teacher, and offered Fagan the job. Fagan has continued to moonlight as a boxer, compiling a 9-3 record, and he won the Oklahoma state lightweight title (a championship only slightly more significant than an IBC title) last year.

Fagan had been scheduled to face Richie Scifo in Oklahoma, but when the opportunity to fight in Dublin presented itself, the bout was transported across the sea, lending a literal interpretation to the phrase "bring your own opponent."

It was a long way to travel for such a brief fight. Midway through the first Fagan cut loose with a Tysonesque combination, crunching Scifo with a hard right to the body followed by a right uppercut up the middle. Oblivious to his surrounding, Scifo pitched face-forward and was writhing in apparent pain throughout the ten-count. From the broadcast booth it had appeared to us that the punch might have broken Scifo's nose, but the young Oklahoman told us later, it didn't even travel that far.

"It was the uppercut that did all the damage," Scifo told us later. "He caught me flush on the point of my jaw. It was a great punch, and I never saw it coming."

* * *

AT THE NATIONAL STADIUM/DUBLIN, IRELAND/October 14, 2005

LIGHT FEATHERWEIGHTS:

Bernard Dunne, 122, Dublin TKO'd Sean Hughes, 121, Pontrefact, England (2) (Wins vacant IBC title)

MIDDLEWEIGHTS:

Jim Rock, 159, Dublin dec. Alan Jones, 158, Aberystwyth, Wales (12) (Wins vacant IBC title)

LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHTS:

Brian Magee, 174, Lisburn, Northern Ireland, TKO'd Varuzhan Davtyan, 179½, Armenia (2)

WELTERWEIGHTS:

Boxing in Ireland

Written by George Kimball

Monday, 17 October 2005 19:00

Stephen Haughian, 141, Lurgan, Northern Ireland, TKO'd Imad Khamis, 144, Egypt (4)

LIGHT WELTERWEIGHTS:

Oisin Fagan, 139 ½, Dublin KO'd Richie Scifo, 143, Oklahoma City (1)

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHTS:

Paul Griffin, 127, Dublin, TKO'd John Bothwell, 126½, Glasgow (1)

Paul Hyland, 128 ½, Dublin, dec. Peter Feher, 129, Palarikovo, Slovakia (4)