

Thirlwell to hit title trail

Written by News Article

Tuesday, 24 January 2006 19:00

Hennessy Sports promoted Matthew Thirlwall believes that his stunning win over former English champion Donovan Smilie in front of the SKY Sports cameras at the York Hall in Bethnal Green on Friday night will set him up for a big 2006.

Despite a distinct weight disadvantage, the 25-year-old demonstrated the power that saw him stop 7 of his 8 opponents on the way to an ABA title by sensationally knocking out the unexpectedly resilient Donovan Smilie after nine breathtaking rounds.

"It was a bit tougher than I thought it would be," the Bermondsey fighter admitted of the final eliminator for the English super middleweight title. "Donovan was very durable. I clipped him a lot of times and thought he might go early, but somehow he hung on in there.

"I was about to stop him in the 4th, the ref was ready to jump in, but the bell went just at the right time for him. He came out for the fifth OK; he had excellent powers of recovery. He was in good shape, which was to be expected as he was given the same notice as me.

"He also used his extra weight well. I think that made him that bit more able to resist some of my shots and he was able to push me back a little when he was in trouble."

There was the odd occasion when Smilie looked as if he may be able to turn the fight round and put Thirlwall in some difficulty of his own. Despite admitting to his corner at one point that he was tired, however, the Bermondsey boxer insists that he was never in deep water.

"I was never really in any trouble myself," he insisted. "It was just that I had only ever done 6 rounds before and realised that I might have to go into territory that I didn't really know. To be honest I panicked a bit, but my trainer Robert McCracken calmed me down. I was never going to pull out or anything like that - I would never quit. Besides, as the fight wore on I realised that if I had needed to go the distance it wouldn't have been a problem."

With that knowledge in the bank, Thirlwall can now progress to full title class. Whilst he has first dibs on the English super middleweight title, he feels his future lies in the weight division below.

"I took this fight at 12 stone for the opportunity to fight an eliminator," the former Fisher and Downside ABC fighter explained. "It also gave me the chance to see how I got on with a bit of extra weight, but I trained so hard that I only came in at just over 11 stone 9lb anyway, so I will be sticking at middleweight.

"I make the limit easily and will be bull strong. I don't think there is a fighter on the domestic scene that will be able to live with me. I will be talking to my promoter Mick Hennessy about my next step over the next couple of days, but I would love to fight Steve Bendall for the English

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title and then Scott Dann for the British.

"They are both good, strong southpaws, but they are beatable. I believe that my ability, speed and natural power would see me through."

Whilst Thirlwall clearly possesses the latter in abundance, he has only demonstrated glimpses of it as a professional. He feels that it is an asset that will only now come to the fore given that he will no longer be facing journeymen.

He explained: "I've always had the power I demonstrated on Friday night, but it's difficult to use it against opponents who only come to survive. It's going to be different now that I am against people who are willing to fight, you can catch them a lot easier."

There are also going to be marked improvements in his performances given a renewed dedication he has shown in the gym.

"I have really knuckled down since I came back from injury late last year," he added. "I admit that in the past I haven't lived the life, but I have learned my lesson the hard way. Even though I believe that the couple of decisions that didn't go for me earlier in my career were wrong, I realised I shouldn't be struggling at that level after a talk I had with Mick and my trainer Robert McCracken. They made me realise that I wasn't fulfilling my potential.

"I thought I could coast early on, but I will never cut corners again, especially as I know that my time in this sport is short. That hit home when an injury ruled me out of most of 2005. I want to build on my win over Smilie and at least get one title this year. It is time for me to get a move on now."

He has already begun to do so, fulfilling a promise he made to Hennessy and McCracken in their conversation.

"Whilst Matthew was recuperating towards the end of last year, we really tried to motivate him because we thought he wasn't using the talent we knew he definitely had," Hennessy explained.

"He told the pair of us he was going to do something about it. He promised he was going to give everything to boxing because he wanted the big fights and big titles. He did exactly what he said he was going to do in the gym and has now transferred it to the ring, which isn't always easy.

"We are over the moon with him. With this new attitude and his exciting style, this is potentially the start of big things. If this momentum continues and he stays committed he will be able to beat the likes of Bendall and Dann as I feel he has more natural talent than both.

"He showed that before he got injured when he went into Howard Eastman's training camp for the Bernard Hopkins fight. He had some fantastic sparring with Howard, doing 8 rounds full pelt against a world-class fighter. He really showed his mettle. All he needs to do now is pick up more in experience the ring."