

Harrison Signs Up For the Helter-Skelton

Written by David Payne
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*"Oh yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending I'm doing well
My need is such, I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell"
– The Platters (1954)*

The career of Audley Harrison, if a collection of unfulfilled boasts, pedestrian displays and back to back defeats to peripheral heavyweights deserve the collective noun 'career,' sucked hard on the oxygen of publicity this week as he bravely announced his challenge to Matt Skelton, for the Bedford brawler's Commonwealth title.

Only in the heavyweight division would a soon-to-be 35-year-old with two failed tests at championship level be offered another opportunity to re-establish his credibility so quickly. In victory, Harrison's hunger, desire and strength of will has been questioned from the outset, and in the losses to an ill-prepared Danny Williams and a flawed Dominic Guinn proven to be completely absent, but Harrison's willingness to tackle Skelton, the complete antithesis of the former Olympian, deserves a degree of begrudging respect.

Not only is Harrison returning to British shores, the scene of his humiliating non-performance against Williams, a fight witnessed live by millions thanks to the ITV terrestrial network's partnership with Frank Warren, but he also faces arguably the most acute test of the qualities so transparently missing in his career thus far.

Physically, Harrison is unquestionably gifted. Tall, long of arm with fast hands, a reasonable array of offensive punches and a natural lefty – God was kind to the Londoner. Add the luminance of his Super-Heavyweight gold medal, an accomplishment even Frank Bruno conceded "couldn't be collected in sweet shops," and the package appears complete.

But five years on from his raucous debut versus part-time detective Mike Middleton, Harrison has been proven to lack in a number of less tangible areas. Against Skelton Harrison's press conference assertion that previous performances were the result of a celebrity lifestyle or the cumulative effect of outside distractions, scoffed at by fans, media and fellow fighters, will be under the most intense scrutiny. There is no hiding place in the ring, and that idiom is never truer when the ring is shared with Matt Skelton.

For every ounce of bluster and self-importance uttered by Harrison, Matt Skelton's own rise to heavyweight prominence represents the perfect counterbalance. Stylistically, the two fighters are polar opposites too. Harrison's performances are a study in suspending belief, of placing hope over evidence, style over substance. Providing contrast, Skelton is about brawn, heart, stamina and a natural affinity for a fight. The former kickboxer, who turned professional shortly before his 35th birthday four years ago, always gives his all in the ring. Relentless offensive pressure and constant punching are Skelton's trademarks, and whilst he's been slightly more

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pragmatic in his encounters with Danny Williams – culminating in the incredible site of him perching his 250 lb. frame on tiptoes whilst shooting out a loose jab – the intensity is sure to return for Harrison. The assumption will be, Harrison simply can't live with Skelton's pressure.

The two should gel well, providing Harrison makes good on his promises, and offers high profile support for the clash between leading featherweight contenders Scott Harrison and Nicky Cook on December 9th at the Excel Centre, London. It is important to remember Harrison's record on fulfilled promises is not good. However, his willingness to face Skelton on primetime terrestrial television, when other less exposed routes were available to him, suggests either a craving for limelight and the ensuing attention or a deeper, more reasoned belief that the natural ability to progress his career remains and ultimately defeat has rewarded him with the humility and determination to utilise it.

For some completely unjustifiable reason I want Harrison to win, and even more unfathomable, I expect him to.