

Mike Oliver Puts The Heart Back In Hartford

Written by Robert Mladinich
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It has been a very busy year for super bantamweight Mike “Machine Gun” Oliver of Hartford, Connecticut, who is one of the most talked about New England prospects in years.

The 26-year-old southpaw upped his record to 17-0 (7 KOS) and also won the vacant USBA super bantamweight title with a 12-round unanimous decision over Adam Carrera, who is now 18-2 (8 KOS), of Cathedral City, California, on October 28 at the Mohegan Sun Casino in Connecticut.

Just 25 days earlier, in his hometown, Oliver won a six-round decision over Oscar De La Cruz of Atlanta.

All in all Oliver has fought six times in 2006, and his promoters hope to match him with a fellow prospect such as Gary “Kid” Stark Jr., 17-0 (8 KOS), of Staten Island, New York, on HBO’s Boxing After Dark in the early part of 2007.

“That would be a great fight for HBO,” said Rich Cappiello, Oliver’s promoter. “Both guys are undefeated, both guys are exciting, and both are great fighters. You never hear any boos when either of them fights.”

Oliver has been wowing audiences since he first laced on gloves as a three-year-old in 1982, the same year that another New England favorite, former light heavyweight title challenger John “Iceman” Scully, began training as a 14-year-old amateur.

“He was incredible, a real natural,” said Scully, who now trains Oliver. “He was doing exhibitions throughout the state before he was big enough for his feet to touch the ground when he sat on his stool.”

All in all, Oliver had well over 300 amateur fights, making him, in Scully’s estimation, the most experienced amateur in Connecticut history.

Although Oliver was inactive as a professional in 2004, he has maintained a fairly busy schedule since turning pro in September 2001. Besides beating a slew of the usual suspects, he has stopped once beaten fighters such as Darby Smart, who was 8-1, and Castulo Gonzalez, who was 7-1. Gonzalez was also a heralded amateur who had competed in the Pan American Games.

At this point, Cappiello and his partner, Joe Lake, the onetime trainer of Dana Rosenblatt, believe that Oliver is more than ready for top-ten competition. While they have enough confidence in him to match him with a blue-chip prospect like Stark right now – and would be more than happy to do so for the chance to get on HBO – they believe Oliver and Stark would be better suited fighting down the road when a world title is on the line.

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“(Former HBO executive) Lou DiBella has (promotes) Stark, so he can make the fight happen (on HBO) if he wants to,” said Lake. “This would be a big East Coast fight, and it would be a really big little guy fight. These two guys might be the most exciting fighters in the division.”

Most of the division’s luminaries, such as Israel Vasquez, Oscar Larios, Poonsawatt Kratingaengym, and Yoddamrong Sithyodthong, hail from South of the Border or the Orient.

Depending on one’s perspective, having two exciting, lighter weight East Coast fighters can be a blessing or a curse.

From the standpoint of the fans, it is refreshing to have such talented little giants hailing from the New York tri-state area. From a promoter’s standpoint, however, it can be a nightmare.

Not only must opponents be flown in from far geographical distances, even the most rudimentary boxing fan knows that a Mexican or South American with a 50-50 record can never be taken for granted. As expensive as it is to import opponents, it is sometimes even more logistically difficult to get an accurate scouting report on them.

“It’s tough,” concedes Lake. “But we realize what a great prospect we have in Mike. There have been lighter weight East Coast fighters who have made their mark. Look at Junior Jones and Kevin Kelley. Once people have the opportunity to see Mike fight, it won’t be hard for him to win over the fans.”

An offensive whirlwind, Oliver is a nonstop puncher who can also counterpunch masterfully. His style is perfectly suited for television. Although he has a less than 50% knockout percentage, make no mistake about the fact that he can punch. The sheer speed and velocity of his punches makes him extremely dangerous.

While he is a natural 122-pounder who doesn’t walk around much heavier than that, several of his opponents have outweighed him by as much as 15 pounds by the time they stepped into the ring.

That is why, says Lake, there are not more knockouts on Oliver’s ledger.

“Some of his opponents have weighed in the high 130s at fight time,” said Lake. “We don’t like it, but if the guy makes weight at the weigh-in, we have to accept it.”

One thing that Cappiello and Lake would love to do is bring a world title fight to Hartford. Oliver already has a big following in his hometown, but his promoters have no doubt that he will eventually become so popular in the area that his fame will rival that of another local native, former welterweight champion Marlon Starling, and Scully, who came from nearby New Windsor.

Former featherweight champion Willie Pep, who between 1940 and 1956 engaged in 242 fights, also hailed from Hartford. He and Sugar Ray Robinson are arguably the greatest pound-for-pound fighters that ever lived.

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It is obvious that if Oliver wants to continue the city's rich fistic history, he has his work cut out for him. Lake and Cappiello believe that he is more than up to the task.

"If we could bring a world title fight to Hartford, that would be huge," said Lake. "A lot of people in Hartford have only heard about Mike, but have never seen him. Once they see him, he's going to be a superstar. There's nothing he can't do, and he has a crowd-pleasing style. What more can you ask for in a world champion?"