

This John Is A Regular Joe

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Many of boxing's most popular fighters have lived the type of extraordinary lives that would probably be implausible for a Hollywood movie.

Not John Duddy.

Despite being one of the hottest attractions in the sport, the middleweight contender doesn't have an exceptional story to tell. He has never battled drug addiction or spent time living on the streets, yet his persona nonetheless draws adoration from the public.

The New York-based Irishman has fought relatively unremarkable opposition in compiling a 20-0 (15Ks) record, yet a 5,000 capacity crowd packed The Theatre at Madison Square Garden for only the second time in the venue's history when he knocked out one Shelby Pudwill last year.

He speaks with an occasionally indiscernible Ulster accent, but still gets offers of movie roles. He struggled to out-point the faded Yori Boy Campas, yet interest in his subsequent bout against Anthony Bonsante was greater than ever. What's more, Duddy began his pro career in 2003 with little fanfare after an amateur career devoid of an Olympic Games or World Championship appearance. And even though his in-ring performances wouldn't ear-mark a fighter for greatness, coverage of his upcoming showcase against Italian journeyman Alessio Furlan is plastered across the internet.

But the fact that he has led a relatively unglamorous and regular life is a key facet that attracts supporters. The 28-year-old's unpretentious manner and belief in hard work seem to resonate with the public, who can relate to the inconspicuous Irish immigrant who is willing to fight for a better lifestyle.

"When John first came to New York [from Derry, Northern Ireland in March 2003], he worked for my construction company and I saw the effort he put in," Duddy's co-manager Eddie McLaughlin told writer Thomas Hauser. "There was no shirking. He pulled his load and more. And then, after a full day, he'd go to the gym and work just as hard."

And Duddy is determined to maintain that focus regardless of the distractions that come with burgeoning popularity.

"I'm [in New York] for one thing and that's business," said the prizefighter. "I'm here to box. People come to me all the time and say, 'I'll get you in movies.' They promise me this and they promise me that. And I tell them, 'After boxing.'"

"I try to keep things simple. I don't look too far into the future. I'm confident and straightforward. I don't like liars and phonies. I'm very focused on my career. And I believe that a fighter needs passion, not cruelty, to be great."

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Still, it hasn't been easy for Duddy to maintain his boxing ambitions. Like many fighters, he grew tired with his amateur career and after 130 fights began to question his desire for the sweet science.

"[The amateur scene] was the same thing again and again," he recalled. "The same bad hotels; the same planes; the same busses; the same bad food. It wasn't fun anymore, and I wasn't getting better as a fighter."

He was so exasperated with the sport that, according to McLaughlin, Duddy would "grit his teeth" whenever boxing was mentioned. But the opportunity to turn pro in the US revitalized his thirst for pugilistic glory and life in Queens was going well until the surfacing of the four letter word that gives immigrants nightmares. Visa.

"I was told [my visa] would be all right, and it wasn't," he said. "I really thought the dream was over. When [I was sent back to] Ireland, my father offered to work with me in the gym, but my heart and spirit weren't in it. For boxing, the right people and the right knowledge just aren't there [in Ireland]. So I worked as a bouncer, a postman, and a lifeguard until I was able to come back to New York."

Seven months later the issue was resolved and Duddy resumed his career with earnest, impressively dominating second-rate opponents. But while he has been able to amble through most of his 20 paid outings, his showdown with the 96-fight veteran Campas last September was more of a slog.

In a thrilling battle between two aggressive punchers, Duddy emerged with a unanimous 12-round decision victory, despite being rocked on numerous occasions and suffering two deep lacerations above both eyes.

"In the end he passed his examination with flying colors," wrote boxing writer George Kimball. "It was a victory that owed as much to raw courage as to boxing skill. Although he probably absorbed more punishment in this one than he had in his first seventeen [bouts] combined."

Duddy's no frills mentality has certainly made him an attractive fighter, even if it may ultimately cost him his ruggedly handsome looks. He doesn't worry too much about the subtler aspects of defence and he'll gladly swing a hook rather than waste time jabbing, but the Campas brawl made these characteristic seem less appealing, perhaps for the benefit of Duddy's longevity.

"The Campas fight showed me that I have to fight with my brain, not just my heart, and make defense more of a priority," he admitted.

"I was fighting an opponent who took everything I threw at him and hit just as hard as I did. That's the first time I was ever really asked in the ring, 'Do you want to be a professional fighter?' And the answer was 'yes, I do'".

And his trainer for the fight, Harry Keitt, was equally frank with his assessment of Duddy's mindset.

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“John has to use his boxing skills more,” said Keitt. “As an amateur, John was a boxer. Then he came to the United States and knocked some people out and forgot about boxing.”

But for Duddy’s fight against Alessio Furlan at the National Stadium in Dublin, Ireland this Saturday, Don Turner has replaced Keitt as trainer.

Turner, who has worked with 19 world titlists, is determined to refine Duddy’s skills so the Derryman doesn’t follow the lead of Gerry Cooney and Joey Archer, heavily hyped fighters of Irish heritage who never claimed the world championship.

“[Duddy is] just as good as anybody in the middleweight division,” said Turner. “He gets hit and it’s my job to teach him not to get hit. He’s responded very well to what I’m teaching him to do and he should be fighting for the world title soon.

“All he needs to do is throw combinations, it’s the missing link. When he has an opponent hurt, that’s when he has to throw five more punches, not let him off the hook.”

And Duddy, who has been training in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, is aiming to show-off improved skills in what will be his first pro fight on Irish soil.

“I’m going to put on more pressure against [Furlan, 19-8-5 (8Ks)] than I did my past few fights, more up tempo, coming at my opponent from all angles.

“Once I get him on the ropes, I don’t want to let him off the hook. We’ve been working on a lot of small things from a different perspective. I think Don Turner is going to bring the best out of me.”

The bout against Furlan is a chance for Duddy to perform in front of his home fans at a venue in which he won numerous amateur titles, and the locals and media alike have embraced the event with demand for tickets and press accreditation at unforeseen levels.

Likewise, Duddy remains equally loyal to his native land.

“It’s great being home,” he acknowledged. “I couldn’t believe the reception I received. Ireland will always be my home. It’s a great country.”

And after collapsing from heat exhaustion during last summer’s blistering Big Apple temperatures, Duddy will have even more reason to enjoy home comforts: Ireland has just endured its wettest June on record, with July likely to follow suit.

Hollywood, it’s not.

The John Duddy “Homecoming” event will be available on cable pay-per-view starting at 5:00 PM/ET, 2:00 PM/PT via iN Demand, DirecTV and TVN.