

Ben Dunne, On Track For A Title Shot

Written by Ronan Keenan
Tuesday, 21 August 2007 19:00

He sat in silence, staring into the mirror at the Buffalo Holiday Inn restaurant. His zoned-out mind attempted to solve a battery of questions: What was wrong with him? Where did it come from? Is this the end?

Bernard Dunne had just absorbed the hardest blow of his fledgling boxing career.

At the weigh-in for his third professional bout on the undercard of the October 2002 Joe Mesi-David Izon event, the Irishman was staggered by the news that his pre-fight MRI scan had shown abnormalities with his brain.

“I want to see this kid when he’s 80 years old and has children and grandchildren,” said Hugo Spindola of the New York State Athletic Commission while pointing at Dunne. “When you have any risk with the brain, among the things that can happen are paralysis, permanent seizures and in the worst case you could be killed. We must not allow that.”

Having given up his home comforts in Dublin for the intimidating environment of Freddie Roach’s Wild Card Gym in Los Angeles, Dunne was determined to make any sacrifice in an effort to reach the top of the boxing world. But a promotional contract with Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing, national TV exposure and a burgeoning reputation as a blue-chip prospect all seemed immaterial that night five years ago.

After watching a 15-year-old Dunne spar with the-then world bantamweight champion Wayne McCullough in 1995, many observers believed the teenager would follow in the footsteps of his compatriot, but not many predicted that apparent brain irregularities would jeopardize both fighters’ careers.

Almost two years to the day before Dunne’s failed scan, McCullough’s license to box was revoked by the British Boxing Board of Control after a routine examination revealed a cyst on his brain ahead of a planned homecoming bout in Belfast. After undergoing a seemingly unending series of medical tests that proved the abnormality was benign, McCullough was finally permitted to box in Britain after a distressing 21 months.

Thankfully for Dunne, he would not have to wait that long before it was revealed the ‘white matter’ present on his initial MRI scan was unthreatening to his boxing career. Just three months after the scare in Buffalo Dunne was back in the ring, but it was uncertain whether the young 122 pound prospect would be mentally scarred by the drama.

“I nearly had it all taken away from me”, admits Dunne. “But if that’s going to happen I’d rather it happened in the ring. [The scare] has made me work even harder since then for what I want to achieve in the sport.”

Dunne has gone on to gain recognition as a serious world title contender, accruing a 24-0 (14)

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record along with the European championship, which he will defend for the third time against the unbeaten Spanish prospect Kiko Martinez, 16-0 (13), on Saturday at the Point in Dublin.

The gusto with which Dunne describes his life-long love-affair with boxing underscores the anguish he must have felt that night in Buffalo.

"I have always been involved in boxing," explains the 27-year-old. "It was mainly because of my Dad [Brendan, who competed at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal] and I began boxing at the age of five. I decided to go professional when I was 21 because I knew that I wanted boxing to be my life."

Still, the decision to end his amateur career wasn't easy and, as always, boxing politics played a major role. Despite building up an unpaid record of 119-11 with 13 Irish titles, Dunne narrowly missed out on qualifying for the 2000 Sydney Olympics and had to be content with a reserve role. But his treatment by the Olympic Council of Ireland left him disillusioned with the amateur scene and his gold medal dreams would be replaced with aspirations of professional world titles.

Fuelled by a determination to make up for his amateur shortcomings, Dunne left behind his long-term girlfriend and family in rainy Dublin for the sweltering heat of LA to test himself against the world's best.

"I'd go home tomorrow if I could," he revealed to Irish-Boxing.com in 2003. "If it was possible to do what I'm doing here back home I'd be there in a flash. I'm here for one thing only and that's to box. The sparring is just phenomenal [in LA]. I never got sparring in the amateurs.

"In the three years before the Olympics I very rarely got sparring. If I had that kind of competitive sparring at home maybe I would have fulfilled my amateur potential instead of not achieving the goals I had set for myself."

But the experience on the West Coast helped Dunne learn his trade alongside some of the finest practitioners in the sport.

"I sparred many rounds with Manny Pacquiao, Johnny Tapia, Carlos Hernandez, 'Sugar' Shane Mosley, James Toney amongst many others," he said. "I've been in with all those guys and acquitted myself really well with every single one of them. Just being in the same gym with so many great fighters has given me invaluable experience."

Working with such high-profile names seems to have boosted the confidence of the gregarious Dubliner, who has been based in Ireland since his contract with Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing ended in late-2004. And in recent fights in front of his raucous hometown supporters, Dunne has marched to the ring with a self-assured swagger, while producing performances to match.

Under the tutelage of Brian Peters Promotions and Belfast trainer Harry Hawkins, Dunne has rattled off 10 victories since leaving the US, with his most impressive performance being his European title win against the skilful Esham Pickering last November.

Skating around the ring in his characteristically relaxed manner, Dunne used a sharp jab and rapid combinations to tattoo Pickering's body on route to becoming Ireland's second ever European champion since Barry McGuigan.

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“Winning the European belt has unlocked something in me,” says Dunne. “It has put a new emphasis on me to train and bust my ass doing it. Nutrition, conditioning, everything is better now than it ever has been, so I am ready for that world title shot.”

Few could argue with Dunne. His title defences over Yersin Jailauov in March and the durable Reidar Walstad last June have proven that he is the best super bantamweight on the European continent. And the temptations to rush him into world level fights after the Martinez bout are mounting.

Having attracted 7,000 fans to each of his last three fights, Dunne certainly doesn't lack drawing power, but his ability to end fights with one punch has been called into question.

Even though he landed almost at will on Walstad, the limited Norwegian was never visibly hurt. And standing at a relatively tall 5'7, the Irishman carries an almost skeletal frame that would be put under severe pressure by aggressive opponents such as Israel Vasquez or Daniel Ponce De Leon.

“Dunne is an excellent, fast boxer but, to me, he seems a bit lacking in physical strength,” warned veteran boxing writer Graham Houston earlier this year.

“I am not sure about Dunne's chin. I saw him dropped in an early fight in the US [against Alejandro Cruz in 2003, whom Dunne outpointed over six rounds] and there was an alarming last-round wobble against [Yuri] Voronin [in a 2005 fight that Dunne won by wide decision after being shaken in the tenth] who is not considered a seriously hard hitter.

“Bernard would, I think, have to box a perfect fight to beat opponents such as [Vasquez, De Leon and Rafael Marquez] and 12 rounds is a long way to go when you cannot make a mistake.”

But so far Dunne hasn't had any slip-ups and his reputation has been growing with every fight.

“He is constantly improving,” added Houston. “In the last two fights he was looking really good, and in another 12 months I expect him to be even better. I think his people are doing the right thing by keeping him in Dublin and focusing on European-level fights for the next year or so.

“It makes sense for him to fight in Dublin, where he has such a passionate following. If the money was right to come to Vegas to fight someone like Ponce De Leon, then it would be something to consider.”

That shouldn't be a problem for Dunne. When you've come as close as he has to losing your dream, a few thousand miles seem pretty insignificant.

“I'd love to fight for a world title,” he says with his typically mischievous smile. “And I don't really mind which of the belt-holders it is and I'm not worried if I have to go to the US or anywhere for the chance.”

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**The Bernard Dunne-Kiko Martinez European title fight can be seen live on RTE.ie at 4:30 PM ET.

Unbeaten prospect Andy Lee will make his Irish debut against Brad Austin on the undercard.