

Lee Gets KO, Marches To Title Shot

Written by Ronan Keenan
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LIMERICK, Ireland – The county of Limerick has a reputation for producing tough characters. From hardy rugby players to underground criminals, the region boasts a long list of dangerous individuals, and middleweight prizefighter Andy Lee looks like being the latest addition to the roster.

In the first ever professional boxing show to be staged in the county, a capacity crowd of over 2,800 packed the University of Limerick Sports Arena to watch Lee improve his record to 15-0 (12) with a five round dismantling of Argentina's Alejandro Gustavo Falliga.

Since his stunning one-punch knockout of former world titlist Carl Daniels last year, Lee has drawn high praise from boxing observers, with many labeling him a future champion. Lee's affiliation with renowned trainer Emanuel Steward in the famous Kronk stable would intuitively heighten his chances of success.

As he walked toward the ring on Saturday, Lee radiated an air of confidence, towering above his cornermen while decked out in the same red and gold Kronk colors that have adorned the likes of Tommy Hearn and Milton McCrory.

Lee wasted little time in establishing his authority on the contest, claiming a position in the ring's center even before the opening bell, immediately forcing Falliga onto the defensive.

At 6'2 Lee enjoyed a three inch height advantage over his opponent, and the Irishman utilized his wide frame to spear Falliga with thudding southpaw rights. After tasting a few jabs the normally aggressive Buenos Aires native resigned himself to fighting in retreat, offering little offense save a few winging right hands.

Early in the second round Lee began to find the mark with his own counter right hook, compelling Falliga to hold tightly. But Lee managed to escape and connected with a right hand to the back of Falliga's head that resulted in the Argentinean throwing himself to the ground in a delayed and dramatic fashion. Falliga's exaggerated reaction to the foul seemed to reinforce Lee's assurance, and the southpaw attacked with a one-two combination that sent the off-balance Falliga to the canvas for a flash knockdown.

Lee suffered a minor cut above his right eye in the third, but he landed with increasing frequency and power as the round progressed. Even so, he displayed caution in refraining from following up on a visibly discomfited Falliga, but the clout in Lee's offense was striking.

"Every punch that Andy Lee is throwing has enormous power," observed former world flyweight titlist Dave McAuley. "Falliga realizes that if he gets caught with one of those shots it will put his lights out."

Lee turned his attention to Falliga's body in the fourth, landing with a series of right uppercuts

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that drew gasps from ringsiders.

“Falliga must be made of leather to absorb those punches,” remarked veteran broadcaster Jimmy Magee.

But at the end of the round Steward felt that his charge should adopt a more assertive approach.

“You’re giving him too much space,” said Steward.

“Yeah, but I’m cautious about walking into something silly,” replied Lee.

Nevertheless, the 2004 Olympian heeded his trainer’s advice and launched a hard straight left that knocked Falliga, 14-4-2 (4), to the canvas early in the fifth. The 25-year-old jumped to his feet, but seconds later another left cross sent him back down. Subsequently, an emboldened Lee finally unleashed a sustained series of punches that floored Falliga for the fourth and final time at 1:49 of the round.

“Falliga was very negative,” said Lee after the contest. “The cut unsettled me a little bit but I knew I would catch up with him.

“It was great to fight in Limerick. Hopefully I can fight for a world title here someday. It’s a great place and the city’s bad reputation is not deserved.”

Although Lee was born in London, his Irish parents moved back to their homeland in 1999 where the teenager made Limerick’s St. Francis Amateur Boxing Club his new home. Lee’s firm grasp of the basics and smooth style saw him capture a silver medal at the 2002 World Junior Amateur Championships, where he initially caught the eye of Steward.

Three years later Lee turned down a lucrative offer from the Irish Amateur Boxing Association to enter the paid ranks under Steward’s tutelage. The 23-year-old now lives with the Kronk Gym leader in Detroit and Steward’s regard of Lee is so high that the trainer momentarily left the training camp of world heavyweight titlist Wladimir Klitschko to be in Limerick for the weekend.

“Andy is on his way to the world championship,” predicted Steward. “By 2008 Lee will be champion of the world. Right now I’m negotiating with Bob Arum for the winner of the fight between [world middleweight champion] Kelly Pavlik and John Duddy to fight Andy Lee.”

To prepare for a battle with a fighter of Pavlik’s caliber, Lee will need to face opponents that offer more resistance than Falliga. His next outing against Brian Vera in Connecticut on a March 21st ESPN card will provide Lee with greater exposure, and hopefully a sterner test.