

Duddy Down, Not Out Of Pavlik Date

Written by Robert Mladinich
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The highly anticipated middleweight title fight between champion Kelly Pavlik of Youngstown, Ohio, and the extremely popular John Duddy, the native of Belfast, Northern Ireland, who has taken the New York and Irish boxing communities by storm, was all but signed and sealed for June 7th at Madison Square Garden.

On February 16, Pavlik held up his end of the bargain by defeating Jermain Taylor, from whom he took the title, in a rematch. All Duddy had to do was get past the unheralded but not untalented Walid Smichet, a Tunisian who fights out of Montreal, in their 10 round non-televvised bout that served as the prelude to the Wladimir Klitschko-Sultan Ibragimov heavyweight snoozer at Madison Square Garden on February 23rd.

The 28-year-old Duddy, now 24-0 (17 KOS), managed to beat Smichet, now 17-4-3 (13 KOS), by majority decision, but he looked terrible doing it. Not only did he turn in what most people are saying is the worst performance of his seemingly meteoric career, his handsome visage was badly cut in three places.

A deep gash on his left eyelid required 20 stitches. Two other angry cuts, one on his right eye and another on his left cheekbone did not require sutures.

As if the cuts weren't bad enough, there were periods in the fight where Duddy was hit with five and six punches at a time.

"I'm disappointed with my performance, but I'm glad to have squeaked out a win," said a dejected Duddy.

"I should have knocked him out in the first or second round," said the classy Smichet, who ran out of gas as the fight wore on. "Look at my face and look at his and you tell me who won."

To the credit of Smichet, as well as his team which includes brothers Howard and Otis Grant and Bob Miller, they never made disparaging remarks about Duddy. Nor did they rail about any injustices related to the decision. They thought they won, as did some fans in attendance, but they accepted the verdict with the dignity that has long defined them.

"I've never seen John get hit with so many punches before," said Jay Mwamba, the boxing writer for the Irish Echo who has covered nearly all of Duddy's fights. "It didn't even seem like him in there. We always knew John was tough and could take a punch, but I was very surprised by how poor his performance was.

"I've seen John get hit with one-twos before, but never with one-two-three-fours," Mwamba continued. "It was like pop, pop, pop, pop. When it was announced that he won, I heard a section of the crowd boo, which is something you never hear at a John Duddy fight."

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One judge scored the bout a 95-95 draw, while the other two saw it 98-92 for the Irishman.

You can bet that while some in the crowd were booing the verdict, many were silently applauding Duddy's courage which has never been in question. He showed an equal amount of heart when his face was cut badly against Yory Boy Campas, but he managed to hang on to win a unanimous decision in that one too.

Right up until the day of the Smichet fight, Bob Arum of Top Rank Inc. had been negotiating with Irish Ropes, Duddy's promotional company, and Madison Square Garden to stage what would have been the Pavlik-Duddy fistic extravaganza in June.

Expecting a Duddy victory against Smichet, Arum had even secured permission from K2 Promotions, the promoters of the February 23rd show, to announce that fight after the main event.

Like so many other observers, Arum was surprised by the listlessness of Duddy's performance, but he believes a Pavlik-Duddy matchup will still be big box office later in the year.

"John didn't look good, but it is understandable," said Arum. "He was looking past Smichet to Kelly. John is a much better fighter than he showed, and he will have the opportunity down the line to prove that against Kelly."

Arum would like to see Duddy's wounds heal, and then have one more fight before meeting Pavlik in November. And even though he is grateful that the Duddy-Smichet fight was not televised because some fans might have been put off by Duddy's weak performance, he still believes that majority of Duddy's fans will remain loyal to him.

One has to wonder just what went wrong. While the obvious choice of reasons is that he was looking past Smichet, Duddy has always been extremely focused and poised and respectful of other fighters. As talented and tough as he is, he has never slacked in training no matter who he was preparing for.

For this fight he even brought two very tough sparring partners to his North Carolina camp. The hard-punching Antwun Echols had fought three times for a world title, and Ross Thompson had gone the distance with Pavlik.

Some people blame Don Turner, who took over Duddy's training duties from Harry Keitt. Turner has worked with 19 world champions, but has always had no shortage of detractors who thought he talked better than he walked.

Still others believe it could just have been a bad night for Duddy. They are quick to point out that a fighter with Duddy's well-chronicled desire and determination should be able to rebound from what should be nothing more than a temporary setback.

"It isn't fair to count John out," said IBF junior welterweight champion Paul "Magic Man" Malignaggi, who has sparred with Duddy on numerous occasions. "A lot of things could have

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been on his mind. We haven't seen the last of him."

One person who concurs with that assessment is "Big" George Mitchell, the extraordinary cut man who kept Duddy in both the Campas and Smichet fights. He said the cut that required stitches was so bad, he had to work triple time to keep Duddy in the fight.

Several sportswriters and ringsiders later told him that the cut on the left eye was one of the worst they'd ever seen. Big George does not disagree.

"It wasn't John's best performance, but everyone has one of those fights on their road to the title," he said. "What people have to realize is that John stayed in that fight and got stronger as the fight wore on."

After the fight, Duddy was not feeling all that jovial so the avuncular Big George, who stands 6'7" and weighs about 280 solid pounds, thought it was a good time to tell Duddy the truth about himself.

"I told him about the difference between a tiger and a lion," said Big George. "A tiger is ferocious, but if he gets into a fight and knows he's going to lose he gives up. But a lion never gives up. John showed that he has the heart of a lion. That is going to take him a long way, no matter who he is in against."