

Junior Witter Craves Hatton Clash

Written by Ronan Keenan
Monday, 05 May 2008 19:00

The ring at St Thomas' Boys and Girls Club in Wincobank, Sheffield, England has seen better days, but the warning sign adjacent to its steps remains as striking as ever:

Boxing Can Seriously

Damage Your Health

But Teaches Self Discipline

And Gets You Fit.

Smoking, Drinking

And Drugs Just

Damage Your Health.

There are plans to redevelop the building that has seen professional world champions train alongside local kids, and owner Brendan Ingle is keen to preserve the gym's unique culture.

"Once it is all built, I'll die happy," says the 66-year-old Irishman who has guided the careers of standouts such as Naseem Hamed and Johnny Nelson. Ingle is congenial as he talks about the gym's history, but his tone changes when he arrives at the topic of his latest world champion.

"I am telling you now; Junior Witter would knock out Floyd Mayweather Jr. I have no doubt about that whatsoever," he insists. "I'm not a gambling man, but if you gave me 100-1 odds about Witter knocking Mayweather out I would have £3,000 on it."

Witter claimed the WBC junior welterweight title in 2006 with a decision victory over DeMarcus Corley, but the Englishman was forced to wait six years and record 18 victories since his previous title shot against Zab Judah in 2000. A negative display in that lackluster Showtime televised encounter earned Witter a reputation as a boring defensive boxer, but Junior has served his time fighting on undercards and has displayed an undeniable talent.

Ingle still feels Witter has been deprived the recognition a world champion deserves and clearly won't rest easy until the Bradford native is acknowledged as the best fighter in his division. To achieve that, Witter must overcome Manchester's beloved Ricky Hatton in what would be a colossal all-English showdown. Paradoxically, long-term animosity between the two titlists may prevent the fight from materializing.

"Hatton has avoided fighting me for years and he's still avoiding me," Witter told The Sunday Times. "Do I think I could beat Ricky Hatton? Of course I do. I have no doubt at all and he

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knows it, too.”

But Hatton claims to have other reasons for denying Witter a career-high payday. At the 2006 BBC Sports Personality of the Year awards, Hatton and an assortment of British boxers, including Witter, were called up on stage in recognition of their fistic achievements, but a feeling of camaraderie was not universal.

“I went on the stage and shook hands with Joe [Calzaghe], Enzo [Maccarinelli] and Junior,” recalls Hatton. “[Witter] then leant over to me and went, ‘one day’. I just thought, ‘you’ve just pissed [your opportunity] up against the wall there.’ I was half contemplating [the fight]. It was a moment where we had all had a good year and out of respect I shook his hand and then he looked at me and whispered that.”

The ill-feeling between the pair can be traced back to 2000 when both fighters were promoted by Frank Warren. Following victory over Jon Thaxton, Hatton was in the middle of a post-fight interview when Witter decided to make his voice heard and vociferously challenged the Mancunian. Warren, sensing a potential blockbuster, built up the rivalry by regularly featuring Witter on Hatton’s undercards. After a few years the promoter wrote the bout into Ricky’s contract, much to Witter’s delight, but Team Hatton declined to exercise the clause.

There was no public outcry when the fight never came to fruition since Witter, who maintained a relatively small fanbase, had yet to defeat a world-rated opponent, while Hatton continued his march to stardom. But now that Hatton has had his advance stifled by Floyd Mayweather and Witter has continued to build a profile, a matchup between the two seems a natural progression.

“It is clear that Hatton seriously dislikes Witter, but that is not a good enough reason to deny the best all-British fight of the present generation,” says Ron Lewis of TimesOnline. “Certainly opinion within boxing seems to be turning against Hatton on this issue.”

Witter’s unorthodox Naseem Hamed-esque style, featuring a blend of speed and knockout power has seen the 34-year-old accrue up a 36-1-2 (21) record since turning pro in 1997. The Ring magazine rates him as the number one contender to Hatton’s title, but a series of inconsistent displays have characterized his career.

His overly defensive approach against Judah has been hard to play down, and even though Witter took the fight on nine day’s notice he received little sympathy from the boxing community.

Wrote Graham Houston in January 2007: “If you ask a U.S. fan about Witter he will probably say: ‘Oh, yeah, the guy that ran away from Zab Judah for 12 rounds.’”

“[At the time] I was struggling like mad financially,” Witter reveals. “When the [Judah] shot came about it meant a really big payday. I thought ‘if I don’t take it, I’ve got nothing’. All my savings were gone and all my loans were on top of me. As far as the fight went, I didn’t have enough experience. I wasn’t even British champion and I had nine days to prepare for a shot at Judah, one of the best fighters in the world. I lost on points, but I learned so much. It taught me that I

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deserved to be at that level.”

Witter partially repaired his image in 2005 during his American debut when he twice floored the granite-jawed Lovemore Ndou on route to a decision win on the Bernard Hopkins-Howard Eastman undercard. Subsequent notable points victories over future WBA titlist Andreas Kotelnik and DeMarcus Corley featured little action, but his most recent outing against Vivian Harris last September was Witter’s most impressive win to date.

Witter dominated the bout throughout, punching from a variety of angles before a stunning left hook sent Harris crumpling to the canvas for a seventh round knockout. According to Brian Doogan, Witter’s victory was a “stunningly convincing performance...combining power and authority with the elusiveness that is his forte.”

Witter must continue to produce such eye-catching displays if the clamor for a showdown with Hatton is to continue. On Saturday he will once again appear on the Showtime network when he defends against the unbeaten Timothy Bradley in Nottingham, England. Bradley was offered the contest when Witter’s proposed bout against the highly-regarded Demetrius Hopkins evaporated, but the Englishman believes Bradley is an adequate replacement.

“I was shocked when Hopkins pulled out and it was very frustrating because I had been training for 12 weeks,” says Witter. “But Bradley has shown a lot of bottle for taking this fight and I give him respect. Bradley has got a great knockout ratio as his record [21-0 (11)] suggests, so I expect him to be aggressive and he will come to fight, which is just how I like them. (Editor’s Note: Junior is Boxrec busted here. Bradley’s knockout ratio is 52%, hardly earth or jaw shattering.

“After seeing me box in front of a massive TV audience both in the UK and the States, once I do a job on Bradley even more people will be asking ‘Why won’t Ricky Hatton fight Junior Witter?’”

A dazzling performance from Witter is never guaranteed and his inconsistent approach to fighting is mirrored by an enigmatic personality. At times, Witter appears to spend too much time thinking in the ring, which is probably unsurprising given that he delayed his entry into the pro ranks to complete a qualification in computer service engineering. Moreover, his penchant for flashy ring attire and attention-grabbing hairstyles contrasts with his self-confessed fondness for Star Trek and Sudoku.

But Witter’s diverse personality fits in perfectly with the ethos that Brendan Ingle instils in fighters at his Sheffield gym.

“We’ve got a lot of Asian lads and black lads, a lot of mixed race, a lot of white kids at the gym,” explains the trainer.

“We’ve got a great selection and if you go into an area where there’s only whites and you’re Asian and boxing the local kid, before you get to the ring they will call you lots of names, they will do everything. [But here] the Asian kid turns around, shakes their hand and says ‘thanks for buying a ticket and coming to watch me.’ The kid then goes and wins and then shakes the guy’s

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hand on the way out and says ‘thanks very much for supporting me.’”