

Hatton Aims For Ending Unlike Naseem Hamed's

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Ricky Hatton's December defeat by Floyd Mayweather could mark a watershed in the Briton's career, or herald an unravelling.

Failing against the world's premier pound-for-pound fighter is no denigration of Hatton's fighting ability, but losing an unbeaten record amid a cauldron of hype can leave permanent mental scars. Just ask some of Hatton's compatriots.

British boxers have historically struggled during transatlantic visits, while their arrivals have generally been considered over-hyped by a sceptical U.S. audience.

The most recent high-profile Brit to wilt under the bright American lights was the mercurial Naseem Hamed. Like Hatton, the Sheffield native was considered to be at the top of his game when he ventured away from home to appear live on HBO against Kevin Kelley at Madison Square Garden.

Both Kelley and Hatton's debut opponent, Luis Collazo, shared the distinction of being current or former world titlists, helping to attract a solid U.S. viewership, but neither was deemed capable of damaging the British visitors.

The Hamed-Kelley featherweight showdown in 1997 ultimately produced moments of thrilling excitement, but did little to highlight Naseem's vaunted Ali-like skills, with sportswriter Tim Smith likening the contest to a "tough-man competition".

Just as Collazo came surprisingly close to derailing Hatton's celebrated arrival in Boston, Kelley was within a whisker of wrecking Hamed's party, flooring Naz on three occasions before losing by fourth round knockout.

Naseem's subsequent three ventures to the U.S. were against the sturdy but unthreatening trio of Wayne McCullough, Cesar Soto and Augie Sanchez. Despite prevailing by wide margins, Hamed failed to impress and was duly outclassed when he faced the universally acclaimed Marco Antonio Barrera.

Hamed returned from Las Vegas with a bruised ego and sought the safer confines of London to stage his comeback against the obscure Manuel Calvo. But an uninspired Naz looked disinterested against the limited Spaniard, winning a dreary points decision that saw much of the crowd exit the ExCel Arena before the final bell.

Wrote Boxing Monthly editor Glyn Leach: "By the time the Hamed gravy train hit Vegas for the Barrera fight, it was as bloated, dysfunctional and delusional as any road trip undertaken by Elvis and the Memphis Mafia. Hamed's final fight, against Manuel Calvo, 10 months after the Barrera defeat, was the fistic equivalent of the infamous concert in which an intoxicated, slurring Presley forgot the words to his songs – a stumbling performance that was only a grotesque

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parody of far better days.”

Will the same fate befall Hatton as he looks to impress his hometown fans at the City of Manchester stadium against Juan Lazcano this Saturday? There is credible evidence to suggest the 29-year-old Hatton peaked the night he ripped the 140-pound title from Kostya Tszyu in a grueling battle three years ago.

Face-first aggressors like Hatton traditionally reach their fistic zenith at an earlier stage than more defensively minded boxers. Fighters from heavyweight champion Joe Frazier down to 130-pound warrior Jeff Fenech were arguably on the slide before hitting 30 as their bodies struggled to maintain the frantic pace of their once customary assaults.

Brian Doogan of *The Ring* accurately observed that the version of Hatton who labored against Collazo and 18-fight novice Juan Urango had less ferocity and energy than the whirlwind that used to set alight Manchester's MEN Arena.

A left hook to the body brought Hatton victory over Jose Luis Castillo in his next outing, but given the Mexican's previous and subsequent torturous exertions to make weight, the win may have flattered to deceive.

Regardless, more than a few respected observers gave Hatton a legitimate chance of upsetting the "Pretty Boy". Yet as writer Richard Williams noted in *The Guardian*, Hatton's performance against Mayweather was "at times like watching a competition between Picasso and an enthusiastic kid with an aerosol paint can."

Whether Hatton's defeat was a result of physical or mental flaws, or just Mayweather's brilliance, his parallels to Hamed momentarily remain resolute.

But Hamed is not the only British fighter to see his career crumble after a well-publicized Stateside setback. Barry McGuigan brought his crowd pleasing style and a plethora of expectation to Las Vegas in 1986, but the Irish-born champion couldn't handle the searing Nevada heat and lost to the journeyman Steve Cruz. McGuigan stayed away from the ring for two years and retired after four more fights in Britain.

Lloyd Honeyghan did the unthinkable and heroically stopped the lauded welterweight champion Donald Curry in Vegas. But on his return to the U.S. the Londoner would lose his title to Marlon Starling, effectively marking his demise as a fighter.

Randy Turpin sensationally defied predictions and upset Ray Robinson for the middleweight championship in London, but two months later the American would exact revenge at the Polo Grounds in New York. Turpin made one more U.S. appearance, losing to Bobo Olsen in 1953 in his final world title challenge.

Ken Buchanan lost his world lightweight title to Roberto Duran in controversial fashion at the Garden in 1972, and despite rebounding with victories over Carlos Ortiz and Jim Watt, the Scot could never regain the championship.

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But Hatton has no problem in breaking the mould from conventional boxing traditions. He routinely piles on pounds between fights, downing pints of Guinness and fatty foods, while indulging in a greasy fry-up on the morning of a fight. Yet he still manages to enter the ring in top physical shape.

Importantly, Hatton has endured a slump in form before, looking jaded against Dennis Pedersen and Carlos Vilches prior to sparkling against Ray Oliveira and Tszyu. And despite the crushing defeat against Mayweather, Hatton is still recognized as the 140-pound world champion.

Moreover, no British fighter has retained their star power on returning from America quite like Hatton has. Ticket sales for Saturday are projected to reach 50,000, while British broadcaster Sky Sports is expecting that an 'At Home with the Hattons' reality show will help attract a stellar pay-per-view audience for what is effectively a tune-up against the weathered Lazcano.

Last week Hatton stated that his new motivation is to prevent a Hamed-like ending to his career. "Naz had his comeback fight which wasn't one of his best and we never saw him again," he told the Daily Mail. "I don't want the memories of my career to be put on the back burner because people say: 'The minute he got beat he was never the same'."

To ensure that, he must overcome an ostensibly arduous battle with the weight of expectation and history.