

Duddy Reminds Us, He's Still 24-0

Written by Ron Borges

Tuesday, 24 June 2008 19:00

John Duddy could scarcely believe the things he was hearing.

Had he not just had the same feeling while standing under the bright lights that illuminate Madison Square Garden that he'd felt 22 years ago in Derry, when he first had his hand raised in the middle of a boxing ring?

Surely his hand had been raised again, had it not?

Indeed so but it no longer felt that way because somehow people kept talking in the hours and days that followed as if he'd lost, even though he'd won. How could that be?

"I couldn't believe it," the undefeated Irish middleweight said recently from his training camp in Miami, where he was preparing for a Saturday night return to the ring in Boston against one Charlie Howe. "The way people were talking it was as if I'd been beaten.

"We all get knocked back a bit but my last fight wasn't the tragedy it supposedly was. I'm still 24-0. People who have never been in this position before have expectations not based on reality. It may not have been the prettiest – it certainly wasn't – but the fact of the matter is I won."

He also lost, which was what caused so many critics to confound him. On Feb. 23 Duddy (24-0, 17 KO) was one sharp victory away from a dream, one clean win over a supposed non-entity named Walid Smichet and he would be in position to challenge Kelly Pavlik on HBO for a lot of money and for the dream he's carried with him since he first entered a gym back home in Ireland at the age of five.

One more night where his hand was raised in the center of the ring and John Duddy would fight for a world championship. In the end his hand was raised but it was covered in his own blood, just like his face. He won but he lost, at least for the moment.

Lost a world title shot. Lost a chance at a dream. Lost on a night when he'd won. That's boxing, too.

By the time Duddy was through brawling with Smichet (17-4-3), he had a slice taken out of his eyelid that made it look like Smichet must have come to the arena not wearing boxing gloves but carrying a sand wedge. Or a hack saw.

Promoter Bob Arum, who handles Pavlik, announced immediately that Duddy would not be ready in time to challenge Pavlik for the planned May title fight and quickly moved on to a British journeyman named Gary Lockett, who didn't carry the same cachet as the popular Duddy but served the purpose Arum had in mind. Pavlik needed less than nine minutes to get rid of him.

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Duddy, meanwhile, heard people all but writing him off. They criticized his defense, which frankly has often enough been the subject of a missing person's report. They even criticized his offense. Most of all, they seemed intent on making him feel like he'd lost on a night in which he'd battled his own blood as well as his opponent and won.

"That's the sport of boxing," said a philosophical Duddy, who will return to the ring in Boston with a new trainer in his corner. Don Turner, Evander Holyfield's former chief second, was dismissed after the win over Smichet, replaced by Pat Burns, who had suffered a similar fate after leading Jermain Taylor to the middleweight title and wins over Bernard Hopkins.

Everything is cyclical in boxing it seems, including both firings and bad nights. Duddy claims he had the latter in part from his own failures and in part from a bad battle plan. His critics say he was exposed, shown to be a club fighter with serious flaws that were revealed by a less than formidable opponent.

Howe (17-4-2, 9 KO) is not expected to answer any of the questions Smichet raised however. He was knocked cold in his last outing by former Contender reality TV product Joey Gilbert in one round and is being imported to Boston to serve a similar purpose. He is the boxing equivalent of a Dale Carnegie course for Duddy. He's here to boost his self-esteem.

Duddy doesn't see it that way of course but then again he doesn't believe his victory over Smichet was anything more than a plasma-filled learning experience. To say he is an optimist would be an understatement.

"That's the sport of boxing," Duddy said. "Things happen and you got to get on with it.

"I got cut. That's life. We all get knocked back a bit. So be it. What's next? Every fight is a test. Every fight is a chance to improve and strengthen your weaknesses.

"I fought a completely wrong fight. I tried to beat the guy at his own game and I struggled. I started boxing once I knew the cut was pretty serious and I couldn't just stand in there and be hard headed any more but I dug myself a hole. The cut made it very difficult for me. But I won the fight."

In the end, that's all that matters to Duddy, who has always had that one goal in mind. Win the fight. It's what first got him involved in boxing and what has kept him here all these years. Win the fight and the rest will take care of itself.

"My first fight came when I was seven." Duddy recalled. "When the referee held me hand up and the crowd cheered I knew this was for me.

"Boxing is not like other sports. One person got me in that hole me last fight – me! It was all on me. The crowd can cheer or boo all it wants but at the end of the day I have to do the job.

"The critic's job is to look at things harshly. My job is to learn from my mistakes and move on. I was very disappointed in myself but I won the fight."

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In the end, that is what Duddy has chosen to cling to. He has refused to focus on having lost a title shot but rather that he won again, with blood streaming into his eye. He won when nothing seemed to be going right. In the end, he says, that's what boxing is really all about.

It's about winning when things are not going right. Winning when you don't seem to have the right answers. Winning when your weaknesses are glaring and your strengths seem fallible.

So he took that victory to Florida with him and began to work with Burns, who is well known as a stern taskmaster and a no-nonsense fundamentalist. He has pushed Duddy to improve his conditioning and his defense. The latter has at times been nowhere to be found with Duddy and its absence has in some ways been part of his popularity.

Some guys come to the arena to box. Duddy comes to fight. He is there to come forward, not retreat. He comes to throw when he can and then catch what he must to throw again.

That may not be a formula for long-term survival in boxing but, as he'll be the first to tell you, so far it's made him 24-0 and still in hot pursuit of a dream.

"At the end of the day, I want to fight," Duddy said. "I'm trying to improve myself as a fighter. Stevie Wonder could tell you what my weakness is. I have to be realistic. But I'm working hard and trying to do some things I've never done before."

Some might say ducking should be included on that list but Duddy believes he is a better defensive fighter than he seemed against Smichet. Judging by the way he looked at the end of the night, you would have to hope so.

"This kind of thing happens in all walks of life," Duddy said of the victory that looked to so many outsiders like defeat. "This is a hard job but I keep at it because I'm good at it.

"This is an opportunity to live a dream. I never would have believed in my wildest dreams I'd come over here and be as popular as I've become in America.

"I've been working hard to improve things. Hopefully Saturday night in Boston you'll see that improvement."

That's what the world will be looking for Saturday night. They'll be looking for improvement. So will John Duddy but more than anything he'll be looking for the only thing he believes matters.

He'll be looking to win.