

Irish Silver Medallist Ponders Going Pro

Written by Ronan Keenan
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As Zaur Antia arrived in Beijing to aid preparations with the Irish boxing team at the Olympic Games, his wife and youngest son left their adopted home of Ireland for a well-earned vacation on the scenic coast of their motherland. But the picturesque Black Sea port of Poti in Georgia quickly turned into a brutal battlefield as a series of bombardments from the Russian air artillery devastated the town.

After learning of the news, the former Georgian boxing champion desperately tried to make contact with his family and after a few hours he ascertained that Nona and Georghe were safe, having fled to the South Ossetian mountains to escape the bombing. When an anxious Zaur finally reached Nona, her first words to him were “I saw Kenny Egan win!”

The Olympic silver medal success of light heavyweight Kenny Egan has transcended the Irish sporting landscape, providing the island with a refreshing respite from thoughts of economic recession and unending rainfall. Coupled with the uplifting story of Zaur and the bronze medal acquisitions by Darren Sutherland and Paddy Barnes, the latest Irish amateur boxing chronicle is devoid of the usual gripes of underperformance and inadequate funding.

Yet the issue of an exacerbating scoring system – in which three of five judges have to press a computer scoring pad within one second for a point to count – remains to the fore, with many onlookers deeming Egan unfortunate to lose a seemingly obtainable gold medal to China’s Zhang Xiaoping.

Regardless, Egan’s journey to the medal podium has been infused with heartening anecdotes, and the venture is expected to continue into the choppy waters of the professional game.

Born in the Clondalkin area of Dublin at the height of a period of mass unemployment and emigration 26 years ago, Egan honed his pugilistic skills at the Neilstown boxing club – a community center that was transformed into a makeshift gym for a couple of hours three nights a week.

The southpaw Egan soon developed a slick style that helped him capture his first national senior title at 18. After securing government funding, Egan turned his sights to Olympic glory, but despite high expectations he failed to make the grade for Athens.

“When I didn’t get there I went home and cried on my pillow for a night or two,” he recalls.

Egan was then expected to pick up a medal at the World Championships in Chicago last year, but a lacklustre performance saw him eliminated at the final 16 stage. Thereafter, whispers began to circulate throughout the boxing community that Egan lacked the guile to succeed on the world stage.

But a rededication to his craft and the help of coaches Billy Walsh and Zaur ultimately paid

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dividends as Egan qualified for Beijing last April.

"I gave it all up: holidays, days out or trips out, all that kind of crap," reveals Egan, who was working as a waiter at a hotel as recently as two years ago, cleaning plates and tables into the night before emerging for his daily dawn run.

Along with the tuition of his coaches, Egan has benefited from time spent with sports psychologist Gerry Hussey and golfing sensation Pádraig Harrington.

"I won't take any credit for what Kenny has achieved," said Harrington, who earlier this month became the first European in 78 years to win the PGA Championship. "Boxers put in an incredible amount of work and it's wonderful to see it paying off."

At the Beijing tournament Egan demonstrated his defensive prudence, conceding just seven points in his first four contests, while punctuating his victories with head-snapping left crosses. But the final bout against the unheralded Zhang proved to be a frustrating experience for Egan.

In the opening frame the Irishman found himself with a surprising two point deficit. After Egan apparently landed a straight left, it was the Chinese who was rewarded on the scoreboard, while a looping righthand that scraped Egan's headguard somehow registered with the judges.

Realizing that he was behind, Egan was forced to abandon his usual calm approach in a desperate attempt to attain seemingly invisible points.

"Right hook then left hand!" screamed Zaur before the final round. Yet Egan's aggressive approach didn't impress the judges and the rugged Zhang was triumphant on a score of 11-7.

The reluctance of the adjudicators to reward clean jabs and bodyshots regularly makes the amateur sport an unattractive and treacherous spectacle, with only straight crosses to the head being recognized as adequate punches.

"If you watched Sunday's fight without looking at the score you'd have thought that Kenny won," said middleweight contender Andy Lee, who competed at the 2004 Olympics.

"Kenny was the aggressor, was throwing [in] more volume and landing lovely left hands and right hooks," added 1992 Olympic gold medallist Michael Carruth.

"They gave Zhang points for shadowboxing," claimed junior featherweight contender Bernard Dunne.

Regardless, the Olympic spirit was preserved as Zhang and Egan willingly expressed respect for the decision, while accepting their medals with grace. Zhang, who defeated highly-regarded opponents from Russia and Kazakhstan during the competition, fought a tactical battle and played to the scoring system by circling throughout and limiting his offence to long righthands.

"There's nothing I can do about [the result]," said Egan. "A score is a score and I just have to

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settle for silver. I'm disgusted but that's how things go; that's sport. He threw a few shots there where he hit my elbow and I could hear the Chinese going bananas. I obviously knew he was getting a score. But he boxed well himself. You can't take it away from him. He's Olympic champion and I'm not."

Egan must now decide whether the shadowy dealings of the professional game will be any friendlier than the politics plaguing the amateur scene.

The Evening Herald reports that Egan may enter talks with George Foreman about the prospect of a professional career, and with a watertight defence and thudding right jab the Irishman would draw many similarities to Winky Wright. That prospect may not get promoters overly excited, but for Egan the additional currency of any pro contract would be tempting.

He has reportedly amassed nearly 200,000 euro after ten years under government sponsorship; a figure that is pittance compared to what professionals earn for a similar training regime.

"I'm on the bones of my arse now," he jests. "Anybody that wants to sponsor me a car or an apartment for a year, they're more than welcome.

"I haven't signed anything yet or even thought about my future. I'm captain of the Irish team and I'm proud to be. In four years I could still be captain."

Still, when Egan arrives home he can look forward to picking up winnings from the sportsbook. Before the Games he bet on himself at 6/1 to win a medal. He will collect 600 euro.

But Olympic achievement can surpass a monetary value.

"It's a great thing for Clondalkin," says Egan's mother Maura. "People always say bad things about the place and it's great now that people can see there is a lot of good going on here. It shows somebody from Clondalkin can set themselves a target, then go and do whatever it is they want."

As Egan and Zaur made their way from the ring last Sunday words were sparse; their minds contemplating their newfound positions and the fickle nature of what might have been.

"That's it," remarked Egan. "That's the end of the fairytale, for now."