

Boxing Learns From Golf

Written by Ronan Keenan

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With the recent trend of unappealing undercards garnering so much attention, it's anticipated that boxing promoters will now focus on producing noteworthy shows instead of main events and mismatches.

As the Ultimate Fighting Championship has industriously sought to make a myriad of quality matchups on its cards, MMA fans have responded in kind by taking their seats when the first fight of the night begins and cheering relentlessly throughout.

It is arguable that the supporters of both sports are different, but when the UFC came to Dublin, Ireland last month, a sizeable proportion of the attendance was composed of genuine boxing supporters. Tickets sold out so quickly and the crowd created such a wild atmosphere during the ten-fight card that UFC officials promised to bring their show back to Dublin on a regular basis.

"The Irish crowd was unbelievable," Wayne McCullough, a former 122-pound boxing world titlist and now a UFC ambassador, told TheSweetScience. "But most of the people there were boxing fans, even though it's a completely different sport than boxing. The fans just turned out to see good fights."

With the appetite of Irish fight fans whetted by the UFC extravaganza, boxing promoter Brian Peters has responded with a packed show of his own. His March 21 event at Dublin's O2 Arena is headlined by Bernard Dunne's challenge of WBA 122-pound titlist Ricardo Cordoba, but the undercard features some unexpected attractions.

The show will include two of the biggest names in Irish boxing: amateur standouts Kenny Egan and Katie Taylor.

The amateur scene in Ireland has produced a variety of fighters that have garnered the type of mainstream attention that would make any promoter envious.

Nearly 80 percent of the country's television viewership watched Egan narrowly lose in the light heavyweight final of the Beijing Olympics, while Taylor has received copious amounts of publicity for winning gold at the female world amateur boxing championships last year.

Egan resisted the temptation to follow fellow Olympian Darren Sutherland into the paid ranks, even turning down an offer from Shelly Finkel. But the Dubliner has still been presented with numerous corporate sponsorship opportunities and his profile has risen to the extent that even his love life made front page news last October.

Not long ago the prospect of a Bernard Dunne world title challenge would have been enough to satisfy Irish fans' fistic hunger, but the cutback in the population's disposable income and threat from other fighting forms may have spurred Peter's idea of putting Dunne, Egan, Taylor and

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Beijing bronze medallist Paddy Barnes on the same event.

Amateur boxing organizations previously wanted to keep a clear distance from the professional game, viewing the paid ranks as a completely separate sport that required a different mentality and fighting style.

So the Amateur Irish Boxing Association had to change their rules to allow amateur boxers to compete on the upcoming pro-am show, but the organization believes the outcome will aid the burgeoning profile of the sport.

“This will be the first time we’ve done this,” admitted AIBA vice-president Tommy Murphy last week. “Under our rules over the past years this couldn’t have happened. But if we don’t change we’ll be left behind and at the moment amateur boxing in Ireland is on a high.”

“It’s amazing how things have changed,” adds McCullough, an Irish silver medallist at the 1992 Olympic Games who now lives in Las Vegas. “When I was an amateur we weren’t even supposed to spar with pro fighters, now they’re on the same card.”

The top Irish amateur boxers receive sizeable funding from the government, but there is the possibility that the experience of fighting in front of a 10,000 crowd at a professional show will dull their hunger for the amateur game.

“The amateur boxers will certainly see the difference between the amateur and pro games in March,” reckons McCullough. “But they are both completely different. Amateur boxing is so quick paced, while the pro game is like a marathon. Fighting on the card will give the amateurs a taste of being a pro, but that doesn’t mean they’ll like it.

“Egan, Barnes and Taylor are serious world-class boxers and I think they’re dedicated to amateur boxing. But personally, I hated amateur boxing. I was sparring pro fighters for six or seven years before I turned pro. I couldn’t wait. The computerized system takes the fun away from throwing body shots and aggression. It’s all about one punch at a time now.”

But that is unlikely to deter fans from flocking to the O2 Arena on March 21.

“The pro-am show is a great idea, but it’s a big risk,” says McCullough. “But it’s a risk that should pay off. Irish boxing people love amateur or pro fights and the event will bring good attention to the amateur sport.”

But Peters is not content to just have the amateur stars box on his show, he wants to match them in notable fights, and that means somehow convincing Egan’s conqueror in Beijing, China’s Zhang Xiaoping, to make the trip to Ireland.

The dealings may blur the line between amateur and pro boxing, but ultimately everyone should be happy as Peters can look forward to increased ticket sales while the AIBA will hope the event can satiate the amateur fighters’ desire for the big time, and convince them to stay in the headgear until 2012.