

TSS Scouting Report: Michael Jennings

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Michael Jennings has an interesting view on the upside of a victory over Miguel Cotto on Saturday night. "Hopefully, if I beat Cotto, it will be great publicity for the band," he says of the punk music group The Shoks, for which he is the drummer.

While Jennings is capable of hitting the right notes, he is not one for banging the publicity drum. Throughout the build-up to his contest with Cotto for the vacant WBO welterweight title in New York, the Englishman has carried himself in an understated and deferential manner.

"When I learned I was fighting at Madison Square Garden, I thought: 'Bloomin' hell', but I have tried to not let it go to my head. If I pull it off, I want a big fight after that, a payday," says the 31-year-old.

Jennings has been shown little respect by the odds-makers, who have him listed as high as an 8/1 underdog. This assessment is largely founded on the fact that his record of 34 wins with 16 knockouts against one loss has been accumulated against mediocre opposition.

Despite being a technically proficient boxer, the prevailing opinion is that Cotto will be too powerful for Jennings and will systematically dismantle the Brit. Many liken the matchup to Gary Lockett's weak challenge of Kelly Pavlik last June, in which the Welshman was thrice forced to his knees en route to a third round stoppage defeat.

"Jennings is quiet, humble and respectful but a more dedicated pro would be hard to find," says Danny Flexen of the British publication Boxing News. "Unfortunately, like Lockett, Jennings has spent far too long treading water at domestic level, all the while safe-guarding his undeserved WBO ranking.

"He cannot be considered a top 10 welterweight at world level. Some would say, with Kell Brook in such sparkling form, that he may not even be the best 147-pounder in Britain."

"I think that Jennings is a nice, stylish boxer who moves well, but his problem is that he lacks punching power," adds veteran boxing writer Graham Houston of Fightwriter.com. "He simply looks outgunned by Cotto."

While stateside observers habitually like to question the resolve of visiting British fighters, it would seem unmerited to downplay Jennings's heart given how much character he has shown outside the ring.

Growing up, his small birthplace of Chorley in Lancashire was host to a variety of threats, but he was shielded from the swarming dangers by an unshakable focus that saw him emerge healthy and unscathed from the perils that left others desolate. His brother died nine years ago of a heroin overdose and the devastating effects of the drug are still prevalent in Jennings's life today. But the experiences have spurred him to make admirable efforts in assisting the stricken

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of his hometown.

“A couple of my mates are still on [heroin]. I don't like seeing people like that so, if I can help in any way to get them on the straight and narrow, I will,” he told The Guardian. “I've opened a few drug-rehab centres, and I've raised money for St Katherine's Hospice in Chorley. If I'm asked, I am happy to do anything to help with the fight against drugs and knife crime.”

The narcotic temptations presented to the teenage Jennings were obstructed by a near-manic obsession with boxing; a devotion that saw candy and ice-cream disregarded, while the idea of watching sports unrelated to pugilism seemed inane.

“I've been one-track about my boxing,” he acknowledges. “I can't stand sitting about watching sport. I was never into football, although in my family they all love it. About the only sport I'll watch is boxing.”

Whether inside the ring or out, Jennings goes about his business with restraint, content to let others indulge in life's extravagances. But his unassuming attitude has won him the admiration of Chorley and even a British rock star.

“I'm super proud of the lad,” revealed the former lead singer of the Stone Roses, Ian Brown. “I met him when he was fighting for the British title and he said he'd be a world champion and I believed him. When [Jennings used one of Brown's songs for his entrance music last year] it was probably one of the proudest things that have ever happened to me.”

It is conceivable that the occasion of a big fight in front of Cotto's partisan Puerto Rican fans at the Garden will perturb a reserved character like Jennings, but the Brit seemed upbeat after meeting his opponent in front of the American media last month.

“Going out to New York and meeting Cotto at the press conference has given me confidence,” he declares. “Before you fight someone you tend to build them up in your head as some kind of monster, but standing toe to toe with Cotto I realized he's no different from me, and a bit smaller.”

Jennings has a noticeable 2½-inch height advantage over Cotto, which should theoretically allow him to utilize his sharp jab. Conversely, Jennings's long torso will likely present glaring opportunities for Cotto to unleash his vaunted body attack. To-date Jennings has relied on textbook technique to overcome his opponents, with the exception being a 2006 split decision loss to the aggressive Young Mutley.

It is worrying that Jennings was outworked by a fighter considered to be naturally smaller and has subsequently been stopped on two occasions by British opposition.

“Jennings is slick, fast of both hand and foot and is fit. He is as strong in the twelfth round as the first and possesses accurate, hurtful - though far from concussive - punches,” assesses Flexen. “In the debit column, he lacks top-level power and appears to be over-reliant on straight shots.”

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Yet while Jennings will enter Saturday's fight on a six fight winning streak and free from lofty expectations, Cotto is expected to produce a performance that will belie the horrific beating he absorbed from the since-disgraced Antonio Margarito last July.

But relying on such intangibles as a portent of victory is a warning in itself.

"This looks like one of those game defeats by an outclassed British challenger," predicts Houston. "Maybe on the lines of Andy Holligan against Julio Cesar Chavez [in which Holligan battled bravely before the fight was stopped at the end of the fifth round]."

For Jennings, an effort that will force Cotto to dip into his reserves will be a mild victory in itself. To achieve that, Jennings will be forced to search his soul for levels of valour he has never yet required in a prizefight. But what he needs can be summoned from the experiences of his youth.