

Fiscal Fallout Hits "The Garden" Hard

Written by Ron Borges
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Emanuel Steward had already mapped out the battle plan for young Andy Lee, studying the ins and outs of the former title contender named Antwun Echols, who young Lee was planning on testing himself against in 10 days.

Lee was to be the main event of a St. Patrick's Day eve fight card in the WaMu Theater at Madison Square Garden, a chance for him to push himself a little against the hard edges of boxing without endangering himself all that much, assuming he will one day become the fighter Steward thinks he might be.

These kind of opportunities are necessary in a developing fighters life but Lee will have to find his elsewhere because the show's promoters, Irish Ropes, pulled the plug on the card Friday, canceling the show because the a dodgy economy had slowed ticket sales to a crawl. Well, crawl might be overstating the demand, actually.

Slowed wouldn't be the right word since that implies they were ever on the move in the first place, which frankly they were not.

Thus another group of fighters end up without paydays, another casualty of the deepening economic malaise that has Wall Street on the ropes and poor boxers not slipping between the ropes as often as they used to. Or, frankly, as often as they need to if they are ever going to mature and blossom into what their raw skills say they might become.

Lee (16-1, 13 KO) is a popular figure among Irish fight fans both in the U.S. and in his native Ireland and even the UK, where he lived for a time with his family before they moved back to the Old Sod.

Often his Irish supporters would fly over to the U.S. to watch his exploits in recent years, but even with airline prices tumbling it was too much to ask either for foreign fight fans or those in the metropolitan area to come to the Garden on a Monday night in March.

"This was a very difficult decision to make but ticket sales were way off compared to two years ago when the economy was much better here and back in Ireland," Irish Ropes Promotions president Eddie McLoughlin said in a press release announcing he'd pulled the plug on the show.

"We apologize for any inconveniences, especially to all of the boxers who worked so hard to prepare for their fights."

Among those boxers was aging Wayne McCullough (27-7, 18 KO), the ex-WBC bantamweight champion hoping to launch another comeback against a soft touch named Alex Becerra (19-7, 9 KO) in the co-feature. McCullough no longer belongs in the ring and thus was saved not by the bell this time but by there being no bell.

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Ask not for whom the bell tolls because this time it's not tolling at all, except perhaps for boxing itself.

Fight cards fall through for a lot of reasons but not all that often because ticket sales are so slow the promoter can't justify going forward. It happens but not as often as fights fall out or fighters pull out. In fact, usually the show goes on because what other choice does a promoter have but to open the doors and hope for the best?

That you can't rustle up enough business on St. Patrick's Day eve to stage a fight in Manhattan with an up-and-coming Irish fighter in the main event against a three time world title challenger and a semi-main event that headlines a former Irish national hero and Olympic silver medalist (1992) who is trying to crawl back into the bad business of boxing, says much about the decline in interest in the sport. It says more, frankly, than it does about the declining economy.

Obviously the latter had something to do with it but if you can't get a few thousand Irishmen to come to a fight on St. Patrick's Day eve what have things come to?

Hard times, it seems. Hard times for the hardest sport there is.

"It wasn't about the quality of the fights on the card," said Bob Trieiger, long-time boxing publicist who works for Irish Ropes in an e-mail explaining the decision.

"The other cards (in previous years) weren't any better and they sold out. Lots of people came over from Ireland to shop in New York when their dollar was much stronger.

"The Irish Ropes-(John) Duddy situation turned off a lot of people on both sides. Duddy sold about \$150,000 less for his last fight than his previous one with Irish Ropes at Madison Square Garden and ticket sales for this were bad. (Having to go on a Monday night (rather than the more traditional Saturday night) didn't help, either."

All true to be sure. Duddy and Irish Ropes had a falling out over (what else?) money and Duddy bolted from the promotional company that started him off as a professional and helped make him a fighter far better known in the United States than his talent would seem to justify.

In fact, Duddy was on the verge of a title shot against Kelly Pavlik a year ago under the guidance of Irish Ropes when a bad cut in a tune-up fight derailed him. Now he's gone elsewhere and still hasn't landed that fight, although it may be coming. Or then again, maybe not.

Meanwhile, Irish Ropes had to pull the plug on what they hoped would be a draw in New York so it's back to the drawing board for Eddie McLaughlin, Emanuel Steward, Andy Lee and old Wayne McCullough at a time in boxing where, frankly, opportunity isn't knocking very loud for more than a handful of fighters.

Maybe one day soon this will change. The economy will rebound and hopefully boxing will too, although if you were an oddsmaker at Caesars or at a William Hill storefront operation in

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London you'd be booking it as a longshot right now.