

## Macklin Wins Euro Middleweight Crown

Written by George Kimball  
Friday, 25 September 2009 19:00

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MANCHESTER, England --- When Ricky Hatton announced the formation of Hatton Promotions back in February and then got knocked out by Manny Pacquiao three months later it appeared that the British boxer might have left it until too late to get himself involved in the bean-counting side of the sport. But then this past July Hatton's fledgling company, which had promoted only four club-level cards to that point, signed a long-term deal with SKY television to promote eight nationally televised shows.

The first card under that agreement took place at a cycling arena in Hatton's native Manchester Friday night, and Hatton's longtime sparring partner Matthew Macklin utterly demolished Finland's former champion Amin Akisainen to win the vacant European middleweight title.

Macklin's spectacular win came in one of those rare fights that proceeds just the way it was drawn up on the chalkboard. Knowing the Finn to be a reflexive boxer who would be trying to figure him out in the early going, Macklin baited the trap in the first two minutes, when on at least four occasions he tapped Asikainen with his jab and then dug with a hard right to the body.

Macklin had also correctly surmised that the Finn wouldn't like this very much. As the round entered its final minute, he showed the jab again, and when Asikainen shied to his left to protect himself from what he thought was coming next, and dropped his hands in doing so, Macklin's feinted jab had turned into a hard left hook that slammed against the side of Asikainen's head and sent him crashing to the floor.

Akisainen climbed to his feet, but as he took the remainder of Sicilian referee Luigi Muratore's mandatory eight-count, his vacant stare radiated confusion, and it was at that moment difficult to tell whether he was surprised by the early knockdown or genuinely hurt.

Macklin assumed it to be the latter, and flew at him with both fists flying the instant the referee turned him loose. He chased Asikainen into his own corner, where a right hand put him on his backside. Once again Asikainen got up with several seconds to spare, but seemed more dazed than ever, and Muratore waved it off without completing his count. In just a two minutes and 34 seconds of fighting, Matthew Macklin was the middleweight champion of Europe, joining a distinguished line of predecessors that has included the likes Marcel Cerdan, Laszlo Papp, and Nino Benvenuti.

The Macklin-Asikainen topped an 11-bout card that included performances by other members of the Hatton Boxing stable, including former British Olympian Joe Murray and unbeaten prospects Rhys Roberts and Scott Quigg.

Following his 2004 victory over Kostya Tszyu, Hatton severed his tie with Frank Warren, and over the next four years his fights were promoted by everyone from Dennis Hobson and Frank Maloney in the UK to Lou DiBella, Bob Arum, Artie Pellulo, and Golden Boy in the US.

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Although he is often the dispassionate conscience of British boxing, writer/broadcaster Steve Bunce may have somewhat overstated the case when he described Hatton's new venture in Friday's Independent as "the British version of Oscar De La Hoya's company, Golden Boy."

That comparison may have stretched the point a bit. To qualify as the British version of Golden Boy, Hatton would have to (a) find some Teutonic who's never seen a fight and put him in charge of the boxing operation, (b) purchase an influential magazine (Boxing News, for instance), (c) start rating fighters and handing out its own titles, and then (d) strong-arm SKY into describing the holders of its belts as "world" champions.

And it probably goes without saying that if the Hitman wanted to fully emulate the Golden Boy model, Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao would already be vice presidents of Hatton Promotions.

But while Golden Boy in its infancy could rely on a bankable asset -- its eponymous founder -- it is by no means clear that Ricky Hatton will ever fight again, but even if he does, some of the shine may have gone off the mystique with his losses to Mayweather and Pacquiao. (Of course, De La Hoya lost to the same two guys, and in fact Oscar's record as a Golden Boy fighter was a pretty spotty one.)

That the folks running Hatton Promotions are raw neophytes when it comes to staging big-time fights was evident in the shoddy press facilities. What was labeled the "ringside press" section turned out to be assigned seating folding chairs set up in the audience. In the absence of tablespots and electrical outlets, those covering the the card were reduced to taking scribbled notes, with the lone exception being the enterprising scribe who was able to compose his copy on a mobile phone and send his story as a text message.

That boxing writers use computers in 2009 does not appear to have occurred to anyone connected with Hatton Promotions, including the principal himself. It does seem nothing short of amazing that Ricky Hatton could have participated in 47 professional fights and never once looked down from the ring long enough to see what writers actually do.

In the wake of the SKY windfall, Hatton used the television money to amass an impressively large stable of Midlands boxers he would need to provide the rosters for his eight upcoming shows and then, apparently, set out to sustain their marginal popularity by making sure none of them lost coming out of the gate. This latter was accomplished by flying in a platoon of Eastern Europeans to provide cannon fodder Friday night. The result was an interminable series of horrible mismatches, so many of which ended so quickly that SKY, with a huge chunk of time to fill, was obliged to show nearly all of them.

"It wasn't a very good night for the boys in the blue corner," sighed former lightweight champion and current SKY analyst Jim Watt, who before the show was halfway over had exhausted his supply of euphemisms in describing the woeful incompetence of the opposition. The effect, in the end, was to diminish even Macklin's spectacular triumph. Amir Asikainen might be the best boxer ever to come out of Finland, but to the armchair fans watching in British living rooms, he could as easily have been another of the bums from Georgia matchmaker Richard Poxon had

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rounded up for the other Hatton boxers.

Born in Birmingham of Irish parents, Macklin is the former Irish and British champion, and effectively gave up the latter title for the chance to fight for the Euro crown on Hatton's first televised card. (Macklin, who knocked out Wayne Elcock to win the British title in March, was stripped when he withdrew from a scheduled defense against Darren Barker.) Macklin, who had a couple of fights in the US four years ago, went into the EBU title fight having won seven in a row since he was stopped by Jamie Moore in the tenth round of their British 154-pound title fight in 2006.

Macklin had dominated the early going in that fight, but after staking himself to a big lead, he ran out of gas down the stretch and was stopped as much by exhaustion as he was by Moore. He had resolved to pace himself better in this one, but any thoughts of husbanding his energy were abandoned once Asikainen became so accommodating.

Asikainen had held the European title for 13 months in 2006-07, but lost it when he was stopped in a rematch by Sebastian Sylvester, now the IBF champ, whom he had knocked out a year earlier.

The audience at the Velodrome was solidly behind Macklin. Close to 1,000 of his supporters had come over from Birmingham, and a significant number of his Irish fans had flown in from Dublin as well. A year or two ago Macklin was rated a poor third behind John Duddy and Andy Lee in the Irish middleweight sweepstakes, but at this stage you'd have to say he has vaulted ahead of both, and it wouldn't be surprising to see the new European champion next turn his attention to the lucrative Irish-American market.

Macklin's record improved to 25-2 with the impressive win. Asikainen, who had gone into the fight a slight betting favorite, fell to 26-3.

The evening was otherwise pretty much a clean sweep for Team Hatton. Junior featherweight Joe Murray, the former British Olympian, went to 16-0 with his first-round TKO of Wolverhampton's Delroy Spencer, who is now 11-89-3. Super-middle Martin (no relation) Murray, the 2008 winner of Britain's trash-sport "Prizefighter" series, also posted a first-round TKO of Georgian George Aduashvili (10-6-1), also improved to 16-0.

The closest thing to an upset came in what was billed as an eliminator for Macklin's old British middleweight title, when veteran Cello Randa of Peterborough knocked out previously unbeaten Sam Horton. Randa (18-7) dropped Horton with a huge right hand in the second, and when he got back up landed a two-punch, right-left combination that left Horton, now 13-1, unconscious for several minutes.

The more usual fare was more akin to Mark Thompson's TKO win over his Georgian opponent, Gari Abajian. Referee John Edwards stopped that one in the fifth because Abajian wasn't punching back, but in truth he could have stopped it almost any time, since Abajian didn't throw a punch from the second round on. Thompson is now 21-1, Abajian 10-8.

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Junior middle Denton Vassell (12-0) had to go the distance to earn his win over Romanian Vasile Surcica (3-29-2) in a bout otherwise rendered remarkable only by Surcica's trunks -- a pair of plaid Bermuda shorts with three pockets. Referee Mike Alexander, apparently unmoved by the Romanian's fashion statement, scored it a 60-54 shutout.

Norway-based Colombian Andreas Evensen (10-1) scored a fifth-round KO over Italian Gianpiero Contestabile (14-2).

Three scheduled 4-rounders all went the distance. Junior lightweights Scott Quigg (15-0) and Roberts (8-0) posted 40-36 shutouts of their respective victims, German substitute Nico Schroeder (4-9-1) and Steve Gethin (11-49-3). Lightweight Anthony Crolla (15-2) outpointed another late sub, John (The Swinton Slugger) Baguley. The Slugger is now 8-16-1.

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At the Velodrome

Manchester, England

Sept. 25, 2009

MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Matthew Macklin, 159, Birmingham, Eng. TKO'd Amin Asikainen, 159 1/4, Siuntio, Finland (1) (Wins vacant European title)

Ceilo Randa, 160, Peterborough, England KO'd Sam Horton, 159 1/2, Wordsley, England (2)

Martin Murray, 165 1/2, St. Helens, Eng. KO'd George Aduashvili, 158, Variani, Georgia (1)

JUNIOR MIDDLEWEIGHTS: Denton Vassell, 151 3/4, Arcoats, Eng. dec. Vasile Surcica, 152 1/4, Iasi, Romania (6)

WELTERWEIGHTS Mark Thompson. 149 1/2, Rochdale, Eng. TKO'd Gari Abajian, 146 1/4, Tblisi, Georgia

LIGHTWEIGHTS: Anthony Crolla, 135, Manchester dec. John Baguley, 138 1/2, Rotherham (4)

JUNIOR LIGHTWEIGHTS: Andreas Evensen, 128 1/2, Bogota, Colombia TKO'd Gianpiero Contestabile, 127 1/2, Avezzano, Italy (5)

Rhys Roberts, 129 1/4, Manchester dec. Steve Gethin, 132 Walsall, England (4)

Scott Quigg, 129, Bury TKO'd Nico Schroeder, 130, Fuerstenwalde, Germany (2)

JUNIOR FEATHERWEIGHTS: Joe Murray, 134, Manchester TKO'd Delroy Spencer, 121 1/4, Wolverhampton, Eng. 1)