

Duddy Benefitting From Return To Mr. Keitt

Written by George Kimball
Wednesday, 30 September 2009 19:00

So after all that it's back to the old sledgehammer and tires.

At one point in his career the WaMu Theatre might as well have been John Duddy's house, but since the Irish middleweight last headlined there he has engaged in eight fights for four different promoters, and changed trainers three times. Thursday, nine days ahead of his return to the scene of his glory days, Duddy presided over a luncheon at a midtown steak house, to which he was accompanied by the trainer who will be in his corner when Duddy faces Jorge (Michi) Munoz on October 10th.

Welcome back, Harry Keitt.

Keitt, who broke Duddy into the pro game six years ago, was unceremoniously tossed overboard after guiding his prize pupil to a 20-0 record. His replacements (Don Turner for four fights, Patrick Burns for three) did not, as promised, exactly vault the Irishman to a new level. Turner followed Keitt out the gate after Duddy barely survived a majority decision win over Walid Smichet on the Wladimir Klitschko-Sultan Ibragimov undercard early last year, and Burns' exit was prompted by Duddy's first loss, to an Ohio journeyman described by his own trainer as a "B fighter," on a Main Events card in Newark this April.

More ominously, no doubt, from the standpoint of Duddy's advisor Craig Hamilton, was that fact that a boxer who had knocked out 16 of the 20 opponents he fought under Keitt had been extended the 10-round distance five times in a row.

So when Duddy, who was married in his native Derry this past summer, returned to the U.S. three weeks ago, pretty much his first stop was a fence-mending session with Keitt. Since then it's been more or less back to the future time:

Here's the sledgehammer, John. You remember where that tire is, don't you?

To bring this thing full circle, Duddy's post-prandial activity yesterday consisted of a sparring session at Gleason's with James Moore, his countryman and onetime Irish Ropes stablemate with whom he used to work pretty much every day.

Moore, of course, had cut his ties with Keitt even before Duddy did. In fact, when he faced off with Yuri Foreman in Atlantic City last year, Moore must have been somewhat taken aback when he looked across the ring and saw Keitt in the opposite corner.

A man not given to Schadenfreude, Keitt said yesterday "I know some of the John's old crowd were sitting around hoping he would lose, but I never felt that way. I only wished him the best."

The move back to Keitt was smooth enough on a personal level, but it hasn't exactly been a seamless transition in the gym. When he commenced his work with Duddy in 2003 he was

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dealing with an amateur straight off the plane. This time around, while Duddy must deal with whatever psychic scars linger from the Billy Lyell fight, while Keitt finds himself trying to polish Duddy back into a semblance of his earlier self. Kite likens it to "restructuring" an old building.

"He looked like a guy trying to fight with a strait-jacket on. It was like he was all bound up," said Keitt of Duddy's initial sparring sessions. "He wasn't snapping his punches the way he did before he left, but we've been making him work and you can see improvement every time he spars. He looks more and more like the old John Duddy every day. "

Keitt, who had monitored the progress of his onetime star pupil from afar, allowed "it couldn't have been that bad, because he kept winning -- and when he beat Howard Eastman, he beat a pretty good boxer."

Munoz, the opponent on the Juan Manuel Lopez-headlined "Island Warriors" card, is 21-3 but in many ways a prototypical Duddy opponent. Which is to say he's 21-0 in Kansas and Missouri and 0-3 elsewhere. Duddy describes him as "a tough Mexican with a good right hand and a decent left hook who comes right at you" -- in other words, the sort of fighter John Duddy used to lick his chops over.