

Froch Doesn't Get Hatton/Calzaghe Love

Written by Ronan Keenan

Tuesday, 13 October 2009 19:00

The lonely nature of prizefighting is not confined to the ring. Customarily, a successful fighter will find an unlimited supply of sycophants, while a ring-worn pug will struggle to find an audience for his laments.

Yet achievements do not always generate fandom, as Britain's only current world titlist, Carl Froch will attest. Despite owning a glistening 25-0 (20 KO) record, the super middleweight has failed to secure a mainstream UK television deal for Saturday's clash with the unbeaten American Andre Dirrell. The contest, which will mark the first fight in Showtime's innovative Super Six tournament, has failed to attract the interest of major British broadcasters and will only be available on an obscure pay-per-view channel.

Stateside, respected fightgame observers are hoping that Showtime's gamble on creating a round-robin competition among some of the world's premier 168-pounders will revolutionize the manner in which the sport's elite boxers compete for supremacy. But despite the presence of Froch and two other highly-touted European fighters, Arthur Abraham and Mikkel Kessler, UK broadcasters have rejected the enterprise, which could see the British fighter become a big name on the other side of the Atlantic.

Froch's showdown with Dirrell will take place in his hometown of Nottingham, England at the Trent FM arena, with recent ticket sales pointing to a 7,000 capacity attendance. But being popular in a small locality doesn't translate to national stardom. Incongruously, Froch arguably enjoyed greater UK exposure before he burst onto the American boxing scene earlier this year.

Soon after claiming a bronze medal at the 2001 world amateur championships, Froch entered the paid ranks on the UK's most watched network, the BBC. The channel is available to every television viewer in the nation, giving Froch, who turned pro at the relatively advanced age of 25, a welcome early-career boost. But in 2005 the BBC ended its association with prizefighting, forcing Froch to the subscription network Sky Sports, which is available to roughly 15% of the populace.

But boxing in the country was on a strong upward trend with two of Sky's resident fighters, Joe Calzaghe and Ricky Hatton, forcing their way into the realms of mainstream sport. The exposure helped Froch's fame grow steadily in Nottingham and last year his status peaked when his WBC title-winning effort against Jean Pascal was screened live at primetime on the terrestrial ITV channel. The fight was an exciting back-and-forth battle that attracted over five million viewers.

With the careers of Calzaghe and Hatton heading toward conclusion, Froch was well-positioned to nudge into the limelight. But TV executives had different plans and passed on his title defence against Jermain Taylor in Connecticut last April. Froch's dramatic twelfth round victory will rank as one of the most impressive performances by a British sportsman on American soil, but the BBC deemed the contest worthy of just highlights 24 hours after the

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event.

The decision by ITV to pass on Froch's fights with Taylor and Dirrell was part of the network's plan to cut out its coverage of the sport in general and not a direct dismissal of Froch. The consensus conclusion is that in tight economic circumstances, sport executives have a tough time convincing their superiors that money should be devoted to an activity that revolves around the pursuit of violence. Other mainstream sports have an easier time garnering investment.

"Boxing has various problems when it comes to TV," says Ron Lewis, a sports writer at the London Times and author of the Boxing Blog on Timesonline.co.uk. "The first one is that our major channels, BBC and ITV, have invested too much of their budget into football. Football is always the safe option for television, because it is the biggest sport in the country, is covered to death in the papers and it has core national and team support. Because of this it is also popular with advertising agencies."

Individual fighters, such as Calzaghe and Hatton, can become celebrities by building huge fanbases in their locality that ultimately capture the attention of major corporate sponsors. But positive attention on single entities does not morph into acceptance for the whole sport.

Unfortunately for Froch, his birthplace of Nottingham is dwarfed in size by Hatton's hometown of Manchester and the Welsh territory that supported Calzaghe. And while Hatton and Calzaghe were very much perceived as "regular guys", Froch has maintained a swagger that has not endeared him to many devoted boxing followers.

Inside the ring the 32-year-old tends to keep his arms low, with his self-assurance out-weighting the need to keep a high guard. Moreover, in direct contrast to the workmanlike approaches of Calzaghe and Hatton, Froch has a tendency to bait opponents during a fight and occasionally toy with inferior competition. He has also engaged in a long-running war of words with Calzaghe in which he once labelled the Welshman "stupid".

But it is inconclusive whether such actions have contributed to Froch's recent rejection by TV networks.

"I don't think it has much to do with his personality or his hometown," argues Tris Dixon of the British publication Boxing News. "He has come through in the shadow of Hatton and Calzaghe, without doubt. He generally has not got the credit he deserves but I don't think you can blame him for that nor can you pinpoint one particular factor that has prevented him becoming a star like Hatton and Calzaghe."

Just two weeks ago there was no UK television deal signed for Froch-Dirrell, but a new subscription channel called Primetime, which will launch on Thursday, has agreed to screen the contest on pay-per-view. The upstart channel will also offer all the other bouts in the Super Six tournament.

Primetime have promised that they are committed to boxing for the long-term, but Froch must be hoping that the unknown network will be his temporary home.

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“The reality is that Hatton and particularly Calzaghe took years to build up the support and media profile they eventually received,” adds Ron Lewis. “A win against Dirrell would go a long way to making Froch a recognizable figure.”

Indeed, Saturday's fight promises to be an intriguing high-class contest. Victory for Froch will undoubtedly aid his burgeoning profile on a global scale, but not necessarily in his homeland.