

Steward, Lee Are Still A Team

Written by George Kimball
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NEW YORK --- When Andy Lee stepped off the flight from Shannon at Kennedy Airport Wednesday afternoon, barely 24 hours after participating in Brian Peters' Limerick press conference announcing his November 14 date with the French champion, Affif Belghecham, it marked the start of a new chapter in the career of the Irish middleweight. For each of his previous 20 bouts the Irish middleweight would have cleared customs and hopped another plane to Detroit, but when Lee returns to Ireland three weeks hence he will have done so without passing 'Go' -- or in this case, "Kronk," and will do all of his sparring for the Belghecham fight in New York gyms.

To answer the obvious question, this does not portend a rift between Lee and his career-long manager and trainer Emanuel Steward. Since Steward is committed to be elsewhere on the night of Lee's bout -- behind an HBO PPV microphone in Las Vegas at the Miguel Cotto-Manny Pacquiao fight at the MGM Grand, to be precise -- it made more sense that Lee spend the next three weeks working with the men who actually will be working his corner on Nov. 14th. Kronk assistant Joey Gamache, like Lee, is based in New York, and Steward's nephew and aide-e-camp Javon (Sugar) Hill will join them in the Big Apple to oversee Lee's polishing for his encounter with the Frenchman.

When Lee left home at the age of 21 and relocated to the United States after signing with the Hall of Fame trainer, he moved bag and baggage into Steward's suburban Detroit home, an ostensibly temporary move that wound up stretching into nearly four years. More recently Lee has been spending more and more time in New York with his girlfriend, the classically-trained Dublin-born musician Maud Reardon, and while -- as was the case with his last outing, an August TKO of Anthony Shuler -- he undertook his preparations in Detroit, he had become a de facto resident of the Lower East Side.

The Steward-Lee dynamic had always been likened to both as a father-son relationship, and there is little to suggest that that has changed: But how many 25 year-olds still live with their fathers?

Belghecham is, like Lee, a southpaw, and boasts a comparable record: He is 19-3-1, while Lee is 19-1, the principal difference being that the Frenchman has stopped just one of 23 professional opponents, while ten of Lee's victims didn't make it to the final bell. A native of Lyon, he won the French title this past April when he outpointed Francois Bastient in Fourmies, and a month later added the EU middleweight belt by stopping Wouldid Guarras in Paris.

The latter title is not to be confused with the European Boxing Union title currently held by Matthew Macklin, like Lee an English-born Irish citizen, but the EU championship will be on the line at the Limerick Sports Arena next month and was described by both Lee and Peters as a potential steppingstone to an all-Irish fight for the full-fledged European title next year.

Irish reports of Tuesday's proceedings had Peters saying that Belghecham was tapped as

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Lee's opponent only after Brian Vera, John Duddy, and Macklin had all turned it down.

If Peters actually said that, it would be curious indeed. Lee would undoubtedly like another crack at Vera, the onetime contender who handed him his only defeat when he stopped him at the Mohegan Sun a year and a half ago, but the Texan is embroiled in managerial and promotional hassles and in no position to be making deals. Duddy, who outpointed Michi Munoz at Madison Square Garden last weekend, appears headed for a matchup with Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. down the line, and had indicated several weeks ago that he had little interest in pursuing the European route in his quest to return to middleweight prominence. And since Peters promotes Macklin in association with Ricky Hatton, any negotiation would have effectively seen Peters' offer made on behalf of Lee turned down by Peters on behalf of Macklin.

Belghecham has had little exposure outside his homeland, but Steward, Camache, and Lee have all viewed him on tape.

"I've watched him in action and he's going to be a very tough opponent," said Lee. "He's the current European Union Champion and is coming to this fight on the back of some very good wins. He's never been stopped so it could be a tough night, but I'm looking forward to it."

"(Lee) doesn't want any pushovers, and he'll certainly have his hands full with Belghecham, because he's a quality operator," said Peters. "He'll provide Andy with a very stiff test, but if he can come through this then I'm sure there could be some massive fights around the corner for him."

Gamache describes Belghecham as "an aggressive southpaw," and is hoping to arrange some sparring sessions with like-minded middleweights for Lee in the coming weeks. He has already contacted the handlers of Mean Joe Green, and Lee said that although they are stylistically dissimilar, he also hoped to engage in some sparring with Yuri Foreman, who will also be fighting on Nov. 14, albeit about 6,000 miles from Limerick.

Even before traveling to Ireland for Tuesday's announcement, Lee had been working out under Gamache's tutelage at the Fighthouse on 27th Street, but Lee expects to spend much of the next few weeks at Gleason's, where he is likely to encounter superior sparring.

The Nov. 14 fight at the University of Limerick Arena will be Lee's third appearance in his Irish hometown. The other two both came in 2008, and were sandwiched around the Vera loss -- a February 5th-round stoppage of Alejandro Gustavo Falliga, who had brought a 14-3-2 record to the bout, and a 10th-round TKO of Bernard Hopkins' cousin Willie Gibbs (20-3), who hasn't fought since. Ironically, it was a cut incurred in the Falliga fight that reintroduced itself in several subsequent bouts, leading to the surgery that sidelined Lee, limiting him to a single fight in an 11-month span after his impressive knockout of Gibbs.

Peters appears to be plunging right back into the fight game after what had to be a rough September. A night after Macklin snatched up the European middleweight belt with a first-round TKO of former champion Amin Asikainen in Manchester, Peters saw his biggest Irish drawing

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card, Bernard Dunne, destroyed inside three rounds by Pongsawat Kratingdaenggym at the O2 Arena in Dublin, and before the weekend was out the WBA 122-pound belt was on its way to Thailand.

On Nov. 6, eight days before Lee's bout in Limerick, Peters will promote another show in Northern Ireland, headlined by unbeaten Paul McCloskey's challenge to EBU light welterweight champion Souleymane M'baye at the Meadowbank Sports Arena in Magherafelt, Co. Derry.