

Sergio Martinez-Andy Lee Might Land At MSG Theatre In March

Written by George Kimball

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Christmas may have come early for Ireland's Andy Lee. Less than a day after the implosion of the Klitschko-Chiisora card in Germany scratched Lee's scheduled fight this weekend, the Irish middleweight has been confirmed as the leading candidate to fight world champion Sergio Martinez on HBO next spring.

Martinez' devastating first-round knockout of Paul Williams in Atlantic City last month did more than solidify the WBC champion's claim on middleweight superiority. Martinez also inherited Williams' onetime mantle as the most feared opponent in boxing. The WBC had mandated a fight between the Martinez-Williams winner and its "Silver Champion, Julio Cesar Chavez Jr., but it has become apparent that Chavez (who, citing illness, pulled out of a scheduled fight against Pawel Wolak last weekend) wants no part of El Maravilla at this stage of his career, and with interim WBC champ Sebastian Zbik and WBA 154-pound champ evincing similar reluctance, Lee has emerged the clear-cut favorite for the opponent's role in Martinez' next defense.

Martinez' promoter Lou DiBella, who spent yesterday conducting transatlantic telephone negotiations with Lee's manager-trainer Emanuel Steward and Irish promoter Brian Peters, confirmed that Lee has been tentatively penciled in on Martinez' dance card. The bout would likely take place at the Madison Square Garden Theatre on March 12, lending a festive St. Patrick's Day atmosphere to what would be the first world middleweight title challenge by an Irishman since Steve Collins beat Chris Pyatt to win the WBO title in 1994.

Ironically, Lee had hoped to fight in the same venue on the same date, but an anticipated all-Irish St. Patrick's week matchup with countryman John Duddy failed to get off the ground.

Lee (24-1) had been training in Austria for an anticipated bout on the Wladimir Klitschko-Dereck Chisora undercard in Mannheim, but that card collapsed this week after the heavyweight champion tore an abdominal muscle in training Wednesday and withdrew from his bout against the Zimbabwe-born English challenger.

Lee notched a pair of TKO victories (stopping Michael Walker in September and Troy Lowry in October) in the space of 15 days, but has not fought since. Earlier in his career Lee had been fast-tracked for a prospective title shot, but that plan was sidetracked by a 2008 TKO loss to Brian Vera at the Mohegan Sun. Lee has reeled off nine wins in a row since the Vera loss, and with the Klitschko-Chisora card gone up in smoke, will probably return to Ireland for the Christmas holidays and then proceed straight to the title bout without rescheduling a tuneup.

The 26 year-old Lee is currently rated No. 14 by the WBC. The organization's rules allow a champion to make a voluntary defense against an opponent rated from 11th to 19th, pending approval of the WBC Board of Governors.

The Argentine-born Martinez (46-2-2), now domiciled in California after nearly a decade based

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in Spain, has emerged that boxing rarity – a late-blooming championship-calibre fighter who was well into his 30s by the time he hit his stride. Martinez, who celebrates his birthday in February, would be 36 by the time of the fight.

Although New York is the front-runner, DiBella said sites in New England (most likely the Connecticut casinos) and Atlantic City, the scene of Martinez' recent triumphs, were also under consideration.