

Kevin McBride Fighting Adamek, And His Demons

Written by Ronan Keenan
Thursday, 07 April 2011 19:53



He looked uncomfortable. Slowly removing his sunglasses, Kevin McBride prepared to recite familiar words. One month from his 38th birthday, his round face retains a boyish charm; after each sentence he breaks into an amiable smile, as if to disarm his own fanciful declarations.

“When I hit him on the chin he’ll think the whole of Ireland was doing it,” says McBride unassumingly, his blue eyes continually glancing at the ground. “I’m going to be the first ever Irish-born heavyweight champion.”

Nobody believed him when he uttered those phrases before pushing Mike Tyson into retirement nearly six years ago. But he had a restrained audacity about him back then. During the staredown at the pre-fight press conference he stretched out his large arms in front of Tyson, flexing wide biceps to assert his 6’6, 270-pound frame. At the announcement of his April 9th fight against highly-rated contender Tomasz Adamek, McBride appeared less enthused. Despite towering over his foe, McBride made no such physical machinations during the face-off,

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just a grin and a nod of the head, seemingly in thanks for the opportunity to share the podium with a respected fighter who has already signed a contract to challenge for the heavyweight title later this year.

McBride isn't really looking for a fight and doesn't want to run the risk of riling his opponent. His enthusiasm for prizefighting has eroded; aware of the harsh reality that a victory over Tyson did nothing to enhance his talent. He won the figurative lottery ticket that night in June 2005, but lost it in subsequent bloody stoppage defeats to fringe contenders Mike Mollo and Andrew Golota. Saturday's unexpected opportunity is coming on the foot of four losses in his last five fights. After retiring following the Golota fight in 2007, McBride returned to competition last year to little fanfare in Poughkeepsie, New York. His performance matched the subdued settings as he was out-pointed by one Zack Page; a journeyman with a 20-29-2 record. McBride followed that up with a win and another defeat in a one-night 'Prizefighter' tournament in London last October.

The losses offered little deterrent to McBride; a man already accustomed to disappointment. Over the years he has learned a lesson familiar to many fighters: the hardest battles are fought outside the ring.

The thick brogue and deliberate speech that many in McBride's adopted homeland of Massachusetts find so charming wasn't always so fashionable in Ireland. Back in the small town of Clones Co. Monaghan, before he showed signs of growing into a heavyweight, McBride was bullied for his monotone speech. When he was nine years old his father took him to the local boxing gym in an effort to stave off his antagonists. After showing promise, McBride then began training at the nearby Smithboro boxing gym; an isolated building that had become a legendary institution after nurturing future world champion Barry McGuigan. Boxing was hugely popular in the region at the time; in the many staunchly Catholic Clones households, pictures of McGuigan rivaled those of the Pope.

Yet while McBride drew inspiration from his compatriot's feats, he lacked the attention span to sit through an entire McGuigan fight. Regardless of McBride's lack of interest in watching the sport, McGuigan's former coach at Smithboro, Frank Mulligan, saw in his new young pupil a talent that warranted attention.

"You couldn't miss Kevin around Clones," remembered McGuigan. "He was enormous, one of the biggest human beings I'd ever seen and when I left Monaghan he was only 14. It was always Big Kevin then. Frank [Mulligan] started training him and he'd be telling me that this kid had great potential."

At 19, in his first full year of senior amateur competition, McBride qualified for the 1992 Olympic Games, making him the youngest competitor in the super heavyweight division. Big things were expected of the Irish boxing team in 1992, which ultimately delivered a gold and silver medal, but the fighter that the whole of Monaghan had awoken early one Sunday morning to watch ultimately lost by 20 points in his first fight. Reports said that McBride was miserable during the Games, unable to focus properly without Mulligan's counsel. After returning home, McBride

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grew increasingly frustrated with his branding as an over-hyped failure and moved to London, where he transitioned to the professional game under Mulligan's direction.

There was renewed interest in McBride when high-profile promoter Frank Warren signed him to a deal, but the optimism was short lived as he could only manage an ugly draw in his debut against an opponent sporting a 1-6 record. This time the poor performance was blamed on a pre-fight meal of kebab meat and seven banana milkshakes.

Most people thought Mulligan had lost his mind after the fight when he said: "There'll be other days. Some day [Kevin] will go to America and fight Tyson or one of them fellas and no one will even think about what happened tonight."

Frank Maloney, who was then managing Lennox Lewis, believed he could better guide McBride and bought the fighter's contract from Warren. "That was the only contract I ever bought," declared Maloney. But the manager wasn't happy with Mulligan's influence. Despite tallying sixteen straight wins, Maloney publicly stated at press conference that McBride would not progress unless Mulligan's involvement ceased. Maloney claimed he invested nearly \$1 million in the fighter and that Mulligan was damaging his prospect.

"Kevin used to live near my dad in South London," recalled Maloney. "One day my dad was walking through the park and it was hammering down with rain. He looked up and there was Kevin shadow boxing in the rain with Frank Mulligan. Dad asked 'What you doing?' The trainer replied: 'I'm teaching Kevin to hit the raindrops. If he can do that he will be able to punch really fast.'

"Another time just before a fight the trainer was trying to work on Kevin's reflexes in the dressing room and kept flicking a towel with a knot tied in the end. Would you believe it, it caught him in the eye and caused all sorts of panic as he was just about to get called to go out. We delayed it for a while and when Kevin did get in the ring he won."

McBride, unable to imagine his fistic future without Mulligan, backed his trainer and refused to sever ties. They were the proverbial odd couple; McBride a humble, gentle-giant figure and Mulligan a diminutive man with an authoritarian presence and severe stare. Mulligan had a deep influence on the fighter. He was the person that first told the vulnerable McBride he could be somebody; he alone turned a bullied child into a boxing star. The trainer knew how to control McBride's naturally self-doubting personality, and now McBride feared that no other man could soothe his misgivings. Irish boxing writer Harry Mullan noted that Mulligan had a connection with McBride that bore semblance to the trainer's previous interest with McGuigan. "The pair had an obsessive and even oppressive relationship," wrote Mullan in 1995. "Mulligan demanded and got absolute dedication and commitment."

"I owe Frank Mulligan a lot," said McBride when the dispute with Maloney reached its zenith in 1995. "I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for him. We have some different ways of training but they all seem to work."

The case was brought before the British Boxing Board of Control and Maloney subsequently

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eased his demands and agreed that Mulligan could have a role in corner, but without head trainer duties. The issue soon became immaterial when Maloney terminated his association with McBride in 1997 following a knockout defeat to journeyman Michael Murray, who entered the ring with 16 losses from 31 fights. It was McBride's third knockout loss in six outings.

"[McBride] is an absolutely smashing fella but it has to be said that he hasn't got much of a chin," Maloney told The Sun after the relationship ended. "He is the most rigid and upright heavyweight I have ever come across. He can certainly punch like a mule if he does catch you. Kevin has got a very big heart but his chin and his co-ordination are simply terrible. In fact, he would make Frank Bruno look like a ballet dancer."

Devoid of a promoter, McBride went back to Clones and worked out with Mulligan at the Smithboro gym. His career now stalled, McBride sought advice from former world titlist and fellow Irishman Steve Collins and thereafter decided to relocate to Massachusetts and start afresh without Mulligan. Goody Petronelli, who previously trained Collins and Marvin Hagler, became McBride's new mentor. Happily settled in the US with his new wife Danielle, McBride ran up a streak of 10 wins and a loss before attracting attention from Tyson's handlers.

Most observers expected an early rounds knockout victory for Tyson, with even Barry McGuigan predicting that the former champion would "get McBride out of there early". Aware of McBride's fragile sensibilities, his camp coordinator Packie Collins brought the fighter to a hypnotist.

"The media hadn't been good to [McBride] and it was getting to him," said Collins. "He needed some positive energy around him."

"[The hypnotist] made me believe in myself," claimed McBride after the Tyson fight. "He increased my awareness so that I could see Tyson's punches as if they are in slow motion."

Even before he entered the ring, McBride exuded a quiet confidence.

"In the morning [of the weigh-in] I drank two liters of water, I ate three meals and I ate a big box of chocolates," said McBride. "Packie Collins said he wanted me to look big and strong at the weigh in. I put on 11 pounds. I raised my arms [at the weigh-in] because Packie said I should let him know: 'I'm bigger than you,' let him know he's in a fight. I looked him in the eyes and I won the staredown, he backed away."

Burned out after six rounds of hopelessly wrestling the resolute Irishman, Tyson quit and then announced his retirement by stating: "I'm not going to disrespect the sport anymore by losing to this caliber of fighter."

The victory earned McBride a measure of redemption back home, with images of him standing over a grounded Tyson erasing thoughts of his previous failures. Like McGuigan before him, McBride was paraded around Clones on an open-top bus as the entire town shut down to revel in his success. The \$150,000 earned for fighting Tyson had whetted the appetite for heavier paychecks. McBride talked of fighting both Klitschko brothers on the same night and flying over Clones in a helicopter while dropping a million dollars onto the town. Local newspapers and radio sports shows were alight with conjecture about McBride's future possibilities: a heavyweight title fight in Ireland, a rematch with Tyson, a momentous Anglo-Irish battle with an

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unretired Lennox Lewis.

But nothing happened. Despite signing a deal with Don King, proposed WBA title fights with John Ruiz and Nikolai Valuev never materialized. Ten months after beating Tyson, his name far from the headlines, McBride returned to the ring and weighing nearly 290 pounds beat one Byron Polley on the undercard of an event in Cleveland. The fight proved nothing and was a major emotional comedown for McBride.

Desperate to lift his morale and evade a feeling of emptiness, he turned to a ubiquitous companion: alcohol. He used it as a method of distracting himself from the reality that despite his remarkable accomplishment, the daily grind of life remained the same. His reliance on alcohol festered to the point that when a chance to prove himself did arrive in the form of a fight with Mike Mollo, McBride struggled to quit drinking. The Boston Globe quoted an associate of McBride as saying the fighter only stopped boozing “two or three days before the Mollo fight”. The second round knockout loss gave credence to that claim.

One year later in October 2007, McBride, still drinking heavily, was given another opportunity to redeem himself but suffered a deep cut in the fight against Andrew Golota and was stopped in the sixth round.

“I’m an alcoholic,” admitted McBride. “I lost those fights because I wasn’t in top condition, especially with my drinking. I couldn’t get myself up for the fights. I didn’t have the same hunger because they weren’t for a world title.”

His fistic reputation in tatters, McBride gave up on boxing and made ends meet doing occasional construction work. Living in Dorchester, Massachusetts, McBride labored far from the Irish consciousness until his name returned to news stories for unwelcome reasons.

In early 2008 Frank Mulligan, then 63, was found guilty of sexually abusing two young boys he coached at Smithboro boxing club on occasions between 1989 and 1997. During the trial Mulligan showed no remorse for his actions and appealed the verdict. He was sentenced to seven years in prison for assault and buggery against the boys who were aged 12 and 13. Mulligan was later found guilty of offenses against five more boys in incidents that took place on dates up to 2002. His victims told how Mulligan took them for “sports massages” at his house where he made them pray before and after sex acts. One victim stood in the witness box and broke down in tears as he told the court how Mulligan destroyed his life.

Irish news outlets perused McBride, looking for details on his relationship with Mulligan. Did he know of the abuse? Was he abused himself? McBride will not talk about the man, rebuffing any questions with “no comment”. In one of his few remarks about Mulligan, McBride told the Boston Globe that his former trainer was “a very sick man who hurt people the way he did and should be put away for life.” The figure he had shared so much of his life with was now revealed to have devastated the lives of others during the very period in which he helped mold McBride into a successful young man.

McBride’s dependency on alcohol carried on until late 2009. He vowed to go sober and joined a

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paving crew, pushing around a wheelbarrow in an effort to put some structure on his life.

“I beat Tyson, who was the most feared man on the planet, but the drink can knock you out,” warned McBride, who is father to a son and daughter aged two and five.

Last year he realized that nothing could distract him from his distress quite like boxing. When making his decision to return he didn't care if he had to fight in obscure venues or that his skills had irreversibly eroded. He's just happy to be back in the game. Inside the ropes he forgets about Frank Mulligan and instead thinks about punching, blocking, moving. When he goes home he plans out tomorrow's training session, not where his next drink will come from. His conversations with friends now focus on his upcoming fight; not the fights that might have been. The pursuit that protected him from a bullied childhood now acts as a sanctuary from demons of its own creation.

McBride, 35-8-1 (29), says he's taking Saturday's fight with Adamek seriously. He is back training with the 87-year-old Petronelli, works with a strength coach and is seeing a hypnotist for the first time since the Tyson fight. But he's aware that despite preparation, his chances of victory are slim.

“I have power,” he said. “That's what I'm counting on. Hopefully, I'll connect.”

Saturday's fight is happening because the Adamek camp want an easy tune-up opponent before fighting one of the Klitschko brothers later this year. McBride's defeat of Tyson and Irish heritage also bring some added publicity to the event which is expected to draw a sizeable crowd to New Jersey's Prudential Center.

McBride is listed as a 15/1 underdog by some bookmakers. His slow reflexes will see him get hit hard and often by Adamek. He will likely finish with cuts, bruises and head trauma. But the pain will make him feel alive, providing a sense of self-worth, easing the ordeal of his deeper battles.

“The drink is one of the great struggles in life,” acknowledged McBride. “You have to keep fighting it every day.”

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the Roast says:

As I have said before, the snowball had a better chance in hell than McBride has. I will offer to fight Adamek myself. We can do it at the AllState Arena. I'll need Mackie Shilestone to help

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mold the Roast up to heavyweight. I'll need Radam to train me. We can talk money later. Come on Adamek. We got a huge Polish fan base here. The AllState was packed a few years back for Adamek-Briggs. The Roast fans will be there in force. I've got more athletic ability in my left nut than McBride. I got demons too. I'm callin you out Grave Digger.

FighterforJC says:

Tomasz Adamek is allowed to take his demons with him to back him up???? That's not fair for McBride!!!!

Radam G says:

WTF! Hehehehehehehehehe! What is up with the Roast?..."more ability in the left nut...got demons too." WOW! There is only one of the Roast. And Radam G training him? No THANKS!!! Though I love da moola, I will be too busy gettin' on my laugh. Help -- I mean how -- do you train a left-nuttred dude, who is full of demons? I am a southpaw, not a fool. I would be too scare that one of those demons would jump outta the Roast and put da smackdown joke on me so hard that I will break all of my funny bones laughing my arse away, and then suddenly: KaPOO! Fade into a pile of Pinoy dust powder like a mutha-Joke. The Roast is just too much for me with all those smackdown jokes. I'm reminded of the ROCK! What in da heck does the Roast "got cookin'?" Kevin McBride is in deep trouble. It look like Adamek is going to give him a demon-arse thrashing. Holla!

the Roast says:

Come on Radam! You and I would make a great team. My demons are under control. For the most part. I missed your buddy Lee Roy Murphy at the Golden Gloves last night. Murphy gave one of the winners his trophy. I was in the bathroom so I didnt see him. I was gonna talk to him about you. Maybe next year.

brownsugar says:

wow... theRoast doesn't like to hold back...lol I don't see how beating the big lumbering McBride will help Adamek vs Klitscho.... there's better big men to practice on.