

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan
Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01



“Can I have four tickets to whatever event is on here now?” asks a German tourist at the ticket office outside London’s Excel Arena.

“You mean the boxing? Not a chance, mate,” says the man behind the counter, unable to withhold a smirk. Tickets for the 10,000 seat arena are sold out for the Olympic semi-finals, just as they have been every day over the last two weeks.

Difficulties in viewing the competition aren’t limited to London. Across the sea in the Irish town of Mullingar the family of John Joe Nevin gather to watch the boxer in a local pub moments before he meets Cuba’s Lázaro Álvarez in the Olympic bantamweight silver medal contest. They enter the pub but are told to leave. Arguments ensue, accusations are made. Other pubs in the town shut their doors, not wanting the group’s business. Nevin’s family have to venture six miles outside Mullingar to find somewhere that will let them in to watch the bout.

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan
Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

It's been a difficult few years for Ireland. The once heralded "Celtic Tiger" economy dramatically collapsed in 2008, with the nation subsequently forced to accept external financial aid as thousands of young jobseekers emigrate in search of work. The lack of opportunity in people's lives has stymied their own ambition and seen an increased unity behind the national sporting teams; essentially anything that can distract from the perpetual headlines detailing rising unemployment and economic stagnation.

The teams haven't obliged, with the much-hyped rugby squad underperforming at the world cup late last year, while the soccer team was pitifully out-classed this summer at its first appearance in the European championships in 24 years. Those disappointments left a lot of scope for the Olympic boxers to capture public attention. Before London 2012, Ireland had won a total of four medals in all sports over the last three Games, and three of them were in boxing. Katie Taylor duly obliged public expectation and won the female competition and John Joe Nevin was seen as the best hope of emulating Michael Carruth to win Ireland's first male gold since 1992.

John Waters of the *Irish Times* recently explained Ireland's obsession with sport: "An Olympic medal, or a creditable appearance by an Irish team in the finals of some international competition, is proposed as something fundamental, rather than a mere passing cause for celebration. And it is indeed as if such successes occur to provide a kind of hope by proxy for the entire population, for whom more enduring forms of hope are nowadays culturally inaccessible."

Nevin, 23, has been regarded as the best Irish male amateur since 2008. After being eliminated in his second contest at the Beijing Games, he later won two bronze medals at world championships. A relaxed counter-puncher in the ring, he boxes with a confident style, typically avoiding punches by a deft move of the head, putting himself in a position with strike with a sharp right cross. Yet in the months leading up to London his performances slumped. He was beaten by opponents that should have been routine tune-ups. Several members of the Irish team said the pressure was getting to Nevin. "He told me a few months ago that he wanted to pull out of the Games," said 2008 Olympic silver medallist Kenny Egan. "He didn't want to go through with it."

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan

Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

In addition to dealing with the expectations of a success-starved nation, Nevin's distinct heritage has brought additional difficulties. He is part of the Travelling community, a traditionally nomadic group considered a distinct ethnic minority in Ireland and Great Britain. The Traveller population in Ireland nears 30,000 and in recent years the group have become more integrated into the broader society, with many living in fixed houses and attending public schools. But the relationship between the communities is uneasy. The Traveller culture suffers from stigmas of violence and crime not helped by the portrayal of their idiosyncratic customs with a voyeuristic curiosity in the mainstream media via "exposé" documentaries on bare-knuckle boxing and reality shows like *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. As with many minorities, the actions of a few taint an entire community.

Few Travellers have been depicted as positive role models. Former boxer Francis Barrett is the most notable exception. Barrett competed for Ireland at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the popularity of his story saw him carry the nation's flag at the Games' opening ceremony. The gesture was expected to be a major breakthrough moment for the Travelling community. It wasn't.

"Six weeks after I came back from the Olympic Games, I was turned away from a bar," recalled Barrett. "I wouldn't say all Travellers are good. Some cause fights, drunken arguments and break places up, but you should not paint them all with the one brush."

Sixteen years later Nevin's family had to journey miles outside their hometown to find a public place that would allow them watch their next of kin approach the zenith of his vocation.

"It is wrong," said Barrett of the apparent discrimination that faced Nevin's family on the day of his semi-final bout. "If African or Polish people were not served in pubs because of their nationality there would be big trouble and so there should be. It is a disgrace that these pub landlords closed the door of the pubs. By rights they should be proud; John Joe is fighting for his country."

Nevin's cousin Martin said John Joe learned of the situation just moments before his contest with Cuba's Álvarez. "He really took it personally," claimed Martin. "He asked me was there a problem with him, whether the local people unhappy with his performance at the Olympics. He was really upset because he thought it was about him. He was in tears."

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan
Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

But the anguish seemed to stir Nevin into the greatest performance of his career, culminating in a 19-14 points win over Álvarez. Nevin became the first Traveller to win an Olympic medal and expectations were high that he could beat Great Britain's Luke Campbell to win gold the following Saturday night.

The strains of Queen's "We Will Rock You" bring the crowd to its feet, with John Joe Nevin emerging into the arena first. Significantly less Irish fans are here than for Katie Taylor's bouts earlier in the week, but those in attendance do their best to make themselves heard. Decked out in red vest and shorts, Nevin bounces on his toes, wearing a broad smile. Accompanied by coaches Billy Walsh and Zaur Anita in resplendent green tracksuits, Nevin raises his gloves to the crowd, signalling a contentment with the task in hand. He may be genuinely at ease, or putting on a front, but in a few minutes it won't matter; attempts at illusion are quickly dispelled in the ring. Bounding up the steps and through the ropes, Nevin skirts the ring's perimeter before briefly settling in front of his opponent's corner where he wipes the soles of his shoes on the canvas as if marking his territory. He moves to his own red corner where Walsh affixes a headguard that will protect from superficial injury, but can do little to diffuse the concussive blows of an Olympic opponent.

As Luke Campbell comes into view the noise of the crowd reaches new decibels. The Irish fans gallantly respond with soccer-style chants but are soon drowned out by the locals' booming repetition of "Campbell, Campbell". There's sincerity in Campbell's approach; head down, he walks quickly with purpose to the ring. His face expressionless, he seems tense, as he should be. At the foot of the ring's steps he jumps in the air, bringing his knees into his chest in an effort to shake out the nerves that likely make his legs feel like lead.

With introductions underway, the boxers prepare for nine minutes of combat dissected into three rounds in which they hope the judges at ringside will acknowledge every punch they land by pressing an electronic button.

As the round starts Nevin, boxing from an orthodox stance, immediately looks to assert himself by stepping firmly onto his southpaw opponent's lead foot. He does this several more times, but the referee is quick to issue a caution. Campbell, the taller, rangier boxer, seeks to keep the fight at a distance by constantly moving while launching long, straight punches. Nevin has a sturdier look about him and is prepared to stand flat-footed and lean away before quickly

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan

Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

throwing looping right hands. Each man tries to impose his will, hoping to draw the other away from their well-rehearsed strategy.

Billy Walsh sits ringside gulping back water. He's fidgeting, crossing his legs, cracking knuckles, trying to subdue the adrenaline. Nevin seems to be almost trying too hard, with his eagerness to score compelling him move forward instead of boxing off the back foot. He gets caught by Campbell's long right hand through the round and as the bell sounds the Irishman is behind 5-3.

In the second, Walsh forgets his restraint, snapping out right hand– left hook combinations. Nevin lands a solid right and Walsh leaps off his chair, pumping his fist. The punch gives Nevin momentum and by round's end the deficit is reduced at 8-9. Behind by one score, Nevin knows he has to press the action. Desperation leads him to chase Campbell, who midway through the round smoothly steps back and catches an onrushing Nevin with a hard right hook. Nevin falls to the canvas. He recovers his senses quickly and unleashes a flurry of combinations through the remainder of the round. Some blows appear to connect, while others are deflected off Campbell's gangly arms.

As the contest ends Nevin stands in the ring's center. He blesses himself and looks skyward, praying that the oft-erratic scoring will go in his favour. When the final result of 14-11 is announced for Campbell there are no complaints from the Irish contingent. As the arena lets out a thunderous roar, Nevin fulfils the obligatory congratulations for his triumphant opponent. After leaving the ring, Walsh puts a red robe onto Nevin's listless body and a white towel over his bowed head.

Nearly half an hour later the boxers are summoned back into the ring for the medal ceremony. Nevin is cleaned-up and dressed in a green Irish tracksuit, but his face remains solemn. Just three punches landed or blocked and he could be standing up where Campbell is, allowing the Irish fans to wave their tricolours to "Amhrán na bhFiann" instead of enduring the deep bellows of "God Save the Queen".

After descending from the podium the boxers make their way from the ring. Nevin gives Campbell a final pat on the shoulder, but it goes unnoticed as the gold medallist is quickly surrounded by a horde of cameras and reporters. Nevin circumvents the gathering toward a small gathering of Irish media. He says a few words, has his picture taken with the tricolour and walks alone into the bowels of the arena.

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan
Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

Back in Mullingar applause resonates around the town center where a crowd of 5,000 [one quarter of the town's population] has just watched the ceremony on a specially erected 13-foot outdoor screen. While Nevin's immediate family decided to stay away from the town, many of his extended clan are among the spectators. Yet it is difficult to tell people apart; most blend together in a sea of green and gold. The town center belongs to no one and everyone, each person sharing common ground without disagreement or unrest; a community brought together by a young man's sporting endeavours.

"I'm glad of Mullingar, what they done for John Joe," said Nevin's mother Winnie later that night. "I was watching it on television and there was a queer [astonishing] atmosphere in Mullingar at the Market Square, and fair play to the Mullingar people, but not the pubs, the pubs is a disgrace."

Around the country 1.2 of the 5 million population tuned into the bout on television, with many more venturing to pubs and other public venues. The following Monday an estimated 7,000 people lined the streets of Mullingar to welcome back Nevin as he was paraded on an open-top bus.

"Today it's a dream come true for me to come back and get represented by such a big crowd," said Nevin at his homecoming. "It's great to see all my family here. I was devastated to lose the final but saying that, I've gotten so far and a month ago I was talking about not going [to the Olympics]."

That Nevin didn't win gold is insignificant. He ultimately absorbed the expectation of country and community and as part of the most successful boxing team in Ireland's Olympic history he showed that the small island can still compete with the best. Whether rich or poor, Traveller or settled, few can be untouched by the success of the Olympian that runs on their town's roads, trains at a nearby gym and breathes the same damp Irish air.

Nevin's success won't see the masses flock to boxing clubs, nor will it wholly change broad

John Joe Nevin Fought For More Than A Medal

Written by Ronan Keenan

Monday, 20 August 2012 08:01

perceptions of the Travelling community. But when the youth of Ireland are discouraged by the shortage of opportunity or fearing immigration, maybe in the coming months they will think of how Nevin had his own setbacks before he achieved on the grandest stage. He has provided a flicker of inspiration to a generation in danger of losing the ability to dream.

Ronan Keenan can be contacted at ronankeenan@yahoo.com

[Comment on this article](#)