

Calzaghe/Kessler Needs No Tagline

Written by Ronan Keenan

Tuesday, 30 October 2007 19:00

“The Collision at Cardiff”?

“The Celt versus the Viking”?

“The War in Wales”?

No thanks. Taglines aren't needed to promote this Saturday's super-middleweight title showdown in Cardiff, Wales. Both fighters' achievements speak for themselves.

Having amassed a combined record of 82-0 and four major world titles, Joe Calzaghe and Mikkel Kessler are undisputedly the best 168-pounders on the planet. But arguments abound as to who is number one.

Yet the two fighters have distanced themselves from the quarrelling and instead treat each other with deference, secure in the knowledge that their boxing will do the talking this weekend. Both men even broke into laughter when they were forced into a head-to-head stare-down at a press conference last month.

Neither combatant has the desire for trash talk and hyperbole, while shunning the glamorous lifestyle that can accompany a champion. Their ambitions have always encompassed the squared circle.

“A lot of my mates used to go out for a beer or three, it was very tempting to go on drinking benders,” reveals Kessler about his youth. “But I wanted to be a world champion and if I partied hard, I couldn't train properly the next day. I had to be strong and disciplined. I did not allow myself to party if I had nothing to celebrate.”

Likewise, Calzaghe has adopted a resolute dedication to his craft.

“Maybe I'm just a boring person. I don't have anything to do with my time except fight,” he admits. “I've always been a winner and need to win. I'm not a person who craves attention. I like my privacy and probably couldn't handle it if I was a footballer or film star. I just don't crave the spotlight. I'm a fighter and all I crave is respect for being a fighter.”

Saturday's event at the Millennium Stadium is being sold on both combatants' exceptional fighting ability rather than their outside-the-ring personalities. Hence, a crowd of over 50,000 and a worldwide television audience will be watching in anticipation of witnessing a top-class boxing match rather than a glitzy pantomime.

“Everybody knows we're the best two super middleweights in the world so there's no need [for us] to badmouth each other,” says Calzaghe, 43-0 (32).

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And in a year that has borne an abundance of mouth-watering matchups, Calzaghe-Kessler is viewed by many insiders as the premiere showdown.

“This, I believe, is the most competitive fight of the year, for Joe Calzaghe and Mikkel Kessler are, by a distance, the two best super middleweights in the world,” says Brian Doogan, European correspondent for The Ring.

“Calzaghe-Kessler is as mouth-watering a matchup as boxing can produce because the fighters are a combined 82-0, and clearly the best in their division,” believes ShoBox commentator Steve Farhood.

While laying claim to The Ring belt and having accrued 20 defences of his WBO strap, Calzaghe enters the bout as the recognized 168-pound champion, and his 14-year professional resume backs up that assertion.

His list of conquests includes a mixture of dangerous veterans (Chris Eubank, Charles Brewer, Byron Mitchell) and touted prospects (Mario Veit, Jeff Lacy, Peter Manfreda) that have covered a diversified range of styles and personalities. Yet throughout his long career Calzaghe has never confronted a fighter with Kessler’s impressive statistics.

Having built a 39-0 (29) slate in nine years, the 28-year-old Dane has comprehensively overcome experienced foes like Dingaana Thobela, Julio Cesar Green and Manny Siaca and elite titlists such as Anthony Mundine, Eric Lucas and Markus Beyer. Moreover, Kessler boasts a height advantage over Calzaghe, a feature that the Welshman has rarely encountered.

In his most celebrated victory, the 2006 drubbing of Jeff Lacy, Calzaghe was able to utilize his athletic advantages by peppering the squat American with rapid flurries. Throughout the twelve rounds Lacy motioned forward in a hunched manner, looking to land with winging hooks. But such a strategy was doomed to failure against a fighter of Calzaghe’s exceptional speed.

Similarly, Calzaghe’s other notable wins against Charles Brewer and Byron Mitchell were against volume punchers who tended to walk forward while neglecting a strong jab. But Kessler brings an antithetical approach, employing a traditional European style of an upright stance while focusing on a stiff jab and straight right hand.

“[Calzaghe is] going to be in for a big surprise,” predicts Kessler. “He’s never fought a guy like me before, that’s why he’s going to be in trouble. I hit harder than him and I’m going to hit him directly. The main thing is to hit Joe and not get hit back, and I’m good at not getting hit. I’ll win as I hit a bit straighter, a bit harder and with greater focus.”

“I’ve covered Kessler’s bouts for The Ring since he won the WBA title from Manny Siaca [in 2004] and I’ve been very impressed by him,” says Doogan. “In terms of technique, attitude, power and fitness, there are not many flaws.”

Kessler’s upright style and prodding jab could conceivably negate the Welshman’s superior speed, but Calzaghe seems well aware of that threat.

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“This fight is all about movement,” he says. “[Kessler] likes to fight in straight lines, he’s more of a straight puncher, so when I throw my combinations, it’s important for me to stand off to the side and give him angles and throw punches from all different sorts of angles, hitting him so fast that he thinks he’s surrounded.”

“He likes to come out in the center of the ring,” continues Calzaghe. “He doesn’t fight good going back. He doesn’t like to fight inside. So, there are two things I like to do. I like to go forward, that’s why I have to use my speed and use my angles and use my fast punching combinations.”

That tactic worked well for Calzaghe in his two meetings with Mario Veit, a tall contender who fought with a textbook European style. Calzaghe was able to get inside Veit’s long jab and pound the German with hooks and uppercuts. Veit crumbled inside a round when he fought Calzaghe in Cardiff six years ago and he was stopped in six frames in the needless rematch four years later.

In the 2001 meeting Veit offered minimal resistance and despite entering the ring with a glossy 30-0 record he was apparently struck with stage-fright in front of the raucous Welsh crowd. But such a fate is unlikely to befall Kessler, who out-pointed Australian Anthony Mundine in front of 16,000 fans in Sydney. Ironically, if either fighter is going to be affected by the partisan Welsh crowd it may be Calzaghe.

“If anything, [fighting in Cardiff] takes pressure off Kessler and adds more pressure on me, because obviously, fighting in front of your home crowd, you want to make sure you do the business. I don’t think it will affect Kessler unduly,” argues the Newbridge resident.

But Calzaghe’s ability to impress his hometown fans has been hampered in the past by reoccurring injuries to his left hand. The pain has even prevented the southpaw from sparring in preparation for some of his title defences, but he insists that at present his hands are healthy.

“At the moment, I’m sparring well, I’m punching out in the gym,” said Calzaghe during a conference call last week. “My hands feel one hundred percent, so you can’t go into any fight thinking about injuries or that you just shouldn’t fight. I’m going in there with one hundred percent positive attitude that I’m going to be punching twelve rounds full power.”

Yet logic would suggest that the 35-year-old Calzaghe has accumulated significant wear-and-tear during his quarter-century boxing career. Nonetheless, the champion believes that his maturity has made him a better fighter.

“I feel like I could fight until 40, there’s no deviation in my skills, I’m as quick as ever,” he claims. “I think I’d kick my ass five years ago and 10 years ago, so I feel that my best is still at the moment, I’ve still as fast as ever, I’m still feeling great shape.”

But there’s little doubt that Calzaghe has stagnated since his defeat of Lacy 20 months ago. A labored points win over Sakio Bika and a blowout of the inexperienced Peter Manfreda will have done little to maintain his sharpness, while adding to the mileage on his body clock.

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Conversely, in the same period Kessler's stock has risen exponentially thanks to his dismantling of Markus Beyer for the WBC title and dominance over the tough Librado Andrade in his HBO debut. The momentum advantage must surely reside with the streaking Copenhagen native.

"Kessler is younger, fresher, and technically superior, which will enable him to negate the southpaw's edge in speed," believes Farhood. "And one key factor: Calzaghe is Kessler's Lacy, the fight that can catapult him into the pound-for-pound top 10. I have to believe the Dane is hungrier. I predict Kessler on points in a close one."

"I think that Calzaghe has greater flexibility and adaptability," counters Doogan. "But the case can be made that both men will be meeting the best opponent they have ever faced. I feel that Kessler, like Lacy, hasn't faced anyone of Calzaghe's quality to date and he will also be stepping into the dragon's lair to do it with 50,000 fans or more cheering on the Welsh champion.

"I think it could be a terrific fight but I believe that Calzaghe has proved what he can do over the stretch while Kessler still has to prove that he can handle a boxer like Joe under these conditions."

In such an even matchup various intangibles are likely to play a part in the outcome. Even the proposed 1:30 AM start time could have a detrimental impact on one fighter. Regardless, HBO's request for the late start to facilitate the live US prime time screening of a fight between a Welshman and a Dane is further evidence of the growing globalization of the sport.

"The World Awaits"?