

Pocket Rocket McCullough Still Fired Up

Written by Ronan Keenan

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Rarely has a crossroads fight involved participants at such precarious stages of their careers. While some observers have labelled Saturday's Kiko Martinez-Wayne McCullough matchup as a showdown between an irresistible force and an immovable object, some see it as an unproven prospect versus a faded ex-champ.

By emerging from obscurity to annex the European 122-pound title in just 86 seconds from the highly-touted Bernard Dunne, the 21-year-old Martinez lived up to his moniker "La Sensación".

The crushing hooks that crashed into Dunne's exposed chin have become a hit on YouTube, while newspaper reports of the bout likened the Spaniard to a miniature Mike Tyson.

Yet if anyone has the credentials to withstand thunderous blows, it's McCullough. Despite standing toe-to-toe with some fearsome punchers, the Irishman has never been floored and earned recognition from The Ring as owner of boxing's best chin.

But to merit such acknowledgement a fighter must take a myriad of blows to the head. Many would argue that McCullough has absorbed too many.

In his last outing, 27 months ago, the "Pocket Rocket" endured ten rounds of unremitting exchanges with the then-premier super bantamweight Oscar Larios, before McCullough's trainer for the fight, Freddie Roach, asked the referee to save his fighter from further punishment.

In the aftermath, the Nevada State Athletic Commission suspended McCullough for six months, while Roach, an ex-fighter who suffers from trauma-induced Parkinson's disease, publicly stated that the Irishman should retire.

"I don't think he should fight anymore," said the esteemed trainer. "I definitely don't want to see Wayne end up like me [with Parkinson's]. I don't see him doing well in the future and I told him it's time to retire. I just worry about what might happen."

The boxing community may not be fully supportive of McCullough's fistic ambitions, but throughout his 37-year life the Las Vegas resident has never relied on encouragement from the masses.

Even though he was a Protestant from the notorious Shankill area of Belfast, McCullough had no reservations about carrying the Irish Tricolour when representing Ireland at the 1988 Olympics.

"I was fighting for Ireland first and foremost," says the silver medalist from the 1992 Games. "And the way I saw it was 'if I fight under the flag I should be happy to carry it.' If I was to say 'no' what kind of coverage would I have gotten? I am a sportsman, not a politician."

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McCullough originally planned on starting his professional career in Belfast, but a lucrative offer from American promoter Mat Tinley and the opportunity to train under the celebrated tutelage of Eddie Futch lured the 22-year-old to the neon of Las Vegas. The scorching desert heat and synthetic surroundings didn't deter the self-effacing Irishman, and after rattling off twelve undemanding victories he was matched with the respected 51-bout veteran Victor Rabanales.

McCullough was given a severe test by the rugged Mexican, but the novice dug deep to record a unanimous decision victory in a frenetic contest.

"That fight against Victor Rabanales was just so tough," recalls McCullough. "It's the earliest win that means the most to me, simply because he had so much more experience than me. It was definitely a learning fight and I had to think on my feet."

The win was enough to garner McCullough a shot at a world championship, but it would come in the form of a daunting challenge against the leading bantamweight titlist Yasuei Yakushiji, in Nagoya, Japan. But McCullough was undeterred by the exigent task and produced an almost flawless performance of non-stop punching and relentless aggression to win a split decision and the veritable respect of the Japanese crowd.

The prospect of an easy defence of his WBC title in Dublin against the limited Jose Luis Bueno convinced McCullough to grind his body down to the 118-pound limit, even though he knew it was no longer his natural fighting weight. The anticipated straightforward showcase never transpired, and the weakened McCullough was forced into an arduous battle, with some observers deeming him lucky to retain his belt on a split points verdict.

McCullough was so exhausted that he was rushed to the hospital immediately after the bout.

"I do not remember anything until the next day," he admits. "I won the fight yet my face was busted up. I was in the hospital after the fight and Bono from U2 held my hand for thirty minutes and I don't remember it."

McCullough's days as a champion ended after that night in Dublin. He moved up to the 122-pound division, but was narrowly defeated by the future Hall of Fame entrant Daniel Zaragoza in one of the most exciting fights of 1997.

Problems with Tinley began to materialize after a rematch with Zaragoza could not be arranged and McCullough's in-ring appearances became an irregular occurrence.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic in Spain, Real Madrid were proving themselves to be the leading football club in Europe, and their lessons in dominance were being watched by a young man in Alicante.

"I have always loved watching Madrid," Kiko Martinez would tell the Belfast Telegraph.

And a decade later he would follow the team's example and capture a European crown of his own. But football was not his only inspiration.

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“Mike Tyson was my big hero,” he said. “I admired Sugar Ray Leonard but Tyson was fantastic. I loved watching him fight and I have modeled my style on him. He was very exciting and he hit very hard, just like me.”

Kiko then set out on a mission to emulate the fighting style of “Iron Mike”. Blessed with the same stocky build as his idol, Martinez was able to intimidate his amateur opponents with his thick neck, wide shoulders and killer instinct.

While Martinez was developing an interest in the sweet science, McCullough was enduring spells of inactivity. Ironically, that predicament ultimately made him a more attractive opponent to the bigger name fighters and subsequent title challenges against Naseem Hamed and Erik Morales came about in the late nineties.

While the two marquee fighters had built up fearsome reputations and a combined 64-0 (56) record, the Irishman was merely regarded as a recognisable name whose light fists would pose little trouble to the undefeated champions.

Yet McCullough showed no respect for his opponents’ reputes and attacked without inhibition. Whereas Hamed opted to retreat for much of the twelve round contest, Morales stood his ground, but later admitted he contemplated quitting, such was the Irishman’s resiliency.

After lasting the distance with the Mexican, McCullough received recognition as one of the toughest fighters in the sport, but his resolve was severely shaken when his licence was revoked after a routine MRI scan for the British Boxing Board of Control [BBBC] showed a cyst on his skull before a planned homecoming bout in Belfast.

It was a day that would ingrain itself on McCullough’s memory.

“For six months I lived in October 18, 2000,” he reveals. “I was here but I wasn’t here.

“I was told [by the promoter Billy Murray] that one more punch to the head could kill me. I actually thought I was going to die because of the way it had been said. I thought if I took a knock to the head at all, by just banging it against a door or whatever, that would be it.”

After undergoing a rigorous series of tests, McCullough was eventually cleared to compete again by the BBBC, but his ultimate reward was a brutal 12-round beating by the potent fists of Scott Harrison in 2003. The featherweight titlist appeared to be at least two weight classes bigger than McCullough, and he administered a pounding to match.

“When I weighed in for the Harrison fight, I thought ‘we’re around the same size’,” says McCullough. “Then we got in the ring and he was huge, like a welterweight.”

Even though his ear had swelled grotesquely, McCullough managed to hear the final bell, but the referee was given numerous opportunities to stop the one-sided fight. Consequently, the beaten fighter was forced to spend a night in a Glasgow hospital, but his desire for combat would not be quenched and he remarkably summoned the will to engage Oscar Larios in two

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vigorous encounters.

But since the second fight on July 16 2005, McCullough, 27-6 (18), has been inactive, waiting for another chance at glory.

Conversely, Martinez has powered his way to the European title, swatting aside seemingly overmatched opposition to build a 17-0 (14) record. And even though the Spaniard was expected to struggle with Dunne in front of a partisan Irish crowd in Dublin, Martinez blitzed his way to victory, while demonstrating chilling power.

Now he wants to cement his standing as world-class prospect. And he has no objections about fighting in front of a pro-McCullough gathering at the Kings Hall in Belfast.

“I will be the first man to knock out McCullough,” he claims. “I give him respect but I expect to stop him. Fighting away from home is what I like very much. I get a real buzz from the fact that the crowd are against me. I prefer fighting away from Spain.”

But why would a rusty McCullough want to step back into the ring against such a formidable opponent, especially considering Martinez’ European title will not be on the line? McCullough has plenty of external interests such as reporting for The Ring magazine, training a crop of upcoming fighters and acting as an ambassador for the UFC.

Are financial constraints forcing him to once again lace up the gloves?

“People are saying that I’m just back fighting for the money, but I’m not,” he retorts. “If I beat Martinez then I can go on to fight for a world title maybe against Israel Vasquez next year.

“And I’m not rusty. Boxers develop ring rust by not training and staying away from the gym for long periods of time. I’ve been training for two years twice a day. I’m feeling in great shape.”

“Martinez hasn’t got the experience I have,” he adds. “When he beat Dunne he caught him cold and caught him around the temple. That can happen to anyone. I had 17 wins and I was world champion and had 13 knockouts but did that make me a big puncher? I know that it didn’t, so you can’t just go with his record.”

McCullough can take heart from the fact that Martinez’ knockout streak loses some of its lustre when it’s noted that, excluding Dunne, his previous five opponents had 70 losses between them.

Moreover, how will the relative neophyte react if his punches bounce off the concrete jaw of McCullough? Then again, can the Irishman’s punch resistance possibly be as stout as it once was?

Ultimately, the victor will likely need to possess a quality that is often cited in English soccer; unfavored teams that aim to remain in the top division are said to need great “bouncebackability”.

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And if that word ever makes it into the English dictionary, a picture of Wayne McCullough would make a fitting explanation.