

Duddy Gets Stiffest Test To Date

Written by Ronan Keenan

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BELFAST, Northern Ireland -- The Kings Hall venue in Belfast has witnessed nights of unbridled passion over the years, but the local boxing fans have had little to cheer about since the successes of Barry McGuigan and Dave McAuley two decades ago.

Their frustrations were heightened last week when Wayne McCullough's bout with Kiko Martinez was cancelled after the Spaniard failed to make the contracted weight. But hot prospect and Derry native John Duddy will be looking to please the knowledgeable crowd at the historic venue when he meets seasoned veteran Howard Eastman on December 8.

Former world title challenger Eastman is expected to be Duddy's sternest test to-date, and the Guyana native is a welcome challenge for the Ulsterman. Since his punishing victory over the tough Yori Boy Campas fifteen months ago, Duddy has been matched with a series of limited opponents. Most recently, he disposed of the 19-year-old Prince Arron in a two-round blowout last October.

It appeared that Duddy's management were opting to keep their charge out of danger until the fruition of a mooted 160-pound world title challenge against Kelly Pavlik, but Saturday's opponent is undoubtedly a serious threat to the Irishman's glossy record. Eastman is a crafty 47-bout veteran who has competed with the some of the best middleweights in the world.

"I think Howard Eastman has fought in a different ball-park than what I've been in," says a deferential Duddy ahead of his debut appearance in Northern Ireland.

The London-based "Battersea Bomber" was unbeaten in 32 fights before losing a close points decision to then-WBA titlist William Joppy in 2001. Eastman had to wait four years for his next big opportunity, which came against the pound-for-pound king Bernard Hopkins. Another points loss dented Eastman's reputation Stateside and seemed to deflate his ambitions as he looked jaded in subsequent defeats to the highly-regarded Arthur Abraham and Edison Miranda.

Yet he showed renewed energy in out-pointing Evans Ashira last April, before stumbling to an upset decision loss against Wayne Elcock five months later. Eastman's handlers said jetlag hampered his performance, but the defeat may have been evidence that his days as a top contender are over.

Eastman has been described as the best British fighter never to win a world crown, so it's fitting that he has stated his fondness for the movie *On The Waterfront*, in which Marlon Brando's character, Terry Malloy famously laments his life, which has taken him from possible ring glory to obscurity.

Still, Eastman's performances have been so uneven throughout his career that it is hard to gauge how much he has left in the tank. Even his trainer, former world title challenger Robert McCracken, is never certain of the 36-year-old's mentality.

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“If the right Howard Eastman turns up then he can win [on Saturday],” believes McCracken. “In fact he has the ability to beat just about anyone. The wrong Eastman turned up against Elcock. One thing the fans can be assured of is that this is going to be a great fight. Duddy’s an exciting fighter and Howard hits very hard, [but] there are questions for both fighters.”

Duddy has had his own potential queried after his bloody struggle against Campas. The Mexican is by far the most accomplished opponent on Duddy’s 22-0 (17 KOs) record, but Eastman is closer to his prime and should provide an even sterner task.

The Irishman knows that an impressive display this weekend will help silence his critics.

“The toughest assignment up to now for me was Yori Boy,” admits the 28-year-old. “He had vast experience over me and Howard is no different. If I can make it an easier night for myself I certainly will. But I don’t think it’s going to be an easy night.”

Despite a long amateur career, Duddy has rarely employed the finer aspects of the sweet science in the paid ranks and has shown a tendency for wielding wide hooks that have left him prone to counter attacks. In an effort to improve his defensive ability and prevent career-shortening brawls, Duddy enlisted the help of Don Turner earlier this year and has been preparing under the tutelage of the renowned trainer in North Carolina.

“John was a boxer before as an amateur, but he got off track,” says Turner. “He’s gone back to doing what he did as an amateur boxer, and he’s not getting hit as much.”

The Belfast crowd will certainly be hoping that Turner can help eradicate some of Duddy’s defensive lapses, providing he leaves a few flaws to quench their passion for excitement.

Duddy-Eastman and bouts from the undercard featuring unbeaten prospects Paul McCloskey and Stephen Haughian can be seen live on RTE.ie from 4pm ET.