

Written by Ronan Keenan
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DUBLIN, Ireland -- Sailing away from the coast of Cuba, he didn't imagine it would lead to this. A sharp March breeze stung Guillermo Rigondeaux's face as he walked with head lowered through the parking lot of the Citywest hotel. Regarded as the greatest amateur boxer of modern times, Rigondeaux defected from his communist homeland, leaving behind a wife and two children to reap the trappings of professional prizefighting. His expectations of success likely didn't involve facing an unbeaten Irish brawler at a hotel on the outskirts of Dublin during St. Patrick's weekend.

The world of pro boxing bears little resemblance to an amateur system where national teams compete in organized tournaments under computerized scoring. After eight paid outings Rigondeaux has learned that fighting is now the easy part of his life.

At the weigh-in on Friday he got a taste for professional hoopla, standing opposite his fiery opponent Willie Casey in front of a raucous crowd of Irishmen. The adrenaline-fueled Casey, with short red hair and wide blue eyes, stared intensely, waving his arms as the crowd cheered him on. With a furrowed brow Rigondeaux looked at the ground, unaccustomed to such an inhospitable atmosphere.

'He was nervous and intimidated by it,' admitted Rigondeaux's manager Gary Hyde.

Conflict outside the ring has followed the 30-year-old Rigondeaux since his failed attempt to abscond from Cuba in 2007. Representing the national team at a tournament in Rio de Janeiro, he went missing from the party with teammate Erislandy Lara. A week later they were found on a beach in Rio following a binge of food, drink and women paid for by Arena Box Promotions, a German group who were trying to entice the boxers to Europe. Returning to a villainous reception, Rigondeaux was punished by the Cuban government in the form of a ban on all contact with the Cuban boxing authorities. The motor car once bestowed to him by Fidel Castro was also revoked and the hero that won two Olympic and World Championship gold medals was now a pariah.

'An athlete who abandons his team is like a soldier who abandons his fellow troops in the middle of combat,' stated Castro.

Rigondeaux's wife, Farah Colina, said her husband trained for a while with local youths on the street but soon stopped and became depressed. 'Those were very hard moments and nobody came to even offer him a job,' she said. Eighteen months later, unbeknownst to his wife, Rigondeaux was sitting on a speedboat en route to Cancun.

Awaiting Rigondeaux inside the Citywest hotel, Willie Casey shadowboxed, unable to contain his nervous energy. His fight with Rigondeaux offered him the chance to claim an interim

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version of the WBA 122-pound world title and paydays that were once beyond his wildest fantasy.

Born into the middle of 22 siblings in the Irish Travelling community [a traditionally nomadic group of people that maintain a distinct set of traditions] Casey was the first of his family to stay in school beyond the age of 15. He left to earn money for the family and spent years doing anything that would pay: cleaning cars, fixing tyres, welding, steel work. When the Irish economic downturn began and opportunities for income diminished, Casey got into boxing and turned to the pro game in 2008 with scant amateur experience.

'I was short of the skill and technique for the amateurs, but I didn't know a lot about the pro game,' said Casey, 29. 'I thought you had to be an Olympic gold medallist to make it. It's not the way. It's a different game.'

It's a game in which the desire to fight can outweigh an ability to box. Casey's fondness for aggressively pressurizing opponents and launching sustained barrages of heavy hooks saw him win a tournament in London that consisted of three fights in one night and prize money of 32,000 British pounds. That triumph was followed up by a European title victory against fellow Irishman Paul Hyland, gaining Casey national fame that was enhanced by a charming, humble demeanor.

While Casey's career has quickly blossomed unexpected rewards, Rigondeaux has struggled to gain momentum. After disembarking the speedboat in Cancun, Rigondeaux didn't meet his manager Gary Hyde as planned, and continued on a journey to Miami. Despite signing a five-year managerial contract with Hyde before his departure from Havana, Rigondeaux enlisted the services of Luis DeCubas. Legal wrangling ensued, with Hyde eventually emerging victorious and negotiating a three-year deal with promotional outfit Top Rank. A brief stint training under the tutelage of Freddie Roach in Los Angeles ended in acrimony with Rigondeaux accusing the trainer of regularly forcing him to spar with heavier fighters. Roach countered that Rigondeaux was not in top condition to fight. Hyde subsequently moved Rigondeaux to Houston to train with Ronnie Shields.

The deal with Top Rank bore fruit last November in the form of a high-profile showcase on the undercard of Manny Pacquiao's fight with Antonio Margarito at Cowboy Stadium, Dallas. An opportunity to impress against former world titlist Ricardo Cordoba turned into reputational damage. Rigondeaux was floored in the sixth round and spent the remainder of the fight in elusive retreat, landing with enough punches to take a split decision victory in a monotonous affair that drew boos from the 40,000-plus crowd and derision among the boxing media.

'Rigondeaux looked almost disinterested at times,' wrote Dan Rafael of ESPN.com.

Fittingly, the build-up to Saturday's bout with Casey was subjugated with contention. Rigondeaux's scheduled appearance at a press event in January was delayed when he was denied departure from the US due to visa trouble. There were then doubts whether the fight would go ahead as the promoters, an upstart group under the name Dolphil, were unable to secure TV coverage for their event. Just last week the Irish national broadcaster RTE agreed to

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screen the fight but only on the basis that Dolphil cover all production costs.

As close to 5,000 spectators, many intoxicated by alcohol and an air of violence, crammed into the Citywest ballroom, the fighter that appeared so meek at the weigh-in had gained a distinct look of authority. Rigondeaux, sporting gold trunks that contrasted with his dark ebony skin, prowled across the ring during the pre-fight introductions. Raising his arms, he made an X sign, as if predicting a forthcoming execution. He was calm amid the noisy support for his adversary, content in the knowledge that outside factors could no longer prevent him from partaking in his life's calling.

Across the ring Casey, partaking in his 12th professional fight, bounced on his toes, twisting and turning itching limbs. 'Rigondeaux can't run from me for 12 rounds,' said Casey beforehand, vowing to pressurize the Cuban into a toe-to-toe battle.

At the sound of the bell Casey rushed across the ring and fired a right hook from his southpaw stance. Rigondeaux took one step back, but no more. As Casey approached, Rigondeaux unleashed a series of body punches. Casey felt the blows and immediately his elbows clung tightly to his body. They traded southpaw jabs. Rigondeaux landed with a clean left hand under Casey's right elbow and suddenly the aggressor moved into survival mode. Rigondeaux knew his man was hurt and went on the attack as Casey backpedalled in an unfamiliar fashion.

The Cuban rapidly switched his attack from body to head. Casey didn't know where to block. Rigondeaux then introduced the bolo punch, a sweeping left uppercut that caught the Irishman on the chin, sending him staggering to the canvas. Casey quickly reclaimed his feet, but there was no longer vigour in his eyes. Rigondeaux maintained his momentum, stalking forward behind blistering combinations, his long arms enabling him to gain powerful leverage. Casey was knocked down for the second time following a heavy left hand to the ear. Referee Stanley Christodoulou could have halted the bout then, but it continued until a few more pin-point punches landed on Casey's stunned head and he stumbled to the floor at 2:38 of the first round.

Shaken, Casey was escorted back to his corner stool under the counsel of his trainer Phil Sutcliffe. The fighter was advised to take breathes, not to worry about the result. 'You just got caught. Can happen anyone,' Casey was told.

'[Rigondeaux] had it all to prove tonight,' said Casey, 11-1 (7), a few minutes afterwards. 'He showed he can stand and fight and bang. His shots come from every angle. We knew what to expect. You get caught with shots like that and you go down. Good chin, bad chin; it doesn't matter.'

Casey wore a smile of relief as he left the ring, aware that sometimes determination cannot compensate for a lack of natural talent. Meanwhile, Rigondeaux, his 5'5 frame being paraded on the shoulders of Ronnie Shields, had reason to grin.

'I came to his territory to show I can fight,' he said having advanced his record to 8-0 (6).

Rigondeaux will know that tougher challenges await. His four hundred amateur bouts proved he could box, but travelling across the world to dominate with such conviction in the intensely

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antagonistic atmosphere of a prizefight requires a sturdy resolve. In professional boxing, regardless of the opponent, putting on a show takes precedence over skillful defensive demonstrations.

Yet even in the euphoria of victory, Rigondeaux cannot escape thoughts of home. 'I left Cuba to better myself and pursue freedom,' he said through translator Ricardo DeCubas. 'I am better off where I can help [my family] financially than being over there and stuck in a system that's not working.'

Stepping back out into the cold night air Rigondeaux walked with purpose, the sense of fulfillment making the bleak weather easier to bear.

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