

CLARKE'S RYDER FORM

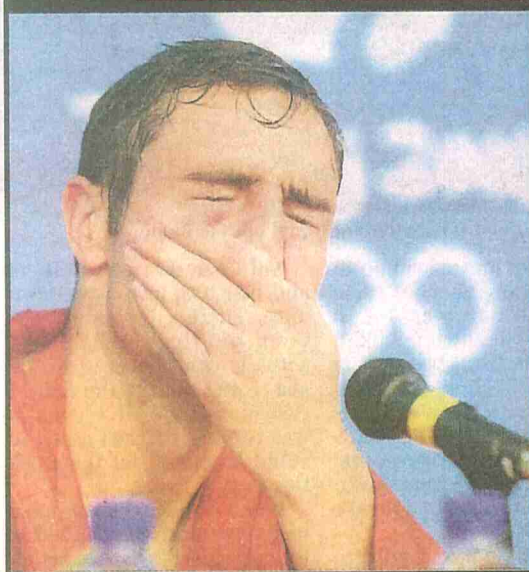
Victory at yesterday's KLM Open leaves Darren Clarke in prime position to claim Ryder Cup wildcard place **7**



OLYMPICS P2-6
GAA P8-17
SOCCER P18-25
RUGBY P26
RACING P28-30

SILVER LINING

CAPTAIN FANTASTIC
LIGHTS UP OLYMPICS
DESPITE FINAL
HEARTACHE **PAGES 2-5**



Olympic silver medalist Kenny Egan shows his emotions at yesterday's post-fight press conference after his narrow light heavyweight final defeat in Beijing

Croker set for Super Sunday as incredible Rebels rally

Gaelic Games

Martin Breheny

ONE of the most amazing comebacks in GAA history at Croke Park yesterday is likely to result in an All-Ireland football semi-final treble header at HQ next Sunday.

Cork hit Kerry for 2-2 in the final five minutes to snatch a dramatic draw against a side who were 1/100 to win after the hour mark as they powered into an eight-point lead.

However, goals by James Masters, following a mistake by Kerry keeper, Diarmuid Murphy, and John Hayes from the penalty spot, after Graham Canty was fouled in the square deep in stoppage time, earned Cork a replay, details of which will be announced today.

It's expected that it will go ahead in Croke Park next Sunday along with the Tyrone v Wexford (senior) and Meath v Tyrone (minor) semi-finals.

Kerry midfielder, Darragh O Se and Cork wing-forward, Donnacha O'Connor will both miss the replay after being sent off on straight red cards in separate incidents in the second half.

Referee, Joe McQuillan dismissed O Se in the 38th minute after an off-the-ball clash with Pearse O'Neill while O'Connor was sent off 12 minutes later for striking out at Aidan O'Mahony.

Ironically, the replay will clear O Se or O'Connor for the final, depending on who wins next weekend. Both can expect a four-week ban which would expire on the night before the final.

Had yesterday's game produced a winner, O Se or O'Connor would have missed the final as a one-game ban applies if the period of suspension coincides with an idle period on the playing front.

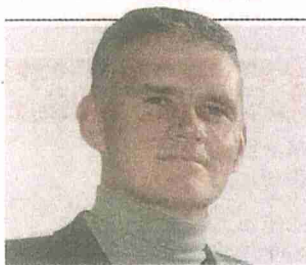
O Se was also sent off in the Munster final against Cork but served no suspension as it was for two yellow card offences.

REPORT AND ANALYSIS
PAGES 8-11

SOCCER INSIDE: BERBATOV'S MAN UNITED MOVE LOOKS IMMINENT AFTER €25 MILLION BID PAGE 19

ALL IS NOT FAIR

Egan joy but 'best light-heavyweight on the planet' falls foul of the judges



VINCENT HOGAN

in Beijing

Boxing

MAYBE our optimism was the fat, little conceit of the story.

We thought Kenny Egan of Walkinstown might put a stick in the spokes of the motherland. We fell for the fairytale. But evening closed in on Olympia yesterday and a glimpse skyward revealed nothing of ourselves in the flaring, red nimbus of Chinese exultation.

There had been a larcenous feel to business in the Workers' Gymnasium but, to be fair, we were short of reliable judges. It wasn't quite Roy Jones being mugged by the Korean, Park Si-Hun, in Seoul. You didn't feel the need to read anyone their rights.

But amateur boxing is prone to subjective whim and the Beijing Games have done little to foster confidence.

Asked if he considered himself the best light-heavyweight in the tournament, Egan replied "Definitely, definitely, without a doubt, the best light-heavyweight on the planet. You can put that in big bold writing."

Inviting him to explore this business further, someone wondered if Kenny felt the word 'cheat' might be appropriate. Sensibly, he tossed the bait aside.

"No, I wouldn't say cheat," he answered. "I'd just say the scoring was unfair. That's all."

The records will say that Zhang Xiaoping landed 11 scores to Egan's seven, thereby becoming Olympic champion. It wasn't perhaps the most dubious of the hosts' 51 golds at these Games, but it did engender a surreal postscript.

The first question thrown the champion's way at the post-fight press-conference all but queried his gall. Did he *really*

believe he had won? More pertinently, the question did not come from an Irish voice.

Zhang, though, was inscrutable. Speaking through an interpreter, he pretty much echoed Egan's view on the first round (edged by the home fighter) and declared the other three "pretty equal". Egan listened with the quiet grace of a man bred to respect his host.

The press conference, essentially, was spared the germs of recrimination. But, by then, the world and his uncle had spoken.

Billy Walsh was as outspoken as you would expect the Irish head coach to be. Yet, nothing Billy said ran too flagrantly against the broad consensus either. British bronze medalist, Tony Jeffries, offered a view that Egan had won the fight by "two or three points".

Just about everyone considered the official maths, at best, a mite eccentric.

Egan had been more candid in the mixed-zone, declaring "The whole arse has fallen out of it (the Olympic experience) now to be honest with you. I know an Olympic silver medal is brilliant but I really thought I had the beatings of that guy."

"Still, Olympic silver medalists are very rare. I'm proud to be Irish and proud to have that silver. I knew it was going to be hard (to win) if it was any way close. He won his previous fight on countback. He's Olympic champion, I'm not. That's it, that's sport. I'm sick as a pig, but that's how things go."

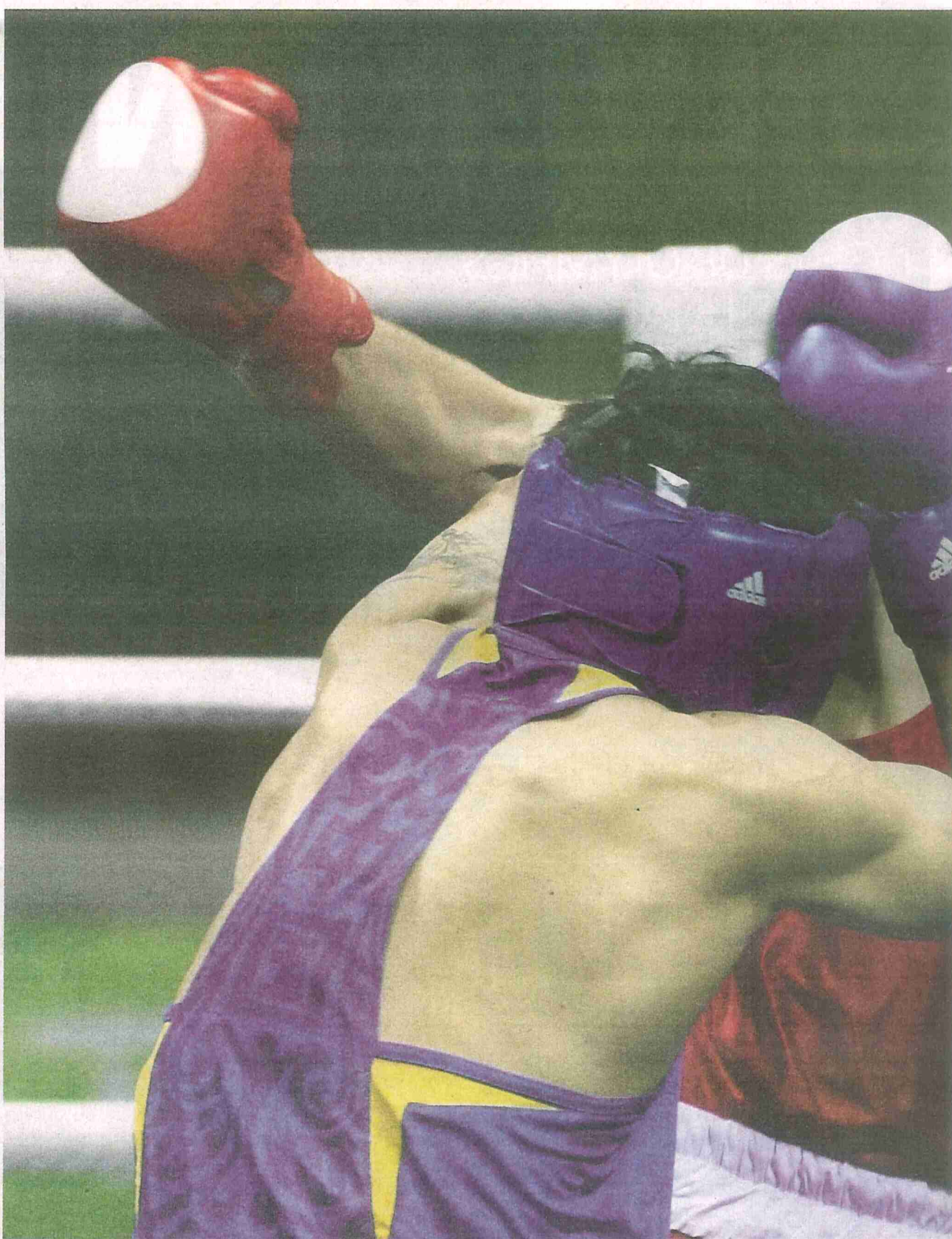
Tentatively

By his own admission, Egan had started tentatively. He was two down at the end of the first round and, already Walsh could feel his indignation rise.

The difficulty was in locating categorical evidence. Zhang had quick feet and clever hands. He invited Egan forward, knowing it wasn't the Irishman's preferred tactic.

If there was skullduggery afoot, it took slightly sharper form in the second. One Zhang punch caromed off Kenny's glove, yet registered a score. Unless the judges all sneezed together, it was indefensible.

Egan explained: "He threw a few shots that hit my elbow and I could hear the Chinese going bananas. So I obviously knew he was getting a score. After that, I knew myself it was going to be a hard fight. It's ridiculous. He's throwing slaps, hitting elbows and getting scores from them."



Zhang Xiaoping of China (left) lands with a left on Kenny Egan during yesterday's light heavyweight final bout in Beijing.

The crowd, naturally, convulsed with each new digit for the blue corner. A sense of hunt ensued. With each roar, Zhang became emboldened. In the third, a beautiful Egan left hook seemed to be accredited to Zhang. Walsh's head was in his hands.

"There were definitely five or six shots not given to Kenny, a blind man could see them," said Billy.

"I'm just gutted for him, for all of us really. Because second best isn't good enough. You want to be victorious, you want to win everything, to be gold

medallists. But, for someone to try to please the Chinese crowd and take that away from him is disgraceful. I think everyone saw it. We're gutted. I know he's had a great Games.

Great

"It's been a great Games for us all, two bronze medals and a silver. But we want to be the best. And Kenny Egan is the best man in these Games. He just doesn't have the medal to prove it."

With one round to go, Egan had to fly against every instinct in his body.

Walsh sent him out simply to throw as many punches as he could. The gap was 7-5 in Zhang's favour and it felt like a great prairie. Zhang was scoring with the most cursory flicks of his arm, with blows barely amounting to the lightest flurries of sleet. But two points down against a China man in China, Kenny Egan had to take out the scattergun.

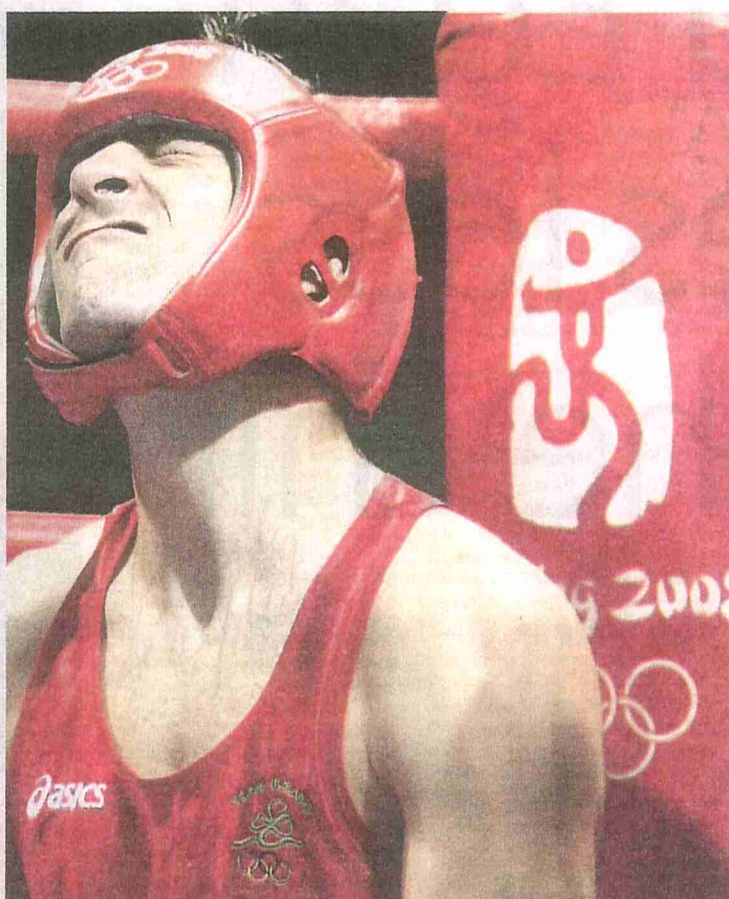
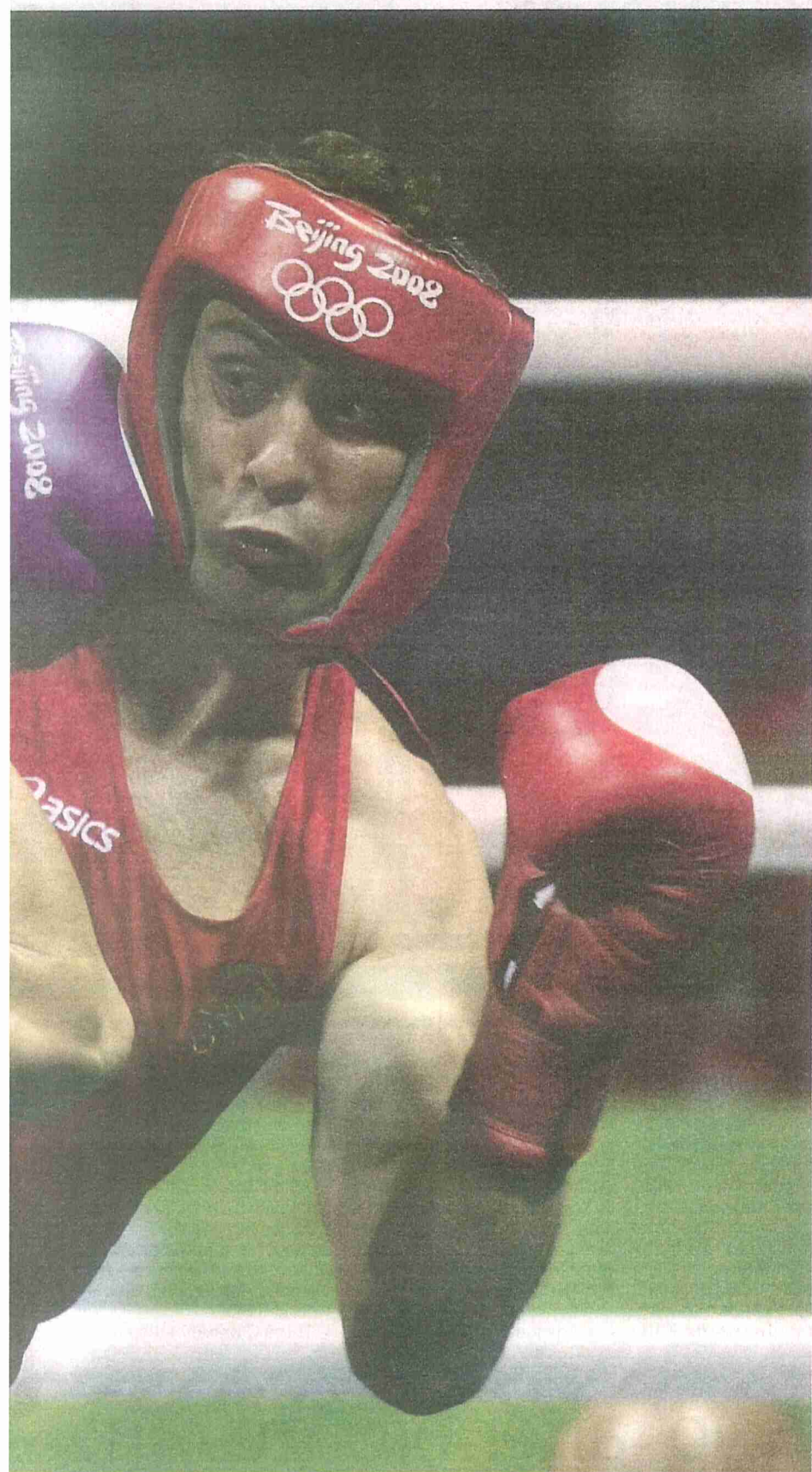
"I knew then it was going to be an uphill battle," he reflected. "I was creasing him with body shots, but he was getting the scores. I wasn't. What can I do?"

"All I can do is get in there and just box, give a performance. There's five judges out there and that's something I actually can't control. In the last, I was chasing the fight. I rushed it a little bit. I had to. I was behind, I wasn't going to stand back and let the clock tick away."

When it ended, he crumpled to his knees, burying his face in the canvas. And Zhang, whether through imitation or embarrassment, chose to do the same. All around us, China was a field of poppies.

Billy had spoken earlier in

IN GLOVE WAR



Walsh: Scoring system not fair, but improving

Billy Walsh (Irish head coach)

"I don't know, to beat a Chinaman in China maybe you need a Tommy gun or something to shoot him, to finish him off."

"In all fairness to Zhang (Xiaoping), he's had a great Games as well. He's beaten some very good quality, beaten the European champion and the world champion. He's been very good as well."

"We really felt that if the light-fly (Siming Zou) had won, we had a chance. If he hadn't won, I could have probably thrown the towel in after the first round. But when the light-flyweight won I thought we had a good chance, I thought there might be a small bit of leniency."

"But we've been through this (judging) process and there's been a lot worse. A lot, lot worse."

"We couldn't get a fella qualified for an Olympics, let alone be here with three medals. It is a lot better under Mister Wu (Wu Ching-kuo). He's only two years in office. You can't change the world in a short space of time."

"It is getting better, but you see what it can be like. Still, it's been a fantastic performance from the team. Everybody performed. I think the whole nation should be proud of them. Hopefully, we lifted a little bit of the doom and gloom."



Tony Jeffries (GB bronze-medallist)

"I didn't think the scoring was fair. Not at all. I feel Kenny should be walking away with the gold medal. The scoring's not been good all the way through, but there it was terrible."

"He (Zhang) has hit Kenny on the arms, which is not a score. But the crowd were going mad and they (the judges) were pressing the buttons. He (Zhang) got scores a couple of times from hitting Kenny's gloves and when Kenny was hitting him with good clean shots they weren't scoring."

"He was tapping with Kenny with little nothing shots and they were scoring. I think Kenny should have won by two or three points."

the week of the bad old days, of crooked judges and of young fighters left broken by the sins of officialdom. The Jones theft in '88 was the marquee moment. It was said then that the American landed 86 clean punches to Park's 32.

The Korean subsequently apologised.

That image of a judicial cesspit has prevailed across different generations and Olympiads. Andy Lee absconded to the pro ranks after Athens because he believed Olympic qualification tournaments to

be too loaded in favour of Eastern bloc countries. Lee is 24 now, trying to scavenge a career in shark-infested waters.

Four years, he reasoned, was just too long to wait for a bingo-card.

Dry-cleaned

But the arrival of Wu Ching-kuo as head of the World Amateur Boxing Federation had, it seemed, dry-cleaned the whole process. Billy reckoned after Paddy Barnes's outburst on Saturday that the game was still 95 per cent honest.

"Unfortunately, the five per cent was on show today," he reckoned now. "The computer is only as good as the people pressing the buttons. And we don't have the best referees and judges here. We have a divide because, politically, they want to keep every continent happy."

"We had a fella here sent home after the first day, who was sent home from the World Championships too. And they send him to an Olympic Games? How is he fit to judge here?"

We don't know the nature of Egan's future plans but we do

know that he boxed beautifully at these Games. And yesterday's defeat confirmed an extraordinary statistic. All five Irish boxers lost in Beijing to the eventual Olympic champions of their weight-division. Furthermore, John Joe Joyce's defeat was a countback verdict. A virtual throw of the dice.

This was a team that performed then.

Last night, Egan said he had "signed nothing", but rather pertinently declared "I love the amateur game, that's what I'm all about. Who knows, in four years

time, I could still be captain."

He had collapsed in Billy's arms at the finish, frustration filling every pore. And Billy held him like a mother clinging to a returning son. What did you say to him, Billy? we wondered in that probing way of human interest detectives.

"I told him 'I love you to bits!'" said Billy.

As the last of the fireworks boomed out of China last night, and the ostentation was put to rest, few things glistened brighter than Kenny Egan's silver.

By David O'Sullivan