

# John Duddy

## Phenomenon

*He's exciting but raw, unbeaten but untested. Yet Irish middleweight John Duddy is packing out arenas in the New York area. STEVE FARHOOD is swept along with the tide but wonders: Will it ever be more than a green thing?*

**O**n a Wednesday night in October 2003, I attend a clubshow at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in New York City. My attention at such fight cards is selective; if there's a fighter I'm curious about, I'll focus on the ring. Otherwise, the evening is as much about schmoozing and socialising as reporting and writing.

I'm chatting with two of my colleagues from Showtime when nameless, faceless junior middleweights begin their ring-walks. Jones vs Johnson ... Rivera vs Lopez ... what's the difference?

Suddenly, as if we are about to witness a multimillion-dollar superfight at Caesars Palace, the room erupts in wild cheers. I glance down at my bout sheet: **John Duddy**, 1-0, Derry, Ireland, vs Jesse Gomez, 1-1, Queens, New York. Four rounds.

I've never heard of either one of them.

Being the remarkably quick study that I am, it takes me only a minute or so to realise the noise isn't for Gomez.

Duddy wins inside of a round. There's nothing I'll remember about the fight, but the crowd response, which includes a dizzy fan waving an empty bottle of hard liquor, guarantees that I'm not going to forget the fighter.

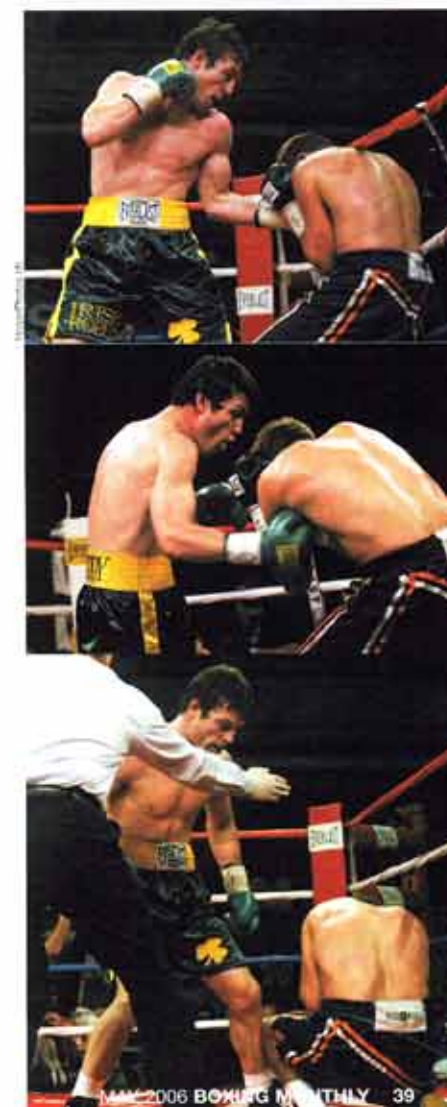
One month later. Same venue, different promoter. Duddy is in another four-rounder, but I'm ready this time; I'm not going to drop my head to glance at my bout sheet. In fact, I'm not going to take my eyes off Duddy at all. And a good thing, too; in a bout that again lasts less than a round, Duddy gets dropped by Leo Laudat, a fighter with a record of 3-5, gets up, and gets revenge by scoring three knockdowns of his own.

The energy Duddy has created is palpable. I don't jump up and down (no rooting in the press section, and all that), but I want to. Everybody else is screaming and spinning and slapping high-fives.

From my notes: "Duddy demands our attention, then goes out and proves he deserves it."

Fast-forward once more, this time to St. Patrick's Day Eve, 2006. At 15-0 (14), Duddy has not only outgrown the Crowne Plaza Hotel, but sold out the Theater at Madison Square Garden (capacity 5,038), something world welterweight champion and hometown product Zab Judah recently failed to do.

The fights aren't even remotely competitive, but Irish eyes keep smiling because the undercard winners have names like Shea and Moore and Clancy. Gerry Cooney is in the house, and so is former No. 1-ranked light-heavyweight Bobby Cassidy and former local heavyweight hope Seamus McDonagh. Hell, with his first name, even front-row fan Shane Mosley passes as Irish.



**DUDDY IS 15-0** with 14 KOs, seven of his first nine victories coming in the opening round



The promoter is Irish Ropes. The main event referee is Wayne Kelly. The TV announcers are Sean O'Grady and Micky Ward. The round-card girls are river-dancers. Some of the four-round fighters prove a bit green, but on this night, how can that be a bad thing?

Curiously, the ring canvas is red. What's up with that? You don't serve corned beef and cabbage with a spicy marinara sauce.

Duddy, now a middleweight, faces North Dakota's Shelby Pudwill, whose record of 21-2-1 flatters him. There are three knockdowns, and the fight lasts 91 seconds — which is exactly how long it took Mike Tyson to stop Michael Spinks.

After Duddy's win, somebody asks promoter Cedric Kushner what he thought of the show. "It was great," the Walrus says, "if you were Irish."

**A**sked to explain his snowballing popularity in a city that's impossible to impress, John Duddy answered quickly: "It's all because I'm Irish."

Actually, there's more to it than that. Duddy is also Irish-handsome and Irish-exciting. An ugly mug who fights like Johnny Nelson wouldn't be selling out Paddy's Pub, much less the Garden.

After brawling with Joe Louis, Billy Conn explained his KO loss by saying, "What's the sense of being Irish if you can't be dumb now and then?" Duddy's boxing IQ hasn't yet been determined, but thus far, he hasn't been able to resist the impulse to brawl. Unlike Conn, however, he isn't spotting his opponent 25 pounds.

As a domestic amateur champion with international experience, Duddy bounced and boxed. His father, Mickey Duddy, was his coach. The senior Duddy fought professionally as a light-welterweight from 1981 to '83, compiling a record of 3-4, and sharing bills at Belfast's Ulster Hall with Barry McGuigan.

Shortly after Duddy came to America (his family remains in County Derry), he teamed with trainer Harry Keit at the legendary Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn. Keit doesn't have a national reputation, but he's worked with heavyweight contenders Carl Williams and Oleg Maskaev, among others. The first question Keit asked: "Can you throw a jab?" Duddy's answer: "I don't know."

The bouncer was about to become a banger.

"I knew John would make the transition from boxer to puncher," said Eddie McLoughlin, who, along with his brothers Tony and Paul, promotes Duddy. "When John first came over, he was still an amateur and he lived with me. He worked for my construction company and he'd just go at things, putting 20 bricks in a wheelbarrow and moving it along. My brother is 200 pounds-plus and has the strength of two men, and John would always want to prove he was better than that. I've never seen a kid with his natural strength."

"John is definitely a quick learner," Keit said. "He's not necessarily the most talented fighter, but he's the hungriest. We've worked on moving, not bouncing, and sitting down on his punches. And we train with a sledhammer; John swings it side to side for a half-hour."

The results have been emphatic. Seven of Duddy's first nine wins were first-round KOs, including his toughest test to date, a nationally televised demolition of Lenard Pierre, 16-0, in March 2005. Duddy has also gone long, extended by veterans Pat Coleman (KO8) and Patrick Thompson (W8) and Haiti's Julio Jean (W10).

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**JOHN DUDDY**



"As an amateur, I wasn't timing my punches or looking to hurt people," Duddy said. "But I like American-style boxing. I wanted to be part of that, where you beat the body to kill the head."

The criticism of Duddy's style has been consistent: He doesn't move his head and invites punches by courting confrontation. He's come full-circle: Now the banger needs to box.

"We're not trying to knock people out," Keit said. "It's just happening. But there's more to John than that. And as the competition goes up, you have to make adjustments."

I asked a pair of New York-based matchmakers to comment on Duddy.

"He's a real exciting fighter who feeds off his fans," said Joe Quiambao of DiBella Entertainment. "He's explosive, but his weaknesses are defence and experience. He's had 16 fights, but not a lot of rounds. They're moving him at the right pace so that everybody can see what John Duddy's all about."

"He's a real nice kid with a lot of charisma in the ring," said Ron Katz of Northeast Promotions. "He's probably one of the best attractions we've had in this area in some time. But the path they're taking is far too easy for him. Only the special fighters can elevate to the next level taking a similar path."

"When he's gone rounds, he's shown numerous weaknesses. If he doesn't knock you out, he seems confused at times. And his defence is very lax. It remains to be seen what happens when he faces adversity. He's okay as long as he's in his little nest."

**I**n boxing, ticket-selling prospects like Duddy present a unique problem. Focus on box-office receipts and you're likely matching your fighter too softly. Focus on his development and you might blow million-dollar paydays.

The power-promoters have all come calling. So far, Team Duddy has maintained its independence.

"The promoters want John, but they're not really putting their hands in their pockets," McLoughlin said. "The money that could be made is astronomical. But money clouds everything, and it's not really a concern now. Ninety percent of the time, John's opponents have made more money than he has."

"We want to make the public like John. And the press will start ripping us if we don't move the bar up."

"At the moment, money is not the object of my boxing career," Duddy added. "It's about finding out how good I am. The star thing comes along whether you want it or not. Being recognised by complete strangers is nice, and so is having restaurant managers tell me the meal is on the house. People like you if you're a genuine person, and I'm not a shit-head. But at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter unless I keep winning."

Duddy's next scheduled bout comes at Madison Square Garden on 10 June, underneath Miguel Cotto-Paulie Malignaggi. In the opposite corner will be 36-year-old junior middleweight Freddy Cuevas, which suggests that Duddy's opponents are still being chosen for whom they've faced, not whom they've beaten. Cuevas, 25-8-1, is 4-4 in his last eight, with the wins all coming in scheduled six-rounders. In the last three years, he's lost to Kassim Ouma, Kingsley Ikeke, and Jermain Taylor.

"The fight before Paddy's Day," McLoughlin said, "the guy [Pudwill] had a good record and everyone left with a good feeling in their heart. But in the long run, a fight like that isn't beneficial for John. I'd like to think the next one is a step up."

Duddy is 26 years old. His alphabet listings come from the World Boxing Association, which ranks him 15th, and the World Boxing Council, which ranks him 27th. Don't expect a bout against a Top 20 middleweight until 2007.

**I**n New York City, John Duddy is the biggest Irish boxing star since Cooney. In 1982, the 25-year-old Cooney, who was 25-0, was stopped by WBC heavyweight champion Larry Holmes in Las Vegas. Cooney earned a purse of \$10 million. Some argue, however, that the singular pursuit of a superfight with Holmes stunted his development. We'll never know because for all intent and purposes, the Holmes fight ended Cooney's career.

Cooney was in attendance when Duddy fought on the eve of St. Patrick's Day. Irishman to Irishman, what advice would he give the young middleweight?

"Stay focused, and of course, have a good teacher," Cooney said. "Know about everything that's going on. And stay away from the late hours. Everybody wants to buy you drinks. If you're up late, you don't run in the morning."

"And one other thing: Put it all out there because it goes so fast. You'll be 35 before you know it."

Until then, Duddy will continue to demand our attention, swinging and smiling and summoning memories of a time when ethnicity counted for more than anything else.

How far will he go? That depends on the luck of the Irish — and whether you think that's a good thing or bad.