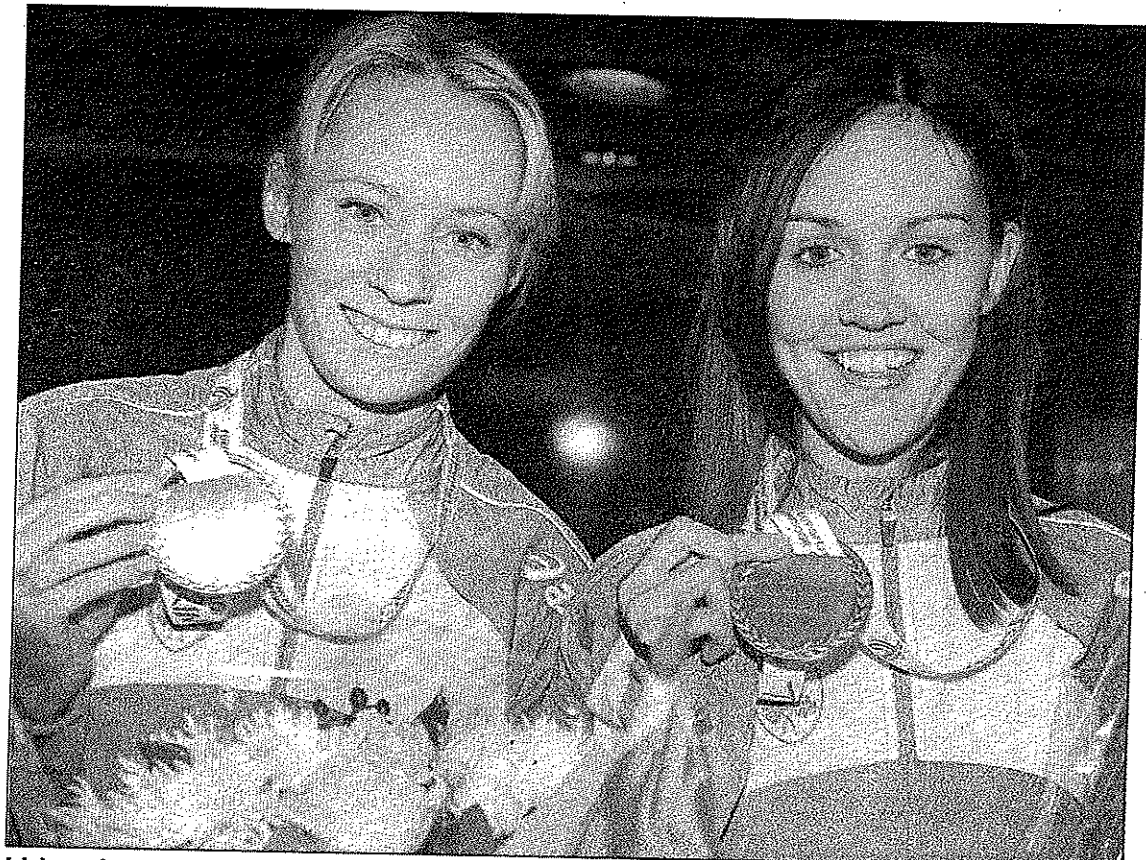


EchoSports

March 11-17, 2009

KERRY, GALWAY GET NORTH WINS

Dubs prevail in windswept Donegal - See Page 78



Irish track stars Derval O'Rourke, left, and Mary Cullen show off their medals after their arrival home in Ireland. SPORTSFILE

ATHLETICS IN EUROPE

O'Rourke adds to medals tally, as Cullen takes bronze in 3,000m

By Mark Jones
letters@irishecho.com

WHILE Sonia O'Sullivan has hung up her spikes, the legacy lives on as both Derval O'Rourke and Mary Cullen won bronze medals for Ireland at the European Indoor Championships in Turin, Italy, last weekend.

O'Rourke made an overdue return to somewhere near her best form to take a medal in a season's best in the 60m hurdles of 7.97 seconds, while Cullen, a former student at Providence College, Rhode Island, battled home tenaciously in the finishing straight of the 3,000 meters in 8:48.47.

However, there was no such positive news for the reigning 400-meter champion, David Gillick, who crashed out of his semi-final. Bumped by a Romanian athlete on the penultimate bend, Gillick lost his footing and tumbled to the ground when a third-place finish would have earned him a place in the final. Not surprisingly in an event where there is often contact, he wasn't reinstated on appeal as a jury decided there had been no infringement.

After some disappointing days in the aftermath of her World indoor gold medal and European outdoor silver, there was some redemption for O'Rourke this time. "I'd like to think I kept the faith but it took until this race for it to be totally restored," she said. "This really does feel like a come-

back, and that's nice."

Cullen had to recover from a stumble five laps from the finish, but she regained her composure to leave several strong athletes in her wake. "My coach Ray Treacy at Providence has been great. He kept telling me to believe, because I did have a hard time believing I could win. He sent me an e-mail before the race saying just that, "Believe."

See also Dave Hannigan's column on Page 77.

Ireland should win, must win

ALTHOUGH Ireland rugby coach Declan Kidney has been talking up Scotland as Saturday's Six Nations game in Edinburgh approaches, all logic points to his team winning for the fourth time in a row during this campaign and edging a step nearer to a first title since 1985 and a first Grand Slam (winning all matches) since 1948.

The pathologically understated Kidney will tell anyone who questions him that Scotland are coming off a win against Italy, that they beat Ireland in a pre-World Cup game back in 2007 and that they're always difficult to cope with on their home patch. Undeniably true, but also not that relevant in this case.

Observers with much less to lose than the coach will respond that in the Six Nations, the Irish have

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BOXING IN AMERICA

Lee, Steward 'very upset' at cancellation

By Jay Mwamba
letters@irishecho.com

Andy Lee is now scheduled to fight on the Bernard Dunne-Ricardo Cordoba world super bantamweight title card in Dublin on March 21 after the shocking cancellation of the St. Patrick's Day eve boxing show in New York.

Lee and his idol Wayne McCullough were to co-headline the "Erin Go Brawl II" event at Madison Square Garden's WaMu Theatre next Monday but both have been left stunned by Irish Ropes' decision to scrap the card last Thursday.

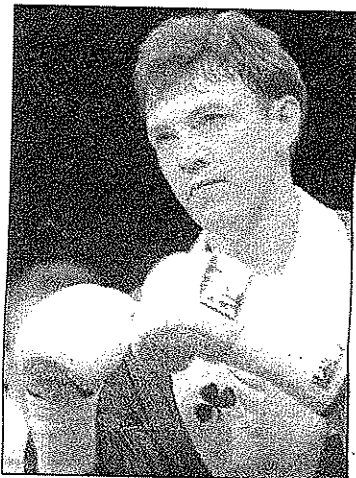
Irish Ropes has since gone out of business — until the lawsuit by its former star charge John Duddy is resolved, according to company president Eddie McLoughlin.

"We're very, very disappointed and upset," Lee's trainer-manager Emanuel Steward told the Echo on Sunday night from his Detroit home. "We've been training since the first of the year and passed up six fights for this."

Lee, a 16-1 [13 KOs] middleweight title prospect, was to fight three-time world title challenger Antwon Echols [31-9-4, 27 KOs] over ten rounds.

In Las Vegas, McCullough, a former world bantamweight champion who was looking forward to resuming his 16-year career, said: "They can say the economy is bad, but people watch sports even during a depression. I'm very disappointed."

McCullough [27-7, 18 KOs] was even more baffled that the cancellation came just a day after he'd signed the contract to fight Mexican super bantamweight Alex Becerra [19-7, 9 KOs] in the co-feature.



Andy Lee will fight in Dublin on March 21. SPORTSFILE

Announcing the cancellation in a press release last week, McLoughlin blamed the global financial crisis.

"This was a very difficult decision to make but ticket sales were way off compared to two years ago when the economy was much better here and back in Ireland," he said. "We apologize for any inconveniences, especially to all of the boxers who worked so hard to prepare for their fights."

In an interview with the Echo later, McLoughlin said they'd sold around a thousand tickets and were looking at a \$250,000 loss when the decision to scuttle the show was made. Tickets ranged from \$50 to \$400.

Asked how many tickets they needed to sell to break even in the 5,600-capacity WaMu Theatre, McLoughlin estimated between 3,500 and 4,000.

Separately, both Steward and McCullough suggested that

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St. Patrick's Day / 2009

Countdown to title tilt

Lee camp sees 2009 as breakout year

By Jay Mwamba
letters@irishecho.com

A great introduction for anyone unfamiliar with Andy Lee's phenomenal boxing skills is that famous YouTube clip of him cold-cocking veteran Carl Daniels at the last St. Patrick's Day show at Madison Square Garden in March 2007.

The Limerick lad, then 22 and with just seven pro bouts under his belt, fakes the former world junior middleweight champ out of his socks before leveling him with a chopping right hook.

Daniels, 48-11-1 with 31 stoppages, was supposed to be Lee's toughest challenge going into the fight. He was out cold before he hit the canvas.

"He was picking my jab with his left so I threw two soft jabs and let him pick them," Lee would later explain. "I threw a third slow jab and as he went to pick it he exposed his chin and I turned it into a hook."

The one-punch KO became a viral hit on YouTube and the legend of Lee, much hyped before and since by his Hall of Fame trainer, Emanuel Steward, was born.

Ireland's sole Olympian at the 2004 Games in Athens has been marked for greatness from an early age. Steward, who doubles as manager, hopes that 2009 is the year his once-beaten charge [16-1, 13 KOs] fulfills his much heralded potential.

According to the Steward plan, Lee's now-aborted St. Patrick's Day eve scrap with Antwun Echols was supposed to start the countdown to the precocious pug's "imminent" world title challenge at the end of the year.

Andy Lee is now scheduled to fight on the Bernard Dunne-Ricardo Cordoba world super bantamweight title card in Dublin on March 21, another test is planned for late May in Ireland and a tune-up after that before Lee hopefully gets a crack at the world middleweight title - presumably against WBC-WBO champion Kelly Pavlik.

A tad ambitious perhaps, considering that the lanky Lee is not even ranked among the top 15 at 160-pounds by any of the major sanctioning bodies.

But if anyone can pull it off, it's the rangy southpaw who caught Steward's eye while beating up top American prospects in the amateurs.

Steward, arguably boxing's greatest living trainer and a man who's worked with most of the best fighters since the Muhammad Ali era, has called Lee the "white Sugar Ray Robinson" because of his ample skills. Should he capture the middleweight crown, whose last Irish custodian was Steve Collins, Steward's assessment will be vindicated.

London-born of Irish parents, Lee has been burdened with expectation from a young age.

At eight, he was tagging along to the



Andy Lee wants a crack at champion Kelly Pavlik.

renowned Repton Boxing Club in London with brothers Tommy and Ned and quickly learning the ropes.

"I was always in the gym with my older brothers and started out with the Repton club over there but my Mom is from Limerick and my Dad's from Dublin so the plan was always to move back to Ireland so when we did I joined the St. Francis club," Lee has said in interviews.

It was at St. Francis ABC in Limerick City where everything came together.

"I had a good foundation from the

Repton club but the coaches at St. Francis and the International coaches fine-tuned me and gave me that little bit extra you need at this level," he recalled.

Working with Zaur Antia on the Irish Amateur Boxing Association's High Performance team in particular was an added fillip.

Said Lee of the Georgian: "He's one of the best coaches I've ever seen."

Between the natural talent and top class coaching he received, the result was a prodigy with the potential to elevate Irish boxing.

Lee was a tantalizing amateur - stellar in

tournaments but always falling short of the main prize. He was a middleweight at the 2002 World Junior championships in Santiago de Cuba where he defeated five men in seven days including the U.S. champion Jesus Gonzales en route to the final.

However, Cuban Noelvis Diaz beat him for the gold medal.

In his first Irish senior championship appearance in February 2003, Lee, aged 17, stormed into the final only to lose a decision to Eamonn O'Kane. That defeat would be avenged two years later in the final.

In between the two scraps with O'Kane, the ever improving youngster beat Patrick Murray for the first of his two All-Ireland titles.

A wiry southpaw with excellent boxing skills and power in either hand, he was by then the best amateur on the Emerald Isle, a fact that would be validated when he became the sole Irish qualifier for the Athens Olympics.

Lee needed to two attempts to book passage. At the first event, the 2003 World Amateur Championships in Bangkok, the teenager lost 29-9 to eventual middleweight gold medalist Gennady Golovkin of Kazakhstan.

He got it right on the second try, the 2004 European Championships in Croatia, punching his ticket with a bronze medal.

Unfortunately, his Olympic medal dreams would be dashed in his second fight, after dispatching Mexican Alfredo Angulo Lopez 38-23 in the preliminaries. Having battled Cameroonian Hassan Ndam Njikam to a 27-27 draw in the Round of 16, Lee lost on a count-back.

"I just didn't fight to my ability," a disappointed Lee said on his return home.

The Irish Sports Council asked him to stick around for the Beijing Games but Lee spurned the offer to turn pro Stateside with Steward.

The Kronk gym godfather, his success with greats such as Thomas Hearns, Evander Holyfield, Lennox Lewis and Oscar De La Hoya legendary, has never waived in his belief that Lee is another gem.

"I have no doubt Andy has a phenomenal talent to be an international star and is capable of being a world champion on the Irish people can be proud of," Steward said.

Steward in turn has not hesitated to throw Lee in deep against vastly more experienced fighters and in all the cases, bar one, the Limerick prospect has prevailed.

Despite the set-back against Brian Vera last March, others, notably HBO analyst Larry Merchant and ESPN, have sang Lee's praises.

Together with John Duddy, whom Steward views as a likely future opponent in a titanic all-Irish middleweight clash, Lee represents Ireland's best hope to reclaim the 160-pound world title once claimed by Collins.

Professional record

Date:	Opponent:	Venue:	Result:
July 19, 2008	Willie Gibbs	Limerick	W TKO 10
March 3, 2008	Brian Vera	Uncasville, CT.	L TKO7
Feb. 2, 2008	Alejandro Gustavo Falliga	Limerick	W KO5
Dec. 15, 2007	Jason McKay	Dublin	W RTD 6
Nov. 15, 2007	Marcus Thomas	Plymouth, MI.	W KO 1
Oct. 2, 2007	James Morrow	Merrionette Park, IL.	W TKO 1
Aug. 25, 2007	Ciaran Healy	Dublin	W RTD 4
July 7, 2007	Thomas Hengstberger	Cologne, Ger ..	W KO 2
May 18, 2007	Clinton Bonds	Memphis, Tenn.	W TKO1
March 16, 2007	Carl Daniels	NewYork	W KO3
Jan. 25, 2007	Arturo Ortega	Las Vegas	W TKO6
Nov. 11, 2006	Dennis Sharpe	NewYork	W UD6
Sept. 14, 2006	Jess Salway	Las Vegas	W KO1
Aug. 10, 2006	Carl Cockerham	Las Vegas	W UD6
June 16, 2006	Rodney Freeman	Memphis, Tenn.	W TKO 1
April, 22, 2006	Wassim Khalil	Mannheim, Ger.	W TKO 5
March 3, 2006	Anthony Cannon	Detroit, MI	W UD 6