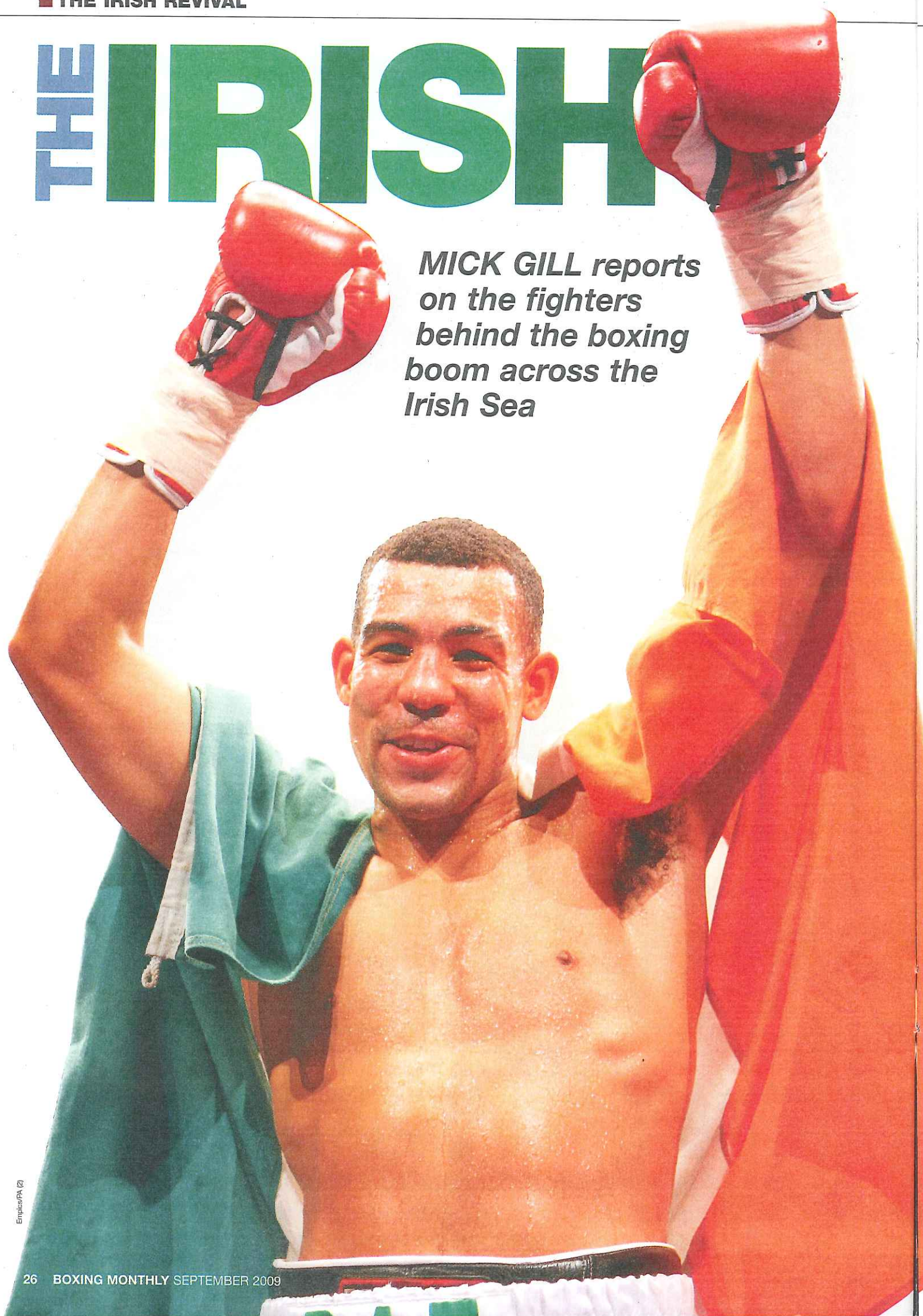


THE IRISH

*MICK GILL reports
on the fighters
behind the boxing
boom across the
Irish Sea*



Empire/PA (2)

REVIVAL

BERNARD DUNNE

Dublin, 29, super bantamweight,
28-1 (15 KOs)

Background Whatever the veracity of his interim WBA title, there can be little debate that the "Dublin Dynamo" is presently the undisputed King of Irish Boxing following his brutal, off-the-floor, 11th-round stoppage of Panama's Ricardo Cordoba in March.

A reserve for the Sydney Olympics, Dunne served a four-year apprenticeship in California, firstly with Freddie Roach and later under Sugar Ray Leonard, before returning to Ireland in 2005.

Subsequently, the cocksure Dubliner has drawn huge live and RTE terrestrial TV audiences for his championship fights.

Over 6,000 filled The Point, Dublin, when Spain's Kiko Martinez separated him from his senses in just 86 seconds for the European title in August 2007. But his fans never lost the faith. A capacity 9,000 crowd returned to the renamed O2 Arena 19 months later to see Dunne defeat Cordoba.

He says: "Starting out, I didn't feel there was a real platform in Ireland for me to showcase my talent so I needed to go where the best were.

"Not many of my U.S. fights were televised, but America gave me the

opportunities to work with Freddie Roach and Sugar Ray Leonard, spar with guys like Pacquiao, Tapia, Mosley, even James Toney. I'd not have had that staying in Ireland. But it was always my plan to come home and start a family here eventually. The exposure and reception I received upon my return is beyond anything I could've fantasised.

"Against Martinez, I didn't do a whole lot wrong — Kiko just executed his plan perfectly; done me with his first punch and I never recovered. But it's how you deal with setbacks that separates the good from the great. If it hadn't happened, I doubt I'd be world champion today.

"Retirement was the easy option, but I, and those close to me, never lost faith. Even after Martinez, I still had great support on the streets and, when the Cordoba opportunity came, I had no doubts. That fight took so many close to a heart attack.

"No fight at this level is easy but Poonsawat [Kratingdaenggym, the Thai fighter who is his mandatory challenger] promises to be particularly hard. His style's completely different to Cordoba, but I feel ready for anybody. I've already achieved what a lot said I couldn't so it's now about having fun and seeing how far we can take it. Unification makes huge business sense on both sides of the Atlantic."

DARREN SUTHERLAND

Dublin, 27, super middleweight,
4-0 (4 KOs)

Background All eyes in the Emerald Isle were focused on this polished box-fighter as he bashed his way to Olympic bronze in China last year.

The offspring of an Irish mother and father from St Vincent in the Caribbean, "The Dazzler" spent four teenage years under the expert tutelage of the Ingles in Sheffield.

Upon his return to Dublin, he was schooled by ex-British light-heavy boss John McCormack, winning three All-Ireland senior titles and beating 2008 Olympic champion James DeGale in four of their six meetings.

He is now coached by Brian Lawrence in London's East End and managed-promoted by Frank Maloney.

He says: "Before, there wasn't a very good pro set-up at home and the kids either went

“When myself and the other Irish lads boxed at the Olympics the country came to a standstill”

to England and the U.S. or stayed amateur. Then, latterly, Ireland developed a very good system for the amateurs, based at the National Stadium, which resulted in major medals at all levels. We'd stay at dreary hotels in those tough-arse East European countries and mix it. Now those nations come to Ireland to learn from our coaches.

"Apparently, when myself and the other Irish lads boxed at the Olympics, we were front page on the nationals and the country came to a standstill. Same when I made my debut in Dublin [December 2008]. My profile went through the roof.

"A term of my contract is that I fight in Ireland a certain number of times per year. I'm a proud Irishman and that's where my fan base is.

"But now I've got my deal, London's the place to be. Back home, the expectation's massive and it's hard to be anonymous. I know a world title is a long way off so I have to get my head down, be humble and work hard. It's gonna be a long tough journey." ▸



STRENGTH IN DEPTH: Sutherland left is a hot prospect while Dunne above is Ireland's world champ

JOHN DUDDY

Derry, 30, middleweight,
26-1 (17 KOs)

Background Rumoured to be offended if an opponent ever throws a punch that misses him, the iron-chinned, lion-hearted Derry man evolved into one of the biggest-ever boxing draws with New York's huge Irish-American community.

Handsome and charismatic, Duddy generated a celebrity following that included John McEnroe and Liam Neeson while compiling a 26-0 slate against mainly B- and C-level opposition. Two

2007 appearances in Dublin generated similar interest, but questions were asked following his 10-round decision over an ageing Howard Eastman at



FIGHTING OUT OF THE USA, John Duddy **left** has become a cult hero with his warrior style while Andy Lee **above** is trained by Emanuel Steward



Belfast's King's Hall in the same year.

After several narrow squeaks, his bubble burst and, in his last fight, Duddy lost over 10 in April against Ohio journeyman Billy Lyell. It was the exposure of a fighter whose appeal seemingly outstretched his ability.

Leading Irish promoter Brian Peters says: "I represent John whenever he fights back home. He developed from being a pretty run-of-the-mill amateur international into an explosive puncher. He was very exciting and he grabbed the attention of the Irish in New York almost to the extent that Gerry Cooney did."

"John's earning fortunes and on the brink of a shot at Kelly Pavlik then loses to a fella he's well capable of beating. Defeats do serious damage to your marketability. John's already turned 30 and now he might never get his shot. He's talking of dropping to 154[lbs/11st] but, for me, him against Andy Lee is a natural fight for the pair of them."

ANDY LEE

Limerick, 25, middleweight,
18-1 (13 KOs)

Background This 6ft 2ins southpaw was a star of Irish amateur boxing in the first half of this decade, winning medals at the world juniors, European seniors and featuring at the 2004 Athens Olympics. Such form convinced Detroit legend Emanuel Steward to train him.

After Lee racked up 15 straight wins, Manny touted the articulate and handsome Celt as potentially "the biggest draw in boxing history". An unscripted seven-round stoppage loss to Texan Brian Vera in March 2008 may cause Steward to re-assess.



Emilia/PA (2)

Lee has regrouped with three wins in Europe, but continues to reside in Michigan.

He says: "Previously, the best Irish fighters stayed amateur because there wasn't a pro angle. Then along came Brian Peters and I'd like to think the things Bernard Dunne, John Duddy and myself have done with his help has inspired others.

"Emanuel Steward offered me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to train at the Kronk gym, where the fierce competition in sparring was legendary. He also took me away to the camps of guys like Wlad Klitschko and Jermain Taylor and I learned so much.

"That said, headlining before more than 4,000 in Limerick's first-ever boxing promotion [in February 2008] was a huge thrill, always great to get home. The Irish public have a good grasp of boxing and don't allow any messing around inside that ring.

"I underestimated Vera, expected an easy knockout, but he came well prepared, dug deep, showed a lot of grit. All credit to him. I'd beaten a million like him in the amateurs, but wasn't there mentally. It was a hurtful loss.

"But I'm on the way back, picking up experience, waiting for a meaningful fight. Me and Duddy on the east coast would be huge.

"I made a lot of personal sacrifices to base myself in the U.S. I'd not do it if I didn't think eventually I'll be world champion. It's too hard a day job!"

MATTHEW MACKLIN

Birmingham, 27, middleweight, 24-2 (17 KOs)

Background Don't allow the strongest of Brummie accents to fool you, "Mack the Knife" considers himself more Irish than the Blarney Stone, due to parents from Roscommon and Tipperary.

A senior ABA champion and seasoned England amateur international in his teens, Macklin turned pro at welter with Sports Network in November 2001, but has since jumped ships with frequency.

He showed character to bounce back from defeats at light-middle to Andrew Facey (over 10 rounds in November 2003 for the English title) and Jamie Moore (a thrilling 10th-round knockout loss for the British crown in September 2006) to dismiss Wayne Elcock in three for the British middle crown this March.

Now with Hatton Promotions, he is shortly to challenge Finland's Amin Asikainen for the vacant European title in Manchester (see page 52).

He says: "I've always had an Irish passport and, as a kid, I'd have been kicked out the house if I'd not supported Ireland over England at any sport. I'd spend the whole summer over in Tipperary and I actually represented the county for hurling at under-14 and under-16 level.

"To be honest, I'm more likely to go big in Ireland or as an 'Irishman' on the American east coast. I'm definitely better known and get more press coverage in those places than the UK.

"I won the Irish title at Dublin's National Stadium, boxed at The Point the night Dunne got beat and was the main event on RTE when I beat Yori Boy Campas [March 2008]. The stadium was pretty full that night.

"When I was Irish middleweight champion, I drew a big following over in Atlantic City and Philadelphia. I was about third down the bill, but the arena emptied out a bit after I'd boxed.

"If I beat Asikainen, I'd love to make a voluntary against Andy Lee, challenge for the IBF title, make a first defence against Duddy, then have a superfight with Kelly Pavlik. That's the plan."



BIRMINGHAM'S Matthew Macklin **left** hopes to tap into the American Irish ex-pat market while Belfast's Martin Lindsay **above** has Euro ambitions

MARTIN LINDSAY

Belfast, 27, featherweight, 14-0 (6 KOs)

Background A business and finance graduate, the classy "Mac Man" started boxing at the Immaculata gym, aged nine.

A dual Irish amateur champion, he made a relatively quiet entrance to the pro game under trainer Gerry Nugent and manager John Rooney, but did win an IBF Youth title over in Canada.

His career really kickstarted after joining Hayemaker Boxing. In a September 2008 British eliminator, he climbed from the deck to spark Liverpool's Derry Mathews with a classic left hook in round nine, then collected the British belt by steaming past Scotland's touted Paul Appleby in six at a chaotic Ulster Hall, Belfast, last April.

Manager John Rooney says: "All his life, Martin's been a good student of boxing. His amateur pedigree ensures he has a good skill level and he's a very levelheaded and committed kid — always 100% prepared.

"Though he's already mandatory for the European, we'll hold off for a while, defend the British a couple of times, put a few quid in his pocket, then aim for the European in 12-18 months' time.

"He'll make a voluntary defence, hopefully in Belfast in October. Everyone at the Ulster Hall knew Martin personally so, with the right undercard, I'm sure 5,000 at the King's Hall would be very achievable."

Promoter Adam Booth says: "Ireland's always produced good fighters, but now they're getting on TV and developing a profile.

"When Martin made his ring walk at the Ulster Hall, it just went off. I had goosebumps. Whereas Barry McGuigan was a crowd-pleasing pressure fighter, Martin's essentially a boxer. Yet there was still real passion in the crowd.

"Ability-wise, I'd say Martin's already beyond British title level. Derry Mathews and Paul Appleby are a handful for anyone yet Martin stopped them both. Next year, we'll look to get him a European shot. Victory automatically places him in the world Top 10."

MARTIN ROGAN

Belfast, 38, heavyweight,
12-1 (6 KOs)

Background After brawling his way to the inaugural Prizefighter title in April 2008, "Rogie" secured lucrative clashes with former Olympic champion Audley Harrison, winning on points, and then Commonwealth boss Matt Skelton (stopping the big guy in 11).

Affable Rogan first laced on the gloves at 27 and was already 33 when he turned pro. He is trained and managed by John Breen.

After drawing 7,000 to Belfast's Odyssey Arena in May, he finally stumbled when controversially withdrawn with a swollen eye against Sam Sexton in round eight of his opening Commonwealth defence. The pair rematch at the same venue for the same title in October.

He says: "Over the years, there's been a lot of wasted Irish talent because there weren't many setting benchmarks for our young fighters to aspire to. There were no promoters here so fighters had to hope someone in England took notice.

"Now, Irish athletes in all sports are showing that, if we get opportunities, we can produce the goods — just look at our rugby.

"Hearing the roars of 7,000 people for me at the Odyssey Arena was marvellous, but a few things went wrong. I beat Audley Harrison in December, Matt Skelton in late February — both very tough fights — then was pushed in against Sam Sexton in early May. My body needed rest. Also, Sam got far too much help from the referee. He pulled me out just as I had Sexton wobbling.

"At the press conference for our return, Sam said he was giving me a boxing lesson. Really?! Now that I've rested, he'll be fighting someone completely different. He's in for the shock of his life. He's going down. The Rocky story is continuing.

"Where will it end? Who knows? You just have to try hard and hope one thing leads to another. Regardless, I really enjoy what I'm doing."

PAUL MCCLOSKEY

Dungiven, 30, light-welterweight,
19-0 (9 KOs)

Background A mini-mart manager by trade, this cool, evasive southpaw switch-hitter was three-time All-Ireland amateur champion before joining John Breen's Belfast camp in March 2005.

With plenty of spite in his shots, the vastly underrated Ulsterman profited from three educational 10-rounders before upsetting Colin Lynes in nine to take the British crown last December.

"Dudie" has since vacated the domestic belt to pursue continental glory. Showing serious world title potential, he'll now challenge EBU champ Souleymane M'baye early in the new season.

He says: "When Big John [Breen]



POPULAR Martin Rogan **top** has become Ireland's Rocky while McCloskey **above** has a Euro shot in sight

approached me to go pro, I didn't have to think too long. He knows what it takes to get to the top. There's no prima donnas at the gym. We all work hard together and, if anyone isn't pulling their weight, John soon lets them know.

"Some fighters are 25 going on 35 but, though I'm 29, I've not much mileage. I'm very scientific and don't take much punishment. I've plenty of time left.

"It was disappointing to have to withdraw from my European shot just 10 days out but,

having come so far, we couldn't risk it. I'm still mandatory and it'll happen in September or October, possibly in Ireland now.

"M'baye may not be the fighter he was — he beat Colin Lynes on a close decision whereas I stopped Colin — but he still gets all my respect. I'm not complacent. It's every fighter's dream to win a world title, but I know there are steps before that. If I win, I'd still like to make a few hard defences to prepare me fully for the big shot."

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