

World champion Andy Lee relishes a day he 'will remember for the rest of my life'

# Boxing's newest champ 'blown away' by his big welcome home

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passionate and I can relate to him," said the champion boxer, who was toasted by Limerick City and County Council earlier in the evening when the Mayor of Limerick City and County, Kevin Sheahan, said the local authority would do everything in their power to bring a world title fight to Limerick.

Among those who braved the elements to greet the world champion was Geraldine O'Donoghue, who brought her two grandchildren - Darren and Ruby O'Donoghue, Andy's cousins.

"He's worth waiting for in the rain," smiled Geraldine.

Five hours earlier, the EI-EPT Aer Lingus aircraft carrying the world champion touched down on the tarmac at Shannon where two local fire engines created a rainbow effect with their water cannons to salute the sporting giant.

At 12.42, Andy Lee emerged from the doorway of the plane. First came a shy wave and then the hoisting of the world title belt over his head. At the foot of the aircraft, under an umbrella which had held over her head by Andy's agent David McHugh, was Andy's mum Ann, tricolour in hand. Then Andy Lee - all 6ft 2in and 159.8 pounds of him stood on Irish soil, Munster soil, for the first time since becoming the middleweight champion of the world.

The embrace was long and heartfelt as flashbulbs clicked all around - a private moment for all the admiring public to see.

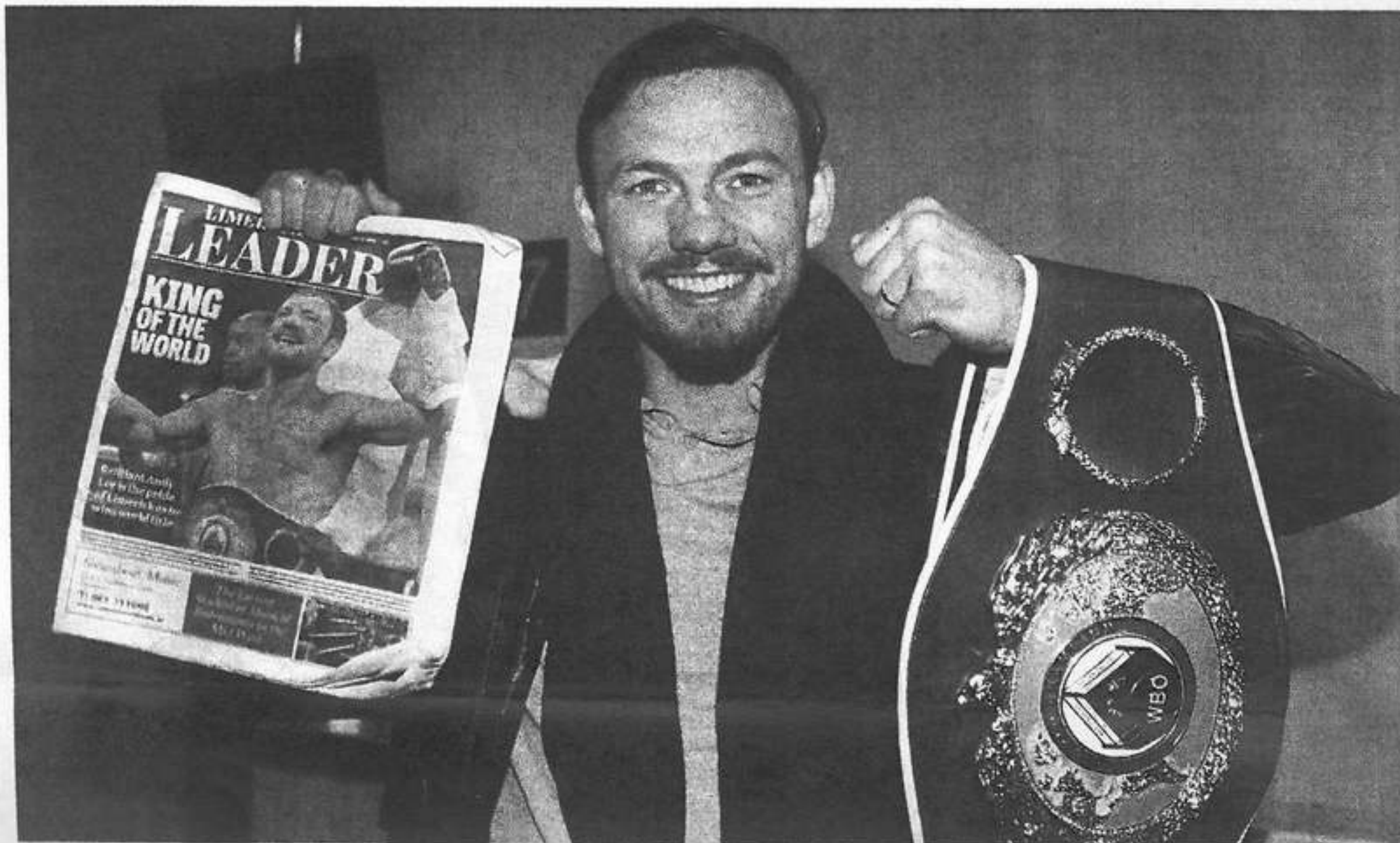
"When he won the fight I just dropped to my knees and cried - it was a dream come true for me and all the family but to see a child's dream come true and knowing how much it meant to him and how much he tried for it and trains, I just cried," said Ann.

"I can't sleep - I have a pain in my face from smiling," she continued. "Because everything was against him - the odds, people now realise that people's dreams do come true."

Andy, she said, "is just an ordinary boy who ran on the Bog Road [in Castleconnell] and couldn't get to run sometimes because people would stop in the cars to have a chat - that's Andy."

Clearly not one for the limelight, Andy ushered his team to follow him down the steps. First came his manager Adam Booth, carrying a heavy case which houses the world title belt, followed by Richard Towers, one of his corner men.

Cracking jokes, the celebratory party made their way across the tarmac and into Gate 6 to meet the



One Limerick leader checks out another: Andy Lee poses at Shannon Airport with his belt and Monday's souvenir issue of the Leader

Picture: Michael Cowhey



Andy with his wife Maud at Shannon Airport before moving on to Limerick City Hall for a civic reception



Fans waiting for Andy Lee to arrive at Shannon Airport this Wednesday when he was given a hero's welcome. The party moved on to Limerick City Hall. More pictures: page 4

Picture: Michael Cowhey

awaiting press. In Andy's grasp was the maroon coloured WBO belt emblazoned with a blue and gold crest.

The metal detectors must have been switched off for the occasion as this dazzling delight would have triggered alarms bells all over the airport.

In his home village of Castleconnell on Tuesday, an old neighbour John Travers sipping from his pint beside the stove in The Ramble Inn said Andy was too nice to be a fighter - "not a boxer now, but a fighter". He asked me if I

understood. Perhaps I didn't then, but I did now.

It was hard to believe that the chunky leather and metal belt was won by this lean, softly spoken athlete wearing skinny jeans, a shy smile and possessing a Limerick/London lilt.

Addressing the media he spoke of how he gets nervous watching other people fight and paid tribute to his mum Ann who he said is "very educated and astute when it comes to boxing. After all the years of driving to the gym and paying for boxing it was nice to

repay them," he said of his family. He said his wife Maud who he wed 18 months ago, gets nervous during the fight "but handles it well".

Andy - the fourth in a family of six children - was greeted by his father Tom in London. Tom had travelled over to London to meet him following Andy's flight there on Monday from LA.

What was he looking forward to on his return to Limerick?

"Donkey Ford chips," he joked to the Leader. Downstairs in the arrivals area, hundreds of ecstatic fans had gathered to welcome

home the Castleconnell man who beat Russia's Matt Korobov on a sixth round TKO for the vacant WBO World middleweight title at the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas.

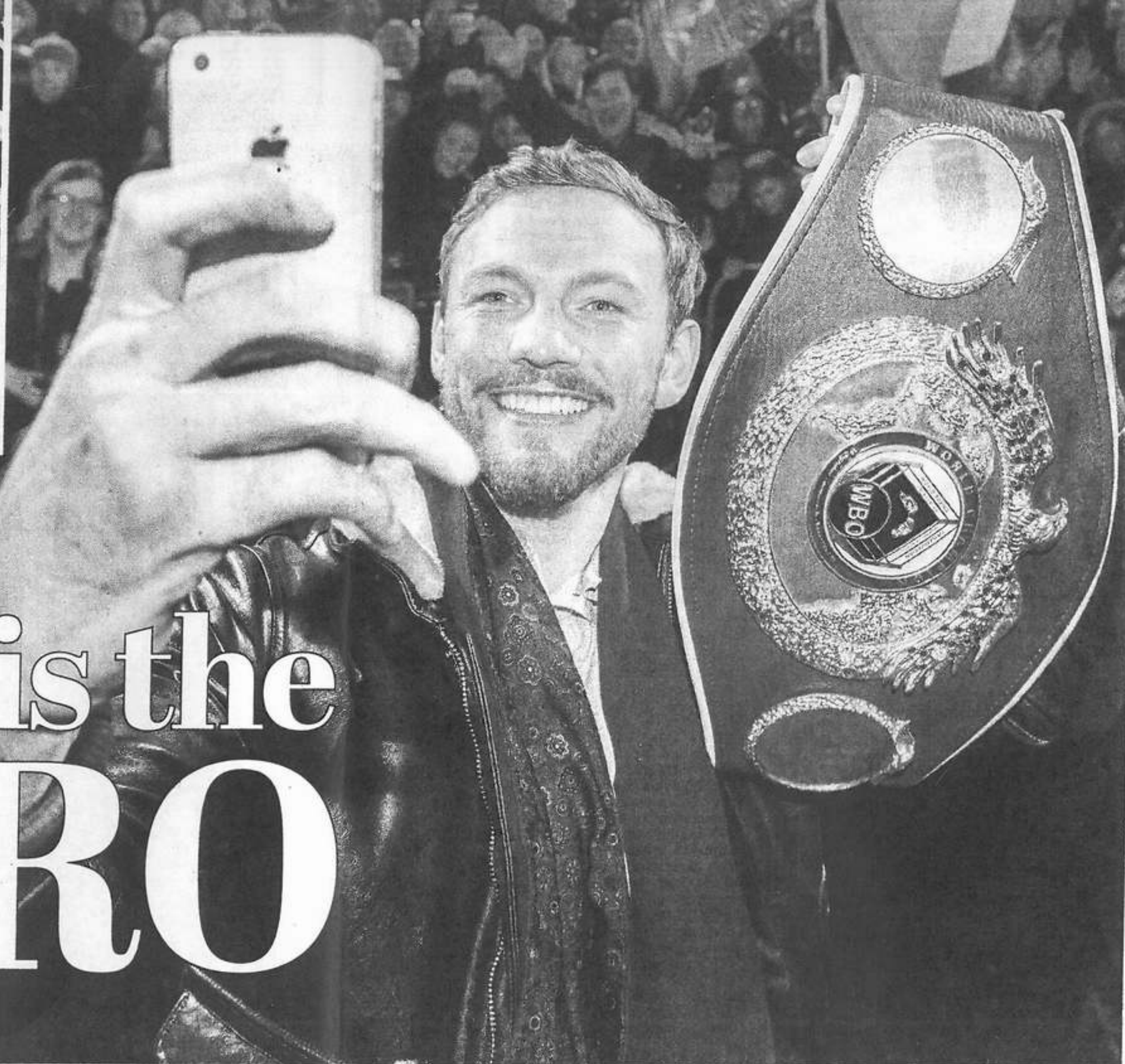
John Mooney from Caherdavin was there with his excited young children Colm, 4 and Sadie, 3 "to cheer on the champ".

"We can't wait to see him - we are delighted to welcome home the champ. Colm can't wait to see him. He is a little bit afraid that he might punch him," he smiled.

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EX: LIMERICK LEADER  
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# Home is the HERO

King of the selfies: Andy Lee takes a picture of himself with the crowd of jubilant fans outside City Hall who welcomed him home and, inset, gets up close and personal. For extensive coverage see pages 2, 3 and 4 plus LeaderSport Pictures: Diarmuid Greene/Sportsfile & Michael Cowhey

## World champion Andy Lee returns to Limerick in triumph

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"THIS VICTORY is for me, my family and Limerick," declared the newly crowned WBO middleweight champion Andy Lee when he fulfilled a life-long dream this Wednesday, raising his world title belt aloft in his home city.

The 30-year-old had long stated his desire to one day raise a world title belt over his head in the city centre and that special moment dawned at exactly 5.45pm on Wednesday, December 17, 2014 to the strains of Eye of the Tiger.

"It's a dream come true. I've always wanted to become a world champion and a big part of

that was to bring the belt home to Limerick," he told hundreds of ecstatic supporters who braved the atrocious weather conditions to welcome home their new world champion at the steps of City Hall.

"I have been blown away - I have known a lot of world champions and trained with a lot of world champions over

the years and I don't think any one of them, no matter how big they are, have come home to a reception or been treated like I have been today," said Andy.

The down-to-earth boxer, who previously lost out on a world title in 2012, lifted the WBO belt aloft several times proving to his home supporters what hard work and perseverance

can do. He spoke of his own self belief and of how just walking the streets of Limerick would give him a boost and said he will remember this day "for as long as I live".

"It's been a while since I was in Limerick but once I was back it was like I had never left - it's the warm feeling that I get when I am here. This has been great

- even on the plane everyone was congratulating me. When I pictured this day I even pictured it was raining!"

To win the world title, Andy said, "shows kids around Limerick and Ireland that it is not impossible to become a world champion - it's not a dream beyond their reach. They can emulate what I did and more.

"I take inspiration from the likes of Paul O'Connell - he is such a professional and inspirational when he talks about his sport and an ambassador for Limerick, not just in rugby but for all sport and I always watch him and listen to his interviews. They say he is intense but I think he is just

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