

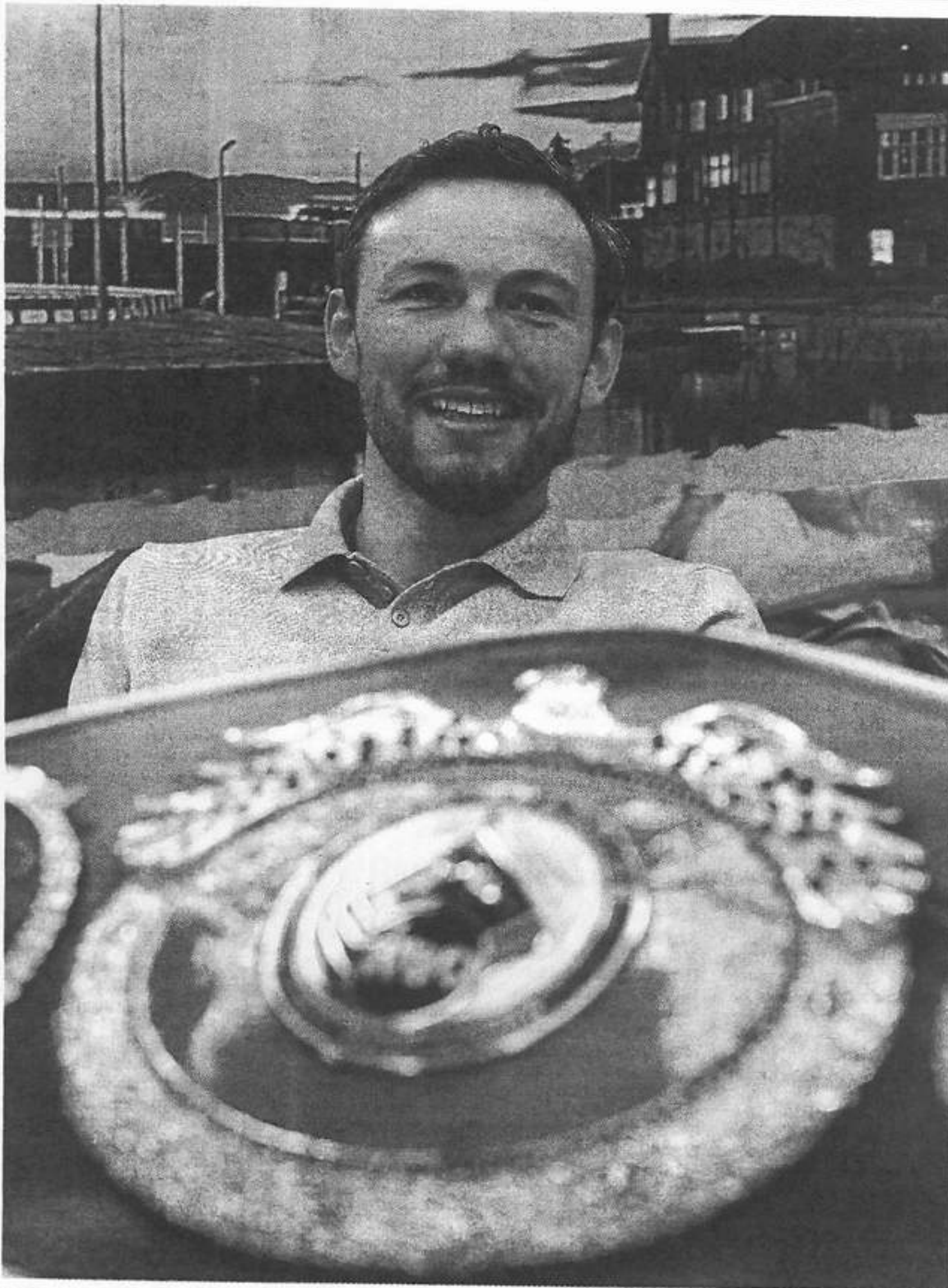
# LeaderSport

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CITY EDITION



## On top of the world

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**ANDY Lee has lived out many a long held dream in the past week.**

This Wednesday afternoon the newly crowned WBO World Champion returned to a heroes welcome in Limerick.

He quickly set his sights on another dream of his..... to defend his world title in Thomond Park.

"Adam (Booth) is already on the ball and maybe Thomond Park in the Summer - which would be another dream come through. Hopefully that can be made," the Castleconnell man said.

"This is something I have dreamed of and fantasised about was stepping back down here when I won the title and coming back to Shannon and Limerick - this is a dream come through," explained Lee.

"This has been amazing - thanks to everybody for coming," he said.

While all on Shannonside will hope for Thomond Park, another possibility is the 3 Arena in Dublin.

"It's gotta be in Ireland - that's the biggest sell and the

biggest possible arena for it," said the newly crowned world champion.

"Thomond Park with 30,000 people would be special. It would be brilliant - not just good for me and for Irish boxing but for Limerick city," said Lee of a title defence in Limerick.

"I am the champ and I am not going outside of Ireland," he smiled.

"I am a champion and I want to defend my belt in Ireland and I will fight the best in the world," he added.

"It would be great to have a big fight here in Thomond Park in the Summer, that would be the next thing on the check-list - to win the world title, to bring it to Limerick and then to defend it in Limerick would be the next big step," explained Lee.

"I think I have earned that and deserved that. Hopefully that will be next, maybe March, St Patrick's Day," said Lee, although any out-door event would be more likely take place in the Summer.

"Maybe Thomond Park or the 3 Arena in Dublin, somewhere in Ireland and that would be great."

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## BOXING - WBO WORLD TITLE FIGHT

# How Andy Lee became champion of the world

**Jerome O'Connell** traces Andy Lee's journey from East London to Castleconnell and to his world title triumph in Las Vegas last weekend

"AS I stood in the corridor before my ring entrance, my stomach was in knots, to say I was nervous would've been an understatement! Walking to the ring, I looked across at my family, the whole clan had turned out to support me. I remember thinking to myself, I don't care how big this guy is I'm not losing this fight!"

The words of Andy Lee.

The fight he recalls is not the WBO World Title Fight but his very first competitive boxing contest - at 11 years of age.

He won that fight and it set in motion his journey to be champion of the world.

## REPTON GYM

Born the fourth of six children to Tom and Ann Lee on June 11, 1984 in Bow in East London. Dawn, Tommy and Ned were before him, Roger and Hayley would come later.

Andy followed his brothers into Repton Boxing Club at a young age and within four years of that debut fight, he was a national champion after an intermediate 63kg success over a Mathew Kennedy of Sunderland in the England Schoolboy finals in Barnsley.

## CASTLECONNELL

Andy's parents Tom and Ann, had moved from Limerick city to London after they were married in the early 70s but in the summer of 1998, the Lee family returned to Limerick and set up home close to

Daly's Cross in Castleconnell.

It wasn't long before a 14-year-old Andy was a member of St Francis Boxing Club on Mungret Street in the city.

## 2002 WORLD JUNIORS

The Limerick man first came to prominence in Ireland during the 2002 AIBA World Junior Championships in Santiago de Cuba.

He eventually won silver and along the way beat American champion Jesus Gonzalez.

It is often recalled that it was that victory over Gonzalez that brought Lee to the attention of Emanuel Steward.

## 2004 OLYMPIC GAMES

As one of the first members of the Irish Amateur Boxing Association's high performance unit and guided by St Francis BC coaches Ken Moore and Finbarr O'Brien, Lee was the only Irish boxer in the Athens Olympics.

He won his first fight at the Olympics, but he then lost to Hassan N'Dam N'Jikam, of Cameroon.

## EMANUEL STEWARD

The famed US boxing coach, who led 37 boxers, including Tommy Hearns and Lennox Lewis to world titles courted Lee since late 2002.

Ten years ago this week, Andy travelled to Las Vegas as a guest of Steward's at the WBC World heavyweight title fight between Danny Williams and Vitali Klitschko.

It took another year but

on December 15, 2005 Andy signed professional contracts with Steward.

## DETROIT

After an amateur career that brought a world junior silver medal, a European bronze, three national senior titles and an Olympic Games appearance, Lee departed St Francis BC for the famed Kronk Gym of Detroit.

For the next seven years the Limerick man was to live in the Steward family home and learn his pro-boxing trade both inside and outside the ring.

## DEBUT

Andy's professional debut came on March 10, 2006, in the Joe Louis Arena in Detroit.

In the first of the 36 fights that led him to be world champion, Lee defeated Anthony Cannon.

## HOMECOMING

Fourteen wins later, including a memorable March 2007 KO of Carl Daniels, Andy Lee returned for a professional bout in Limerick.

The date was February 2, 2008 and the local hero duly thrilled his home fans with a fifth round knockout win over Alejandro Gustavo Falliga in UL.

And although now a world title contender, Lee's rise up the rankings was abruptly halted by Brian Vera the following month.

That July, however, Lee



Going places: Lee celebrates after victory over Jason McKay in the National Stadium in Dublin in 2007



Olympic flame: Coach Billy Walsh has a quick word with Ireland's Andy Lee, before the start of his bout with Hassan Ndam Njikam of Cameroon in the 2004 Olympics in Athens

started to rebuild his career with victory over Willie Gibbs back in UL.

Indeed four of his next six fights were in Ireland.

By the time he beat Mamedou Thiam in the UL Arena in May 2010, Lee was back as a contender on the world stage.

## REVENGE

Vera was still a blot on Lee's record but revenge came on October 1, 2011. By that stage Lee had fought 27 times with Vera the only defeat.

Mentally it was a big moment for the Castleconnell southpaw and set him on course for the first of his two world title fights.

## EL PASO

While much of the Irish attention was on our middleweight trio of Lee, Matthew Macklin and John Duddy, Steward and Lee were about to secure a world title shot.

The date was June 16 when Andy fought in the Texan heat for the WBC World middleweight title.

His opponent was the much vaunted Julio Cesar

Chavez Jr.

Defeat was ultimately Lee's lot. But for fans of the Limerick man there is much about Chavez Jr that remains uncertain.

## STEWARDS RIP

It was to be the last fight for the Lee and Steward combination.

He may not have been in Lee's corner last weekend but there is no denying the monumental role the famed Detroit trainer played in shaping Lee into the boxer and person he is today.

Lee returned to London after that Chavez loss and joined up with Adam Booth.

That October came the news of the untimely death of Steward.

## ADAM BOOTH

The first venture into the ring for the new Lee-Booth partnership was in February 2013 - eight months after his world title fight loss to Chavez.

The contest was in Belfast's Odyssey Arena on a night when all attention focused on the main attrac-

The best in the world: Lee celebrates after his victory against Matt Korobov in Sunday's World title fight in Las Vegas



tion of Carl Frampton and Kiko Martinez. But Lee was back to winning ways and ultimately on the road to world glory.

## INACTIVE

Three months later came another win over Darryl Cunningham and later that Summer Andy married his long time girlfriend Maud Reardon.

But between May 2013 and April 2014 Lee fought just once (a routine second round KO in Manchester in October 2013).

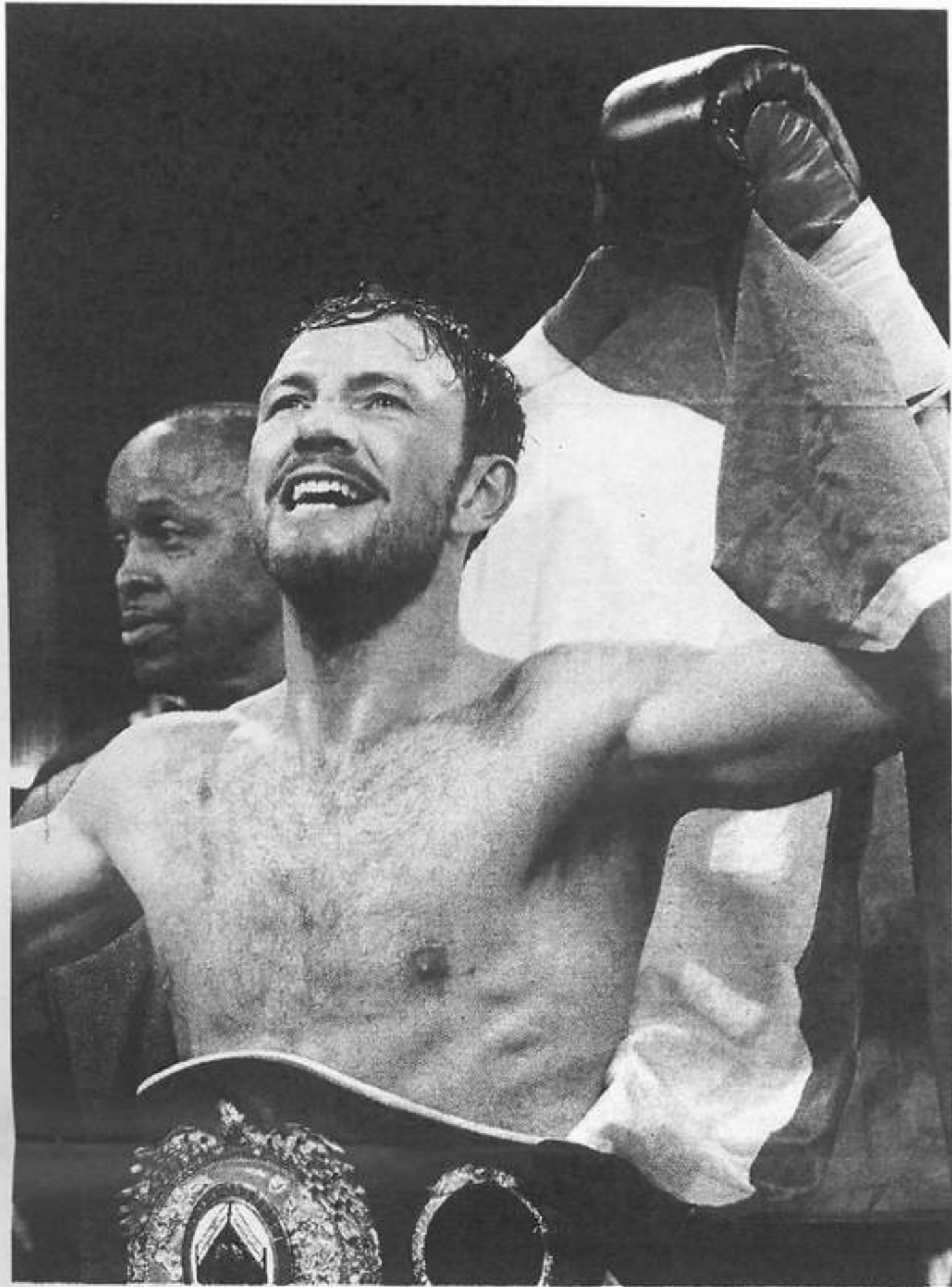
Bit by bit Lee was slipping from the public eye.

But we now know that his determination to reach the top remained steadfast.

There was continued talk of a Macklin bout but it never came.

Then it appeared he was to get his big chance to face Gennady Golovkin last April in New York but the WBA middleweight champion from Kazakhstan had to cancel after the death of his father.

Next up for Andy was this



June's Madison Square Garden contest with John Jackson for the vacant NABF title at light middleweight title.

Much like his WBO world title winning bout, Lee struggled until he caught Jackson with a right hook in the fifth round.

**A SECOND CHANCE**

In early October Lee and Matt

Korobov were confirmed for the World Boxing Organization middleweight title fight.

For a while a Dublin date was muted but eventually the duo were rubber stamped for the undercard of the Tim Bradley-Diego Chaves fight - live across the US on HBO and in Ireland on Box Nation.

**WBO WORLD CHAMPION**

At 4.29am in the early hours of Sunday, December 14, the people of Castleconnell, Limerick and Ireland had a new sporting hero.

A 30-year Andy Lee had found another right hook to stop Korobov and fulfil the dream that had started long before that first fight as an 11-year-old.

Next comes the defence.

**National champ:** Lee celebrates after victory over Patrick Murray in the National Senior Championships in December 2003



# Smiling assassin calls upon famed right hook to secure WBO belt

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ANDY Lee always carries a smile but never was it as broad as when referee Kenny Bayless strapped the WBO world title belt around his waist in Las Vegas' Cosmopolitan Hotel last weekend.

"It's been a long journey - but I don't want to romanticise it," the Castleconnell southpaw told the world's boxing media in the post fight press conference.

"I never lost faith in myself or the vision to be world champion - I knew in my heart I would be world champion. In fights when I was behind I always knew and had faith in myself that I would win."

He was quick to remember the hard knocks that brought ultimate success.

"Boxing is full of disappointments and fights he think you can get and don't and fights that get cancelled but in boxing you have to preserve and work hard everyday and not loose sight of your goal. The motivation was always to do something in this life that was bigger than me and this can never be taken away from me - I am champion and always will be world champion," he said with the broadest of smiles.

"That fight was dedicated to Emanuel Steward - it was an honour after everything he did for me over the years," declared Lee.

An amateur star on the back of the 2004 Olympic Games, Lee was enticed to turn professional by Steward.

The promise was to be world champion.

That title eventually came by way of knockout in the sixth round against Matt Korobov last weekend.

It was a fight that had Lee as a 4/1 outsider at best.

In the early rounds the Limerick man looked both tentative but yet confident.

The maturity of 35 pro-fights was evident in a refusal to panic as the rounds progressed.

But the judges scoreboard told that Lee was certainly behind as the fight entered the sixth round.

Then all changed as a new sporting Limerick hero was cemented.

In front of such watching boxing figures as Miguel Cotta, Oscar de la Hoya, Terence Crawford, Lee produced what is now his trade-mark right hook.

The rest is history.

The KO success makes Lee the first Irishman to win a world title bout in the US since 1934.

Boxing from the blue corner and wearing black trunks with a tricolour on the back, Lee did the damage with a crashing right hook and then a flurry of almost 20 punches forced referee Kenny Bayless to stop the fight.

Lee was behind with all three judges before his decisive punch, but that will matter little to the history books. "My right hook is a killer punch - I thought he was gone down but I made sure and wasn't taking any chances and I just threw hell for leather and got him out of there. God blessed me with a right hook - I can't take too much credit!" said an elated Lee in the ring after he was crowned champion of the world.

Just seconds after being held aloft in the ring, Lee's thoughts turned to the departed Emanuel Steward.

"I have to say a thank you to this man, my coach Adam Booth, who has done so much for me in the last couple of years - this title is for him before also for the man who made me Emanuel Steward. I lived with him for 7-8 years and learned so much from him. He said I would win a world title and tonight I made him true," said an emotional Lee.



Andy Lee and his late coach Emanuel Steward at the pre-fight weigh in ahead of his fight with Alejandro Gustavo Falliga in UL in 2008

# Lee sets his sights on the next challenge

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LIMERICK'S new sporting hero is to weigh-up his next move in the New Year.

England's Billy Joe Saunders is the mandatory challenger to the WBO title but Andy Lee has revealed that he could opt for a voluntary defence first.

"I will fight anybody - I fear no one. If he wants to fight me, he can come to me," said Lee of Saunders.

"If he wants to come to Ireland he is welcome to - my first defence will be in Ireland and I am looking forward to it."

Another option is a unifying bout against Gennady Golovkin - the reigning WBA and IBO champion.

"I have no fear of him - he is the best middleweight in the world and rightly so but how would he hold up if he got hit with that right hook, we don't know!"

"He will have to respect my power," said Lee with a broad smile.

"It would be very special to bring a fighter of his calibre to Ireland and maybe towards the end of the year that could be a possibility," he said of Golovkin.

But for all on Shannonside, they will want their new hero in a Limerick bout.

A look at Munster rugby fixtures show that Thomond Park will be available around the March 17 date with the only tie scheduled for March a PRO12 tie with Connacht at the end of the month.

While Lee has spoken of his dream for a St Patrick's Day bout, that falls on a Tuesday so any fight is more likely to take place either the weekend before or after.

Already officials of Thomond Park and the Gaelic Grounds have expressed their interest in hosting the contest. Lee has fought four times in the UL Arena a capacity of 3,200 rules out a return.

John Cantwell, Thomond Park Stadium manager confirmed that he has already made "tentative enquiries".

"We would be absolutely open to a fight here and what an event it would be for Limerick and for the stadium," said Cantwell.

"Andy held a press conference here back in 2009 and at the time spoke of his wish to bring a world title fight to Thomond Park - hopefully that can now happen," said Cantwell.

Limerick GAA secretary Mike O'Riordan said that the Gaelic Grounds "would be made available" and would "love the opportunity."