

BOXING EUROPEAN SUPER BANTAMWEIGHT TITLE FIGHT NIGHT

Big Bang reaches big time



Willie Casey is Limerick's new sporting hero. The Southill southpaw won the European Super Bantamweight Title last Saturday night. **Jerome O'Connell** reports on 'Big Bang's' fourth round victory over Dublin's Paul Hyland

Jerome O'Connell

LIMERICK'S Willie 'Big Bang' Casey is the new star of Irish boxing after he became just the 13th ever Irish man to claim a European title.

Casey won the EBU Super Bantamweight title in the UL Arena in front of a capacity crowd of 2,500 and the live television cameras of RTE on Saturday night.

English referee John Keane stopped the fight two minutes and nine seconds into the fourth of the 12 scheduled rounds "in the interest of Paul Hyland's own safety" after almost 60 seconds of a barrage of punches from 28 year old Casey.

The rise of the Southill southpaw to the top of the European pro-game has taken just two years, making his achievement all the more remarkable.

As an amateur with Southill Boxing Club and Our Lady of Lourdes-St Saviours, Casey never even won a national senior title, but already looks a seasoned professional in the paid ranks.

"I am just honoured and over the moon," said a delighted Casey after his historic success in the first ever all-Irish European title fight.

"With the time that I have put in and the dedication that I put it, I am delighted that it has paid off. We knew that the title was staying in Limerick. I'm in this game to fight whoever is the best out there - at this stage now I am really starting to believe in myself. After winning the European title with just 10 fights, I believe that I can go on to bigger things," said Casey afterwards.

Just minutes after the UL Arena erupted with emotion as Casey was carried around the ring with the title belt, he strolled into a press conference as cool as if he had just won an amateur tournament in Athy or anywhere across the country.

"I just take each fight as it comes - I am still learning in this game and I am no one special," said a modest Casey.



Willie Casey exchanges punches with Paul Hyland during the first round of their European Super Bantamweight bout

PICTURE: SPORTSFILE

But his coach Phil Sutcliffe was having none of it.

"Your very special," interjected Sutcliffe.

"You have just one a European title," he proclaimed as he prodded the championship belt, which was on the table in front of Casey.

"I really believe in myself and I know that my wife believes in me and my family believe in me and they all know that once I set my heart on something I will make it happen. This is what I want to show my family why I have been away for the last eight weeks training," Casey explained as he glanced towards his coveted belt.

"When Phil Sutcliffe saw me in the

amateur game one time, he persuaded me that the amateurs were not for me, that I should be in the pro game. A week after I turned pro with him he told me that he would make me a European champion within three years and here I am now after just over two years in the game with 10 fights," explained Casey.

"I know that Brian (Peters) told me before that only 12 people from all of Ireland actually won a European title. How many won it within only two years and 10 fights - that's another record for me!" said Casey displaying a broad smile of satisfaction for the first time.

"I don't look too far ahead of myself.

I said to my coach when we started - I don't want to be hanging around in this game, I wanted to be tested and I think I have been tested and I have proved myself in the Prizefighter, against the Canadian champion and now Paulie. He came here to win and he didn't want to leave Limerick without that belt."

While Casey acknowledged that Hyland gave him "the hardest four rounds that I ever had", the Southill man warned that he had plenty left in the tank despite his huge intensity throughout the four opening rounds.

"People take me for granted and think that I am only about the 'big bang' and that I will go gone after

three or four rounds. But Phil Sutcliffe knows me and Joe Clifford my strength and conditioning coach knows me and they worked me for the last eight weeks up in Greystones in Wicklow and they know that after my padwork and sparring partners and everything, I am just as strong in the eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th, 12th rounds as I am in the first six rounds - there is no stopping me once I get into my rhythm in that ring," he said once again releasing his broad smile in the direction of his wife Mary.

In the ring, Casey proclaimed: "As long as I have this belt, no body is taking it off me".

But next up for Casey will be former champion Kiko Martinez. Casey was originally scheduled to fight the Spaniard who famously defeated Bernard Dunne, but Martinez had the withdraw due to injury.

"I am the real champion - he won it no different to how I won it. He was released when he won it as well and now I have won it when he released it. How I won it and how he won it is no different. Who is going to win between me and him will be another chapter," said Casey of the show down, which will most likely take place next spring in Limerick.

A proud member of the travelling community from Southill, Casey was joined in the celebrations in the ring by his parents Terry and Kathleen, wife Mary and son Myles.

"If I can do this anyone can do it, with a little bit of time and dedication and the right people around you - I am making it happen and so can anyone," he said.

"I am very grateful for where I have come in the last two years in the pro-game. I am very grateful for what I have now and for Kiko for relinquishing the belt. He gave this chance for myself and Paulie to at it for this title. And, I hope that it is not the end for Paulie - we all saw what Bernard Dunne did when he was beaten and he came back to be a world champion and I believe Paulie can do that as well."

No complaint from Hyland camp against new champion

Jerome O'Connell

"THERE'S only one Willie Casey" sang the crowd of 2,500 for over a half hour before Limerick's new sporting hero arrived ringside.

All in the UL Arena could sense that something special was about to happen.

Most had arrived early but the undercard was just a passing glance for most, who came to see the first ever all-Irish championship bout.

'Good Luck Daddy' read the giant sign that little Myles Casey carried proudly around the Arena before the main event of the evening.

'Good Luck Big Bang' read another of the banners as the travelling Hyland support were left in no doubt that 99 per cent of those in the Arena were supporting Willie Casey.

At 9.50pm Master of Ceremonies Mike Goodhall finally brought the crowd to silence as he introduced the main even of the evening.

Paulie Hyland was left in no doubt that he was facing a hostile home crowd as he entrance music of 'Molly Malone' was drowned out by a chorus of boos.

But when six pipers appeared to signal the arrival of the home favourite, the UL

Arena was shaking at its very foundations.

"Ole, Ole Ole" sang the now standing crowd as Casey bounced into the ring.

Clearly emotional, the fear was that the occasion could get to an inexperienced Casey, who brought a record of 10 wins (six KOs) from 10 fights into the ring, compared to Hyland's record of 18 wins from 19 fights.

But not so.

The opening was frantic from both and Casey finished the opening round he a great upperhand to the open chin of Hyland.

Queen's 'We will rock you'

was the interval music and that was certainly true as Casey and Hyland went toe to toe.

Many had expected a more defensive stance from Hyland but the second round he certainly the best he had to offer as he caught Casey with a left hook or two.

But his corner sounded caution to not get involved in a toe-to-toe fight with Casey.

"Paulie got a bit of success and ran away with himself and forgot the gameplan. He got a bit of success in the second round, but in the third round I felt he fought the wrong contest and allowed Willie to do

what Willie does best," explained Paulie's coach and father Paddy afterwards.

With blood spilling from Hyland's nose the crowd and Casey sensed an ending.

Punch after punch reigning down on Hyland. Firstly pinned to the left ropes and although working his way back towards the centre, the Tallaght man was then pushed back onto ropes.

Another flurry of punches came from Casey and the referee stepped in to stop the contest.

"If Paulie had thrown a few shots back in the fourth, I don't think that the contest would

have been stopped but everything sounds like an excuse when you are beaten, but there is no excuse," explained Hyland's father afterwards.

Neither did his son offer any excuse.

"I just got some silly clip at the back of the ear and I couldn't see anything and that's the way boxing goes. I'm a fighter and I don't want any fight stopped but it was up to the referee - I am disappointed but I am not complaining. I couldn't see and I was trying to hold him but the referee stepped in," explained Hyland of the fight's end in the fourth round.