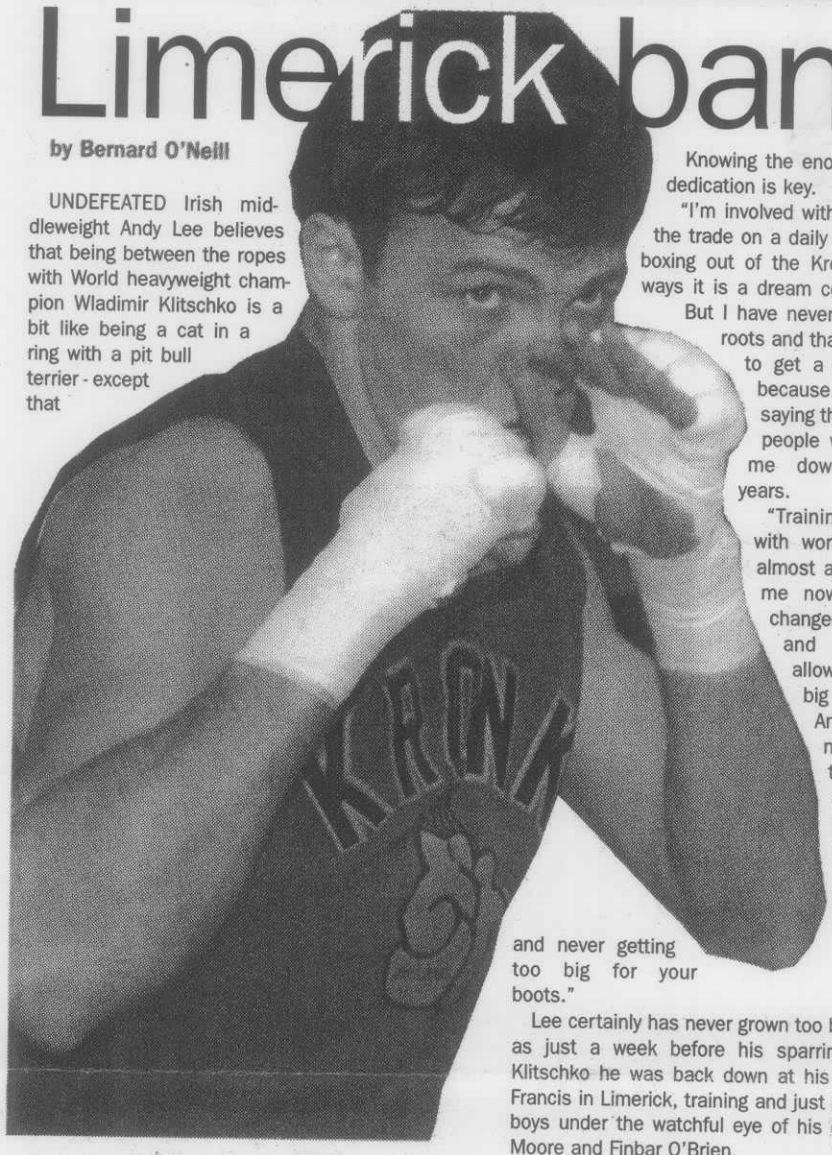
Limerick banks on Lee

by Bernard O'Neill



UNDEFEATED Irish middleweight Andy Lee believes that being between the ropes with World heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko is a bit like being a cat in a ring with a pit bull terrier - except that he's the cat, technically speaking.

Lee, unbeaten in 14 pro fights, will make his long awaited professional debut in his home town this Saturday February 2 against Argentinean Alejandro Gustavo Falliga at the University of Limerick.

Tickets for the scheduled 10 rounder were sold out within hours of going on sale last month, but Buenos Aries born Falliga, speaking from his training base in Argentina, is vowing to rain on everyone's parade.

"I know all about Lee and his reputation. When I saw he was scheduled to fight in December I asked my manager to get a fight with him because I want to test myself against the best. On that occasion it didn't happen, but thankfully my chance is here now and it is a big opportunity for me," said Falliga

The 25 year old, who is two years Lee's senior, suffered a comprehensive points defeat to Germany's Sebastian Zbik in Cologne last May and has lost two of his last five fights. His last defeat arrived at the hands of his fellow countryman Luciano Leonel Cuello after a controversial spilt decision in Buenos Aries last month, but Falliga, nicknamed "El Flaco" insists he's learning.

Looking ahead to his eagerly awaited professional debut at a venue which is just a short walk away from his families home in Castleconnell, Lee said he will be well prepared.

"Falliga has an impressive record and we will be studying him more over the coming weeks. From what I've heard he was very unlucky not to win his last fight as he dropped Cuello twice in the earlier rounds. I will give Falliga the utmost respect but fighting in my home town is a dream come true for me and I don't intend to disappoint boxing fans on my own turf."

Lee's sparring sessions with Klitschko were mostly technical and defensive sparring, but even so, just as punishing. However, he is well able to give as good as he gets against the world's best these days, just ask ex-World middleweight champ Jermain Taylor.

Rubbing shoulders and trading leather with world champions is a regular feature of Lee's days these times - indeed as he points out you can't walk around the Kronk gym without falling over one.

There's Klitschko, Taylor and Thomas "the hit man" Hearn's to name but three, and even the legendary Jake La Motta has been giving the 23-year-old Limerick man little bits of advice and tips including praise when he knocked out ex-World champ Carl Daniels at Madison Square Garden last March.

"Wow, the lights went out on Broadway, this Irish kids got class," said La Motta.

Knowing the enormous amount of dedication is key.

"I'm involved with the very best in the trade on a daily and weekly basis boxing out of the Kronk and in many ways it is a dream come true for me. But I have never lost sight of my roots and that is why I pushed to get a fight in Limerick because it is my way of saying thank you to all the people who have helped me down through the years.

"Training and sparring with world champions is almost a daily routine for me now but it hasn't changed me as a person and I would never allow myself to get big headed about it. Anyway, they would never stand for that at the Kronk, airs and graces have no place in the gym, it's all about hard work and having the right attitude and never getting too big for your boots."

Lee certainly has never grown too big for his boots, as just a week before his sparring session with Klitschko he was back down at his former club, St Francis in Limerick, training and just being one of the boys under the watchful eye of his ex coaches Ken Moore and Finbar O'Brien.

Lee's appearance at his old club went down a bomb and the young up and coming St Francis stars had a field day watching their hero perform in their very own gym. His training method of holding a tennis ball between his chin and left glove to keep his left hand up in defence has also caught on at the club. Most boxers when practising their right jab also try to keep their left hand up. But the left can inadvertently drop at times and the boxers don't even notice.

However, if the tennis ball drops then you know that your defence has dropped. It is a simple, but very effective training method.

"Yeah, I've been using that training routine for a few years now because having a good jab is not going to get you very far if your leaving yourself wide open to attack. I was delighted to get back to St Francis for a few nights and meet all the lads and just find out what's happening with the club and it is great to see that we have won an Irish title this year.

"There is obviously a difference being a professional but the pressures are still the same as when I was on the High Performance Programme, it's just different as a pro, but my objective has always been the same, and that is to be the best.

"When I started winning Irish titles a few years ago it was a great boost and then I was invited to become a member of the High Performance Programme and training under Gary Keegan, Billy Walsh and Zuar Antia who really helped to improve me as a boxer.

"But the funding was low in those days to tell the truth and it was difficult to get by at times as I was training six days a week in Dublin and I wasn't able to work.

"That is why things like getting paid for writing a diary for the Evening Echo really helped and the extra money came in really useful at the time and I can't thank the paper enough.

"There were another few people that helped me also and I would like to thank them because basically I was an amateur training like a professional and I couldn't work for a living and we all need a few bob in our pockets.

"These days I'm well taken care of and I travel the world to watch fights and attend training camps before my fights, but I will never forget the people that helped me when I was starting out.

"People might say I'm living the life and to a certain extent I am, but it's still the same as when I was on the High Performance Programme as I watch my weight, the food I eat, the amount and quality of training I do and all the various disciplines associated with being a professional boxer.

"I think that discipline is the key in this sport and that is why I haven't changed since my amateur days really as I was very dedicated and disciplined then. It's just the objectives that have changed now.

Renowned American coach and manager Emanuel Steward, who has trained and managed over 30 world champions - including Thomas 'The Hit Man' Hearn's, Evander Holyfield and Lennox Lewis, to name but three - has always been interested in tall fighters, and the 6ft 2in Lee fitted nicely into that category. Tentative approaches were made from Steward's legendary Kronk Gym in Detroit.

However, Lee, who was born in London before moving back to his mother Anne's hometown of Limerick in the mid 1990s, always wanted to box for his country in the Olympics.

"My ambition was always to box for Ireland every since I saw Michael Carruth win a gold medal at the Barcelona Games and Wayne McCullough win silver.

"When I started winning Irish titles there were enquiries from the English but there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to represent Ireland."

Lee, whose father Tom is from Dublin, eventually realised his ambition and qualified for the Athens 2004 Olympics from the European Senior Championships in Croatia, winning a bronze medal into the bargain.

"It took a lot of deliberation on my part to sign the contract with Emanuel Steward as I really enjoyed boxing as an amateur and I was treated brilliantly by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association and the Irish Sports Council."

The Olympics will always be a beacon to all sports men and woman, whether they are amateurs or professionals; so when the Olympic flame is lit in Beijing next summer, will the 2004 Olympian feel a tinge of regret that he didn't hold off on signing up for the pay per punch game.?

"Well I would have had to have qualified first and that's no easy thing especially for European boxers as the qualification process in Europe is particularly hard since the old Soviet Union broke up.

"The Olympics were a fantastic experience for me and I was devastated when I went out. I remember at the time that Sonia O'Sullivan was organising the entire Irish Olympic squad to get down to the arena to cheer me on and they were chanting my name throughout the fight.

"That was the first time I had ever experienced that kind of support and it took me two rounds to regain my focus properly and I was playing catch up from there on in. But that was then, this is now, and I've made my decision.

"I will watch the Olympics on TV next summer and I'll be throwing every punch with the Irish lads and I will be keeping my fingers crossed that Ken Egan and the boys can come through the qualifiers in Italy and Greece in the next few months."

Lee's last fight saw him outclass Ulster puncher Jason McKay at the National Stadium in December, McKay retiring on his stool at the end of the six round.

Meanwhile, Lee's clash with Falliga will see the 23 year old -who has yet to drop a round in the pro ranks - box at the University of Limerick for the first time since he beat Scotland's Brian Peacock the venue to win a Junior Four Nations gold medal in 2001.

The tickets for the Brian Peters promotion sold out like hot cakes within hours and the 2000 capacity Sports Arena will be packed to the rafters with the type of support that is exclusive only to the Munster rugby team at Thomond Park.

Lee has been allowed add a green stripe and shamrock to the famous gold and red trunk colours of the Kronk Gym he sports in the ring ^ a sign of the indelible mark he,s already made on the sport.

So will he be the first-ever Irish world champion to emerge from the renowned Detroit boxing academy? "Obviously the objective is to be up there challenging for a world title sometime in the near future," added Lee, "but I have a bit of a way to travel yet and I'm not rushing anything. Everything is moving along nicely and nothing is being rushed."

And what of his former opponent Jesus Gonzales, who turned pro in 2003 just a few months after being beaten by Lee in Cuba and has won 20 of his 21 fights?

"Gonzalez is doing well for himself and has an impressive record. We have both come a long way since the 2002 World Junior Championships."

More 37 for your dollar?

SINCE we last spoke about Limerick 37 things have really, really changed. Let me see if I can get this right. We finished fourth. We sacked our manager. We hire Mike Kerley. We then lost our CEO. We then looked like we would fold and never been seen again. Enter a Mr McCarthy from the USA and we are alive again.

So where are we now? Well, if a club has no PRO and no real news coming from within its ranks, what is a journalist to do? Talk to a shareholder that's what.

This week between the posts spoke to a major Limerick 37 shareholder and things are looking up. The club has secured financial backing from New Jersey native Mr Jack McCarthy. The latest we hear is that Mc Carthy's investment has been gratefully accepted by all the shareholders and both sides are looking to "get things on the road as soon as possible"

"The most important thing at the moment for Limerick 37 is the get our license sorted for the FAI. Other things can fall in after that," commented our source. He went on to add that the shareholders and Mr McCarthy would be looking to "take things bit by bit. Making sure that the club is financially stable first before looking to expand in any way" Good to hear for once in an off-season.

This new investment came at the 11th hour as Limerick was really in danger of going out of business. Something that this city did not need. All the negativity of the past is now to be forgotten and once again Limerick can go into a season looking forward rather than over their collective shoulders.

Commenting on his recent acquisition, Mc Carthy was quoted as saying; "One of my first priorities is to look for a chief executive who will run the club on a day-to-day basis.

"I will also take a hands-on approach to running the club and I will continue to be a regular visitor to Ireland. My challenge is to work with and build relationships with the players, the fans, with the wonderful junior programme in Limerick and with the business community. I'm proud and delighted to get involved." Looks like we are singing from the same hymn sheet.

Worrying signs are still evident though. There is still no news of who has signed and who has not. All we do know is that Kevin Waters has gone to Waterford and Limerick will need to not only replace Kevin, but also strengthen the squad elsewhere else too.

On a final note for this week. The proposed pre season friendly against Galway United, scheduled for this Friday has been cancelled due to an unplayable pitch.

Other venues were also unavailable so the game may now take place at another time. The First Division itself is set to start on March 7 with an away tie against Monaghan United. Let's hope we will be all sorted by then. Limerick's first five games are listed below.

Fri. 7 March	Monaghan United v Limerick 37	A	8.00 pm
Fri. 14 March	Limerick 37 v Wexford Youths	H	7.45 pm
Fri. 21 March	Sporting Fingal v Limerick 37	A	7.45 pm
Fri. 28 March	Limerick 37 v Longford Town	H	7.45 pm
Fri. 4 April	Waterford United v Limerick 37	A	7.45 pm

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