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Willie Casey lives up to his billing as 'Big Bang' wins title

■ The Southill boxer now turns his attention to a European title defence against Spaniard Kiko Martinez

By 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 in, 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.

But his coach Phil Sutcliffe was having none of it.

"Your very special," interjected Sutcliffe.

"You have just won 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 the 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.



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

PICTURES: SPORTSFILE

"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 for-

mer 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."



Willie Casey celebrates with his family, from left to right, father Terry, niece Donna-Marie, son Myles, wife Mary, niece Kayleigh and mother Kathleen, after his victory over Paul Hyland