

THE *BIG* INTERVIEW *Echo Sports*

of it

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short and stocky until I was 14, when I shot up. And I was heavy as well so I had to fight people who were taller than me. I remember I got weighed in and I was sitting down after getting changed and everyone was asking each other: 'Who are you fighting?' I remember they asked this big fella in the corner: 'Who are you fighting?' and he said 'Someone called A. Lee.' This fella was massive and I just thought 'No'.

"I couldn't believe how nervous I was, but I went out and beat him anyway. It was pretty scary, but I loved it, the winning feeling. It felt like a million dollars to win and it still does."

Lee went on to win two national titles when he was 14 and 15 in England, before he came to Ireland and took All-Irelands at ages 16, 17 and 18.

When the family moved back to Castleconnell in Limerick over five years ago he joined St Francis boxing club. Finbarr O'Brien and Kenneth Moore from the club have helped Lee a lot.

"They are like my best friends as well as coaches. We're a small club, but it gave me a foundation for where I am today. But club coaches can only go so far. And now Zouris, Billy Walsh, Gary Keegan and Cathal O'Grady have been tweaking and fine-tuning me since I started boxing internationally."

So what separates Andy Lee from the rest? "I'd like to think that I train harder, dedicate myself and make a lot of sacrifices; boxers don't have social lives. There's a little bit of talent as well, maybe," he laughs.

This year he has had eight international fights, and lost three, but one was on a cut. But he has had to step up a weight division after the Olympic Council did away with the light middleweight division. It has meant he has had to work with weights to build up his muscle volume so he can punch with more power at 75kg.

Against the Russian Gaidarbekov in the final of a Helsinki multi-nations tournament his opponent's strength really told and Lee went down to a close 16-12 decision. Not bad though considering Gaidarbekov was runner-up in the Sydney Olympics and Lee held his own against him.

He also lost at the EU tournament in Strasbourg on a stoppage to Mamadou Diambang because of a

cut forehead, having, he says, beaten the head of the Frenchman every day at a training camp a few weeks earlier.

"I knew straight away that it was a bad cut and my first thought were that I would miss the World Championships in Bangkok.

"At the start of the year I was going to the Worlds to get experience, but when I got there I wanted a medal. The preparation wasn't the best because of the cut, I couldn't spar for the last two days before the first round. I beat a Korean (Kim Jae Ki) by a few points in that, but it wasn't my best performance. Then I was drawn against the Kazhak (Gennadiy Golovkin), who was the World Club and Asian champion. I was a bit too anxious because I knew it was such a big fight. I didn't box well and got beaten by a wide margin.

"On my day I could have given him a fight, but again I was under the weight and he had more power and was simply better than me.

"He went on to win it though, so at least I had got beaten by the best."

While he doesn't remember Barcelona '92, Lee knows all about that great period for Irish boxing.

"I've watched the video and read the book. I actually had lunch with Michael Carruth last week. He really should get more recognition, because he is an Olympic champion and how many of them have we got. Having him sitting in front of me was good because he has been there and done it and I want to emulate that."

The ambition is the gold medal, but it won't be easy. Whatever about getting there, in his way at Athens would be the Kazhakstani, Golovkin, the Turk, Sardar Ostan, and the Cuban, Noelvis Veitig Dias and the Canadian, Pascal, not to mention whoever represents the strongest European team, Russia.

"The Olympics are about who can turn it on, on the day," says Lee. "I'd like to meet the Kazhakstani in the Olympics because he is the best and I want to do myself justice against him."

Were Lee to get a medal in Athens it would be the first time Ireland would have got one above the welterweight division.

That he won't get to fight at light middle is a shame, considering it was what his favourite boxer fought at in Seoul '88.

"Roy Jones would be the main



Andy Lee (red) in action against Scotland's John Peacock during the Four Nations Boxing Championship held at the University of Limerick in 2001.

man for me. He is the best out there," he says enthusiastically.

Jones famously got robbed of gold at those Olympics when a hometown decision was given to a Si-hun Park. Light middle was also the weight that legendary Olympian Lazslo Papp, who died a fortnight before I spoke to Lee, had fought at. Papp won two golds at light middle and one at middle and also went on to remain unbeaten in 29 professional fights.

These are the men that Lee is aiming to emulate.

But if he were to miss out on gold then he could look at the American middleweight Jermaine Taylor, who took only bronze at Sydney and who since last Saturday night has an 18-0 professional record.

But Lee is wary of thinking about professionalism just yet.

"My goal is Athens and it is the

only thing I'm focusing on at the minute. I can weigh up my options after that. I could stay amateur and maybe I could be defending my Olympic title in Beijing," he smiles.

But no less a name than Emmanuel Steward has been trying to bend his ear and now that Lennox Lewis is retiring, maybe the great coach might have some extra space in his gym.

"He wanted me to travel to America and train over there. But I am 19 years old and have the rest of my life to turn pro. Of course, it is nice to have such a man as Emmanuel Steward interested in you. But I have to my feet on the ground."

However, the American he beat in the semi-final in Cuba, Jesus Gonzalez has already signed up with promoter Bob Arum and has won his first two fights.

"Yeah, he's got a nice few bob now. I mean it's nice and all to have the attention, but if I don't get to or perform in Athens, it could very quickly be 'Andy who?' I have to do my job first and get a medal and then they can start praising me."

When pressed though he says, that down the line, he wants to go to America.

"There is good money in Germany and the crowds are very good too, but I'm not to sure if I'd like the country. I like Belfast though. It is a big boxing town and it is not too far from home. But everywhere is second to America for boxing. The standard, the coaching, the publicity; I would love to go to America at some stage because you can only go so far as an amateur. A few quid would be nice too, but I love the sport more and my aim is to be world champion."