

EchoSports THE BIG MATCH

Silver in Cuba for Andy Lee

"IN 2001 I had been beaten in the final of the Nationals here, but the champion couldn't box in the four nations, so I went instead and won.

"I went on to the European Juniors where I was beaten by a Turkish lad Sardar Ostan, who was the World Champion. After that I was so sick, disgusted by the loss that when I heard about the World Championships being in Cuba, I set my mind to winning the gold there. "After that I put my head down and put the hours of training in.

"All through the year I had good results in the ring and I went out there and did the business and got silver.

"I stopped a Slovakian, Andrei Molnar, and a very good Mexican, Marco Prrybah on the 15-point rule in the first two rounds. Then I faced a Ukrainian, Ismail Sillakh, who was a World and European Cadet champion. All through the year I had heard about how tough he was. But thankfully the hard work I had put in paid off and I beat him 21-18.

"It was the best fight of my life. We were in a huge stadium and, you know, they love their boxing in Cuba. It was sheer joy when I knew I had one a medal.

Next up was the American Jesus Gonzalez. He was tough as well; the number one in America, senior and junior, and he was a huge prospect for them. I had heard a lot about him, but I was confident, because he was short (Andy is 6' 2") He was a southpaw too, and I thought he would suit me as he came forward and I counter-punched. In the end, we were both knackered and stood toe-to-toe and slugged it out for a while. I won 19-17.

"The Cuban Noelvis Diaz beat me fair and square in the final, but I was exhausted by the time it came around. I had five fights in six days and for the final I was dead on my legs. I got stuck in, but I was in survival mode. The first two rounds I went out there and I was catching him and keeping in touch, but in the third he pulled out a lead and while I gave it a good lash in the last, I didn't do enough.

"I reckon if I had been fit and fresh as the first day I would definitely have beaten him.

And he only had four fights because he had a walkover in an earlier round and so he was fresher."

Making a fist



Andy Lee at the Multi-Nations Boxing Tournament at the Rochestown Park Hotel last week.

Picture: Gavin Browne

Boxing, along with horse racing, is the sport that has been most associated with Ireland on the international stage during our sporting history.

And while it is good to see the rise of martial arts, imported from the East, become increasingly popular across the country, the dwindling interest in the 'noble art' is something we should mourn.

Which was all the more reason to celebrate the arrival of a tournament like the Multi-Nations boxing tournament in Rochestown Park Hotel last week. That not all the participating countries turned up was unfortunate, and that some did, and had to be turned away because of faulty accreditation was even more annoying. Added to all this, one of Ireland's best talents was forced out due to injury: Andy Lee the 19-year-old silver medal winner from the Junior World Championships in Cuba last year.

Anyone who has seen the Lee in action or on the scant coverage given to amateur boxing on TV (not on RTE, naturally) will have seen why he is considered boxing's bright young hope in Ireland. He is a natural boxer, or at least as natural as you can get from spending your life in the gym. He doesn't enter into 'I'm-going-to-re-arrange-your-face' style confrontations. His counter-attacking style is perfectly suited to the amateur scoring system. Above all, he holds Ireland's best chance of getting a boxing medal at the Olympics next year.

Robert O'Shea talks Ireland's brightest boxing prospect for the Athens Olympics, the Limerick middleweight, Andy Lee

When I met him last week at the Multi-Nations tournament in Cork, he was frustrated that he wouldn't be performing.

"It's torture to watch when you can't get in the ring. There is a Canadian here, Jean-Paul Pascal, who is the Commonwealth champion at my weight. I'd like to have fought him."

Pascal was the best boxer in the tournament displaying power and speed, and a cockiness that was justified.

Lee had to drop out of the event because of an injury to the middle knuckle of his left hand, which he picked up when using someone else's boxing gloves during sparring when in Cyprus.

"It happened six weeks ago. It's still sore and it is responding very slowly to treatment.

"But the positives are that it has let me work on my general fitness. My Georgian coach Zouris Antia has been working my jab with me (Lee is a southpaw). As a junior I was more or less an out-and-out counter-puncher, but I've been working a lot harder on coming forward since I joined the High Performance team. "I don't think the knuckle will affect Olympic

chances. The most important thing is to be back for the National Senior Championships December."

Before that, he heads off to Moscow with the High Performance team, where he hopes to test the fist with some sparring.

The High Performance team includes ten of the best boxers in the country and helps them to prepare for international competition.

"It is something that Irish boxing has needed for a long, long time," says Lee.

"Before the present system it was terrible. You'd be training with your club all year round and you'd win the national title and then two weeks before an international championship, you would get called up for squad training and then fly out."

Indeed our one and only representative at the last Olympics, Michael Roche from the Sunnyside boxing club in Cork has said: "Compared to what was laid out for me, other countries' preparations, were miles ahead in Sydney."

The silver in Cuba last year opened doors for Lee. He qualified for the International Carding Scheme through the Sports Council and the funding has been a massive help.

"It lets me to concentrate on becoming a full-time boxer, which you need to be if you are to be fighting at Olympic standard.

"With the High Performance team you have the structure and the system and full-time coaches in the gym every day. Each day you go into the gym you seem to be learn-

ing something new." It's all in aid to help Lee and his team-mates reach the Olympics.

"I believe that I will be going to Athens, even though it's much harder to qualify from Europe now. To get there you have to finish among the medals in the European championships in Croatia in February. And sometimes judges decisions can be influenced by politics, especially with the Eastern European countries. But you can't control your fate so you have to just block it out.

However, I would get a second chance to get through were I to win a silver medal in multi-nation events in Poland and Sweden."

Lee grew up in London after his father from Dublin and mother from Limerick had moved there, and his first taste of the pugilistic life came when his uncle took his two older brothers to the famous Repton boxing club in the city. He tagged along, as a younger brother always does.

Repton was a club that had many Olympians and ABA champions and the super heavyweight champ from Sydney, Audley Harrison, used to train there.

"I grew up with boxing gloves on my hands. I'd be down the gym three nights a week for the whole evening and later on, every night. They were sick of looking at me after a while."

When it came time for his first fight he remembers being very nervous.

"I was 12 and the whole family was there. I wasn't tall then. I was