

Starting over

He was going nowhere fast but a change of scene seems to have done light-middle Matthew Macklin a power of good. MCK GILL talks to him

In November 2001, Birmingham welterweight **Matthew Macklin** entered the professional ranks. He was touted as the man to shed "the Second City" of its long-standing apathy towards boxing. A multiple national junior champion, reigning ABA king and world-rated amateur starlet, the 19-year-old oozed crossover appeal. Second-generation Tipperary, bright eyed and personable, he had been educated at a fee-paying school and had done Year One of a law degree at Coventry University before turning pro with Sports Network.

Yet, four-and-a-half years on, the trophy cabinet remains barren. An English-title challenge brought a loss and 30 months of relative obscurity. His only British outing over the last two years lasted 164 seconds. However, away from the public glare, Macklin has been grafting away in Manchester, new trainer Billy Graham shoring up his defence and installing Macklin as Ricky Hatton's chief sparring mate.

Now 16-1(12KOs), Macklin feels the time has come to resurface. We should discover exactly how much the light-middle has to offer when he challenges Jamie Moore this summer in what figures to be a top-quality domestic dust-up.

BM: After storming to nine straight wins by November 2003, you were on the cusp of a British-title challenge but were outpointed — contentiously, it must be said — by Sheffield's Andrew Facey for the English light-middleweight crown. In hindsight, was that a blessing?
MM: Probably. It was a poor performance, a setback. But, even if others forget my pedigree, I knew I was still the real deal.

Listen, I was just 21, not a single hair on my chest, and dropped a very tight decision in my first 10-rounder to a really awkward 31-year-old who no one in the world could look good against.

BM: Following stints with Peter Harrison and the Lynch brothers, you are now with Billy Graham.

MM: Billy's definitely the one for me; a wicked trainer. I've never been fully content where I've been before. When I first came to the Phoenix, I just stayed in the shadows and really learned my trade. Previously, I've been great when fighters came at me, less good at chasing it. But Billy spent a lot of time working at improving my rhythm. He encouraged me to develop my footwork by watching Joe Louis videos and I applied myself fully to his teachings. I also got the best of sparring.

I drive up Monday morning and I've just bought a flat somewhere near Manchester city centre. The hardest part was the loneliness because, in Birmingham, I'm never on my own. But, gradually, I've learned to enjoy my own company.

BM: You've had the dubious pleasure of serving as chief sparring partner to Ricky Hatton for his last six fights. I trust he pays you well!

MM: Does he fuck! Actually, I really enjoy it. The things I had to improve on, like rhythm and covering the canvas, Ricky's shit hot at. He helps me out with the old-man tricks, how to steal rests whilst still applying pressure. I can't help but improve. We get big crowds to watch and I always try to give it him back. Close to his fights I've usually got close to a stone (14lbs) weight advantage, but obviously he's far more experienced. There's no quarter given, none asked, either side. He's never really hurt me but then he's never really caught me clean to the body yet. I've still got that to look forward to!

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MACKLIN'S WIPEOUT of Alexey Chirkov showed that the move to Manchester was paying dividends

“He is so physically strong it's like sparring a bear. It gets very lively, very physical and I have to really get myself psyched up for it because I know, if I ever take my foot off the gas, he'll give me a proper dusting”

RICKY HATTON

BM: Initial manager Frank Warren once claimed that you had star quality stamped all over you. Yet this January you left him in favour of Dublin's unsung Brian Peters. Why?

MM: When the time came to renew in November 2004, I think Frank had forgotten how good I was. I felt I was worth more than he was offering and also wanted some concrete direction.

My intention was to prove my worth by shining in a couple of fights while out of contract, to up the ante. I just needed a fight. Any fight. I'd been out 11 months when, out of the blue, Brian offered me an Irish-title shot up at middleweight against Michael Monaghan. I boxed really well, dominated every round [winning in the fifth].

Thereafter, I kept contact with Brian. I was very impressed with the job he'd done with Bernard Dunne and could tell he was genuine. Even before I signed with him, he got me videos of all my opponents. Since, he's delivered everything he's promised, got me a sponsor straight away. As well as Ireland, he's got contacts on the mainland and in the States.

BM: That Irish dimension can't have harmed you when you dabbled with a couple of fights in America last year.

MM: Absolutely. The title proved a big launch pad for securing an Irish-American following. Brian seems eager to make an Irish-title fight with

John Duddy [the unbeaten Derry man currently making a name for himself in New York, see pages 38-41 of this issue]. Though Duddy's boxing at middle, he's no more solid than me. He's decent, dangerous early, but I think I'm better in every department.

When I fought at a swanky Atlantic City casino, I brought the house down [routing Leo Lauat in three]. All the Irish turned out; I had the bogpipes, the lot.

BM: After 18 months on the road, you returned to Britain. On the Hatton-Maussa undercard in Sheffield last November, you obliterated Russian Alexey Chirkov with a left hook to the body in round one.

MM: I had a blast of butterflies when I saw Chirkov's credentials [top amateur, 17-1 going in]. He was a big step up but I was way too good for the level I'd been boxing at and I'd been feeling good in the gym. Showtime televised it live in the U.S., which was pleasing.

BM: You were denied further American exposure when trainer Graham withdrew you from a fight at Madison Square Garden on St Patrick's Day eve on account of a weight discrepancy.

MM: Billy made the right decision. Things had been going too well to take chances. Still, it was as near to having a fight as you can be without fighting. I went through all the nerves, all the grief of making weight. I was actually about to get taped up when they binned it.

BM: With so many belts these days, is challenging Jamie Moore an unnecessary gamble? He's southpaw, touching his prime, contesting his 10th championship contest and also enjoying home advantage.

MM: I'd have loved it to have been in Birmingham but expect to have 450 to 500 up there [anyway], Jamie's a nice lad and him being such a highly regarded champion makes this challenge all the sweeter. More kudos.

Neither of us will ever be mistaken for Willie Pep so it's bound to be exciting. I can't see it going 12. Jamie's the least awkward southpaw you could get. He's tough, well-schooled, but both Facey and Michael Jones shook him up and neither of them hit like a Wayne Alexander.

I've never been down amateur or pro and, though I've only been 10 rounds once, I know my stamina is one of my best attributes. When U.S. doctors monitored my heart, they were astonished I had a resting pulse rate of just 44 beats per minute. I held school records for middle-distance running and, unlike lots of the others at the gym, I managed the 12 rounds on Billy's body bag quickly.

If I come through Jamie, I definitely intend to make my first defence in Bram and get a buzz going. I'm confident I could sell out the [3,000 capacity] Aston Villa Leisure Centre or Solihull Ice Rink on my own.

I'd also fancy topping an ESPN date. I've penned a three-fight [promotional] deal with Barry Hearn and I'd like to work on both sides of the Atlantic.

