

# Raised expectations

*Taylor is well-grounded, but instant hype will add pressure*

Katie Taylor is very obviously a remarkable athlete. To be a senior soccer international and one of the world's finest female boxers is some achievement. For a woman coming from Ireland, a country where so much of women's sport has only been properly recognized in the past two decades and still struggles for coverage and support these days, it's an even bigger feat. It was fitting then that last week's announcement women's boxing will be included in the 2012 Olympics brought Taylor into the national spotlight for a few days.



**Dave Hannigan**  
letters@irishecho.com

Given that she has two world titles to her name already, the general gist of the stories were that the Bray native will be delivering gold in London three years from now. This sort of instant hype and unnecessary heaping on of pressure is unfortunate but apparently inevitable in the modern media environment.

Everybody who's ever dealt with the woman testifies that Taylor is a well-grounded, self-motivated individual and, given her impact in two different codes, it's fair to assume she's not the type to have her head turned by excess publicity. Indeed, those around the women's international soccer team are struck by her humility and her work ethic when she links up with the squad. Even still, somebody should pull her aside and warn her about Ireland and Olympians. The nation expects. It has no right to do but it does.

We have been down this road before with Sonia O'Sullivan. The moment she started evincing promise back in the early 1990s, the expectations were of immediate gold in major championships. Even more ludicrously, there were some who would complain if she didn't win whatever televised race they happened to catch her running in on a given night during the summer. Never mind that she was up there in the top five female distance runners in the world for more than a decade, giving us a rooting interest. That wasn't enough for the bar-stool critics who demanded instant gratification.

Some people mocked O'Sullivan's Olympic debacles in 1996 and 2004 as much as they celebrated her silver in 2000. Through it all, too many of those watching ignored the most obvious fact. Here was a unique character giving us a presence at the elite level of athletics that we may never, ever have again. Before Olive Loughnane walked from nowhere into 20km silver in Berlin on Sunday, when was the last time any Irish person tuned into a world-class athletics event and got to enjoy seeing one of our own finishing in the top three? And with all due respect,

when will be the next time?

The O'Sullivan treatment is instructive because it offers a glimpse of how we may well be the most over-expectant nation in the world. Harsh? Maybe fair. Think about the international soccer team. We fully expect them to qualify for the World Cup. At the very least, we demand a trip to the play-offs. Yet, this is a first XI largely made up of championship players and Premiership journeymen, just one of whom plays regularly in the Champions League. And how long John O'Shea can retain starter status at United remains to be seen.

We have this warped view that when the athlete or footballer or boxer is wearing green, they can perform magic. And sometimes they do. But the reaction to Katie Taylor's sudden transformation into genuine Olympic prospect this past week was a tad frightening. Think of all the stuff that can happen to her over the next three years. If a week is a long time in politics, what does that make three years in sport? A lifetime?

"It's going to be hard over the next three years. I think a lot of



PHOTO BY PETER MCDERMOTT

Katie Taylor on the seafront in her native Bray, Co. Wicklow.

people feel that I'm just going to turn up and win a gold medal," said Taylor the other day. "All I can do is to try my best to keep going as I am and to improve as a boxer, enjoy my boxing for the

next two years and, hopefully, that will lead to qualification and Olympic gold.

"I've no doubt that over the next few years women's boxing is going to improve again. It is

going to be the hardest task just to qualify for the Olympics. In three years time you don't know what's going to happen. There are always going to be new girls coming up, even here in Ireland there are girls coming up, which is brilliant. I can't afford to get complacent at all."

She won't get complacent but that won't stop the rest of us. The armchair fans will reach for the remote three summers from now and demand to be entertained and inspired. Most of them won't give her a second thought in between. The government will, to its credit, give her €40,000, just about the average industrial wage, through the Irish Sports Council elite athlete grants. Is that enough? How much is ever enough when it comes to preparing somebody to compete against the best in the world?

By the time Taylor climbs into the ring to try to punch her qualifying ticket for London at the 2011 World Championships, traditional Olympic powers like China and Russia will have diverted massive resources into boosting the chances of their female fighters doing likewise. Remember how the Chinese cherrypicked athletes with different physiques and diverted them to different disciplines ahead of Beijing in order to boost the medal tally. It shouldn't prove that difficult for them to unearth a few distaff pugilists in a population that size between now and then, and we all know what the big red sporting machine there can do with raw talent.

In her favor is the fact Taylor trains and works within the same high performance international boxing structure that delivered Ireland three medals in China last year. They know what they're doing and everything she's done in her own career so far suggests she does too. But only time will really tell. Three long years and counting.

## Lee takes on home-town hero

By Jay Mwamba  
letters@irishecho.com

In his first bout States-side since the stunning loss to Brian Vera nearly 18 months ago, Andy Lee squares off with Anthony Shuler in Hammond, Ind., this Friday night, expecting a tough fight from the local hero.

"To beat me would be a big thing in his hometown," Lee said from his Detroit training base last Sunday. "But I'm all set and in good shape. I'm ready to fight."

The Limerick southpaw has won three straight bouts since the set-back against Vera and is now ranked number 14 in the middleweight division by the World Boxing Association [WBA]. Victory over Shuler at the Horseshoe Casino, in Hammond, could see him break into the top ten, putting him in line for a crack at WBA 160-pound titlist Felix Sturm of Germany.

In the 20-6-1 Indiana native, Lee faces a capable foe with a reputation as a puncher [14 KOs], albeit most of those wins have been in the light middleweight division.

Shuler, listed at 5-foot-eight and half, will also be spotting Lee more than five inches in the scheduled ten rounder.

"I don't know much about him," Lee confessed. "He's lost to Yory Boy and he has plenty of experience."

Luis Ramon "Yory Boy" Campas is the veteran Mexican slugger best remembered by Irish fans for his brutal war with John Duddy three years ago. Shuler, who's 32, was kayoed in one round by Campas in 2004.

He's also been stopped in both his last two fights: a second round KO by Julio Cesar Chavez, Jr., in April 2007, and after taking 2008 off, a third round TKO by Andy Kollé two months ago.



INPHO

Andy Lee.

Whilst these losses may suggest that Shuler doesn't take punishment well, Emanuel Steward, Lee's trainer-manager, believes that the hometown factor should boost Shuler's performance.

"He's got good upper body movement and does a lot of sliding and slipping of punches. He should fight very well since he'll be fighting at home," noted Steward.

Ticket information for the Lee-Shuler fight is available at (800) 745-3000.