

No Ordinary Joe

Contributed by Daniel Cann
Saturday, 08 November 2008

Arguably the greatest boxer ever produced from the British Isles is Welshman Joe Calzaghe. In a stunning professional career he has remained undefeated since his debut on the Lennox Lewis versus Frank Bruno under-card at the Cardiff Arms Park way back in 1993. Since then he has won the WBO Super Middleweight Title by out-pointing Chris Eubank in 1997 and defended this title twenty one times over eleven years. In a career spanning nearly fifteen years he has fought and defeated all-comers including rival World Champions. This autobiography from the man himself goes behind the triumphs and the exemplary record and provides the background and insider knowledge of an amazing career.

This book has avoided the pitfall of being a 'love-in' or a glossy whitewashed media friendly PR exercise. I was delighted to read an autobiography about a top sportsman that was so down to earth and honest. Calzaghe does not shy away from telling it like it is. This book catalogues the highs and lows of his life and boxing career.

I was surprised to learn that the confident (to the point of arrogance at times) champion was in fact bullied at school. He admits to being a very shy and insecure boy who threw his energies into becoming a schoolboy boxing champion. It was as an amateur boxer that Calzaghe found his true calling. Always single-minded and shunning the limelight he flourished in the tough disciplined world of the amateur code. The early chapters show a very different Calzaghe to the one we have been used to and perhaps his development in these formative years are why he exhibits such a strong independent streak as an adult. The story unfolds in a frank, open self-deprecating manner, quite at odds with many public perceptions.

One chapter I particularly enjoyed was when Calzaghe recalled an early holiday to Sardinia and a scrape that he got into with a local. Episodes like this are told with candour and humour. There are darker moments too as he explains how his career has been plagued with injuries to his hands and elbows. Many lucrative fights have been postponed or cancelled due to this problem. It says a lot for his character that he has persevered through these problems where lesser athletes would have probably retired citing the injuries as a valid excuse.

Calzaghe emerged as World Champion at a time when the big names like Eubank, Benn, and Collins et al were on the way out. Consequently for many years although being an excellent champion making many defences he lacked that one defining fight that would turn him from being a respected champion into a superstar. He describes in great detail fights with the likes of Richie Woodall, Charles Brewer, Byron Mitchell and Mario Veit where he proved his worth and paid his dues against quality opposition yet real fame still eluded him. This all changed when in 2006 he faced the dangerous and heavily favoured American Jeff Lacy the rival IBF Super Middleweight champion. Hugh McIlvanney one of the most respected sports journalists described Calzaghe's points win as 'one of the greatest displays of superb technique, confidence and fighting intelligence a British boxer has delivered in a major contest.' Joe Calzaghe boxing superstar had finally arrived.

One constant through all the hard times and the triumphs is Calzaghe's trainer and father Enzo. He emerges as a colourful and engaging character who deserves an autobiography himself! The camaraderie and comedy that encapsulates this relationship is fully explored here. The book has plenty of witty laugh out loud incidents involving father and son. Enzo comes across as a highly motivated and talented trainer who obviously enjoys a close bond with his son but the duo have an uncanny knack for getting into ridiculous and comic situations together. Calzaghe also talks proudly of his children and describes himself as a family man. This is what elevates this autobiography from standard sports hero fare. It is full of insight, emotion and humour. The reader will feel that they have been on the journey with Calzaghe.

The book ends after Calzaghe defeats Peter Manfredo Jnr in front of his adoring fans at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff in April 2007. The feeling is that Calzaghe has a few more fights left in him and has achieved a kind of peace with himself after an excellent but tough career. The reader too will feel rewarded as I did. I felt I knew and understood the fighter much better once I put the book down. This is a must read for all serious boxing fans.