

Caldwell, John ('Johnny')

by Turlough O'Riordan

Caldwell, John ('Johnny') (1938–2009), boxer, was born on 7 May 1938 at 63 Cyprus Street, Belfast, the son of John Caldwell, a joiner, and Bridget Caldwell (née Maguire). During his education at St Comghall's School, Divis Street, his diminutive stature attracted bullying, and at age 10 he joined the Immaculate Boxing Club. He left Hardinge Street CBS at the age of 14 to become a plumber's apprentice, and continued to box. A rapid, skilful combination puncher with adept footwork, he dominated at provincial and national levels (winning seven Ulster titles), becoming the first boxer to win Ulster and Irish titles at both junior and senior level in 1955/6, his crowning amateur season. A devout catholic, he attended mass daily after his morning run.

In May 1956 Caldwell was flyweight on an Irish team that fought the US national Golden Gloves winners in Chicago (outpointing Pete Mendelez) and the Canadian national winners in Montreal (putting Jean Claude LeClair to the canvas four times), and won the 'Bunny' Sabbath Trophy, awarded by the *Montreal Sportsman* to the most impressive boxer on the tour. Despite losing to Kevin Rafter at the National Stadium, Dublin (21 September 1956), Caldwell was selected (based on his perceived durability) for the Irish team to travel to Melbourne for the Olympic games. Receiving a first round bye, he dispatched Yai Shwe of Burma with a knockout (KO). An impressive display of defensive boxing against the highly rated Australian Warner Batchelor earned him a unanimous points victory in the quarter-final. A points loss to Mircea Dobrescu of Romania in the semi-final secured Caldwell a bronze medal in the flyweight (51kg) division, one of four medal-winning Irish boxers (including Fred Tiedt (qv)) at the games. Nicknamed the 'baby-faced assassin' by the press (in 2016 he remains the youngest ever Irish Olympic medallist at 18 years 205 days), Caldwell was feted on his return by Taoiseach John A. Costello (qv) and the lord mayors of Dublin and Belfast. In the following months he continued to rack up wins, most impressively in the annual Ulster vs. British Army bout in the Ulster Hall (19 December 1956).

After losing in May 1957 to eventual gold-medallist Manfred Homberg of West Germany in the first round of the European amateur boxing championships in Prague, Caldwell was keen to turn professional. He won his last amateur bout on 15 January 1958, having lost only six of 240 amateur bouts and accruing twenty-four titles. After signing professional terms for seven years with his long-time trainer, Jack McCusker, Caldwell won his professional debut on 5 February 1958 with a second-round stoppage against Billy Downer in Glasgow's Kelvin Hall.

Caldwell married (17 July 1958) his childhood sweetheart Bridie Browne in Glasgow. Training there with Joe Aitchenson, he also worked as a bookmaker's clerk with

Sammy Docherty, a Glasgow bookmaker and boxing promoter who had earlier offered him professional terms. McCusker was his manager in name only. In his first professional fight in Belfast, Caldwell outpointed Esteban Martin at the King's Hall to win his seventh professional victory (29 November 1958). He continued to rack up victories, and a third-round knockout of Young Martin of Spain at Streatham Ice Rink, London (9 February 1960), 'a wonderfully mature performance' (*Times*, 10 February 1960), his fifteenth professional win, earned Caldwell a non-title matchup with Risto Luukkonen of Finland, the reigning European flyweight champion. A points victory over ten rounds (23 February 1960) established Caldwell as a leading contender in his division. After he took the British flyweight title from Frankie Jones with a third-round KO in Belfast (8 October 1960), *Ring* magazine placed Caldwell fourth in their annual flyweight world rankings; he was 1960 Ulster boxer of the year. Promoted by Jack Solomons, the leading UK boxing promoter, Caldwell struggled to find flyweight opponents, and had to gain four pounds to beat Christian Marchand of Algeria at bantamweight over seven rounds in Belfast (26 November 1960).

Challenging the experienced, powerful Alphonse Halimi for his world bantamweight title at the Empire Pool (Wembley Arena), London, on 30 May 1961, Caldwell knocked him down for a four count in the last round to win a victory on points. Universally lauded in the British and Irish press – the usually dispassionate *Times* correspondent opining that 'it was a magnificent performance, perfectly executed to the last round' (31 May 1961) – Caldwell returned to a hero's welcome in Belfast. However, two weak victories presaged a tame and uninspiring points victory in the title rematch against Halimi in London (31 October 1961). McCusker released Caldwell, now unbeaten in twenty-one professional bouts, from his contract for an undisclosed settlement in November 1961. By then, *Ring* ranked him as the number three bantamweight in the world. After Caldwell relinquished his British flyweight title in November 1961, Solomons secured him a bantamweight unification bout against Éder Jofre of Brazil, recognised as champion by the USA's National Boxing Association. For the second year running Caldwell was voted Caltex Irish boxer of the year (1960, 1961).

Nat Fleischer, *Ring* editor and doyen of boxing journalism, ranked Jofre as the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world, unbeaten in fifty-four professional bouts, the last eleven by knockout. Caldwell spent Christmas with his family in their new home in Hillhead Avenue, Belfast (bought outright with the proceeds of his title fights), before arriving in São Paulo on 29 December with Docherty, Solomons and new trainer Danny Holland, who had replaced Aitchenson, whose authoritarian nature had riled Caldwell. Fighting under modified NBA rules using lighter, 'American' gloves, Jofre accepted a £1,000 side bet from Caldwell, whose speed, stamina and ring-craft, though respected, were widely regarded as unlikely to overcome Jofre's powerful punching. Fighting on 18 January 1962 at 11 p.m. to minimise the heat and humidity of the Ibirapuera Stadium, with 20,000 in attendance, Caldwell, winning the first round on points, took his first-ever eight count in the fifth round. Jofre's advantageous reach minimised the effect of Caldwell's combinations, and

the Brazilian disorientated him with relentless, punishing barrages crowned with devastating left hooks; Holland threw in the towel at the close of the tenth round. Caldwell later noted: 'the best boxer I met was Éder Jofre ... the hardest hitter of them all' (*Kerryman*, 19 December 1997).

After an anticipated return bout evaporated owing to promoter wrangling and the nature of his defeat, Caldwell became disenchanted with training in London, argued with Docherty, and returned to Belfast in March 1962. Although soon reconciled, Caldwell remained suspicious of Docherty's equitable sharing of his earnings. Tentative agreement was reached to fight fellow Belfast boxer Freddie Gilroy, ranked fifth, for his British and Empire titles at the King's Hall in June. Their careers being long intertwined (rising through the amateur ranks together, winning their first Irish senior titles on the same night, rooming together on the Golden Gloves tour and again in Melbourne, where they both won bronze), the bout was hugely anticipated by press and public alike. In front of 10,000 spectators (20 October) – some peeking through the King's Hall skylights – after nine explosive rounds Gilroy retained his titles as Caldwell retired with cuts to both eyes. Both were arguably past their primes, and Caldwell, forsaking his polished orthodox elegance to brawl in close, was exposed to Gilroy's greater punching power. The British Board of Boxing Control (BBBC) ordered Gilroy to defend his titles against Caldwell before April 1963. When Gilroy's weight struggles and Caldwell's nose surgery (July 1963) delayed the rematch, the BBBC stripped Gilroy of his titles (November), and ordered Caldwell to fight George Bowes for them. At the ABC Cinema in Belfast, after taking considerable punishment, Caldwell opened a cut above Bowes's left eye stopping the fight in his favour (5 March 1964).

Caldwell left Docherty's fold upon expiration of his contract and, with Solomons' grip over British boxing waning, signed with Bert McCarthy in May 1964 to resurrect his career. Not helped by further nose surgery in Belfast (November 1964) and eye injuries sustained in sparring (January 1965), Caldwell lost his British and Empire titles to Alan Rudkin at Nottingham on 22 March 1965. Plagued by eye cuts, Caldwell suffered a points defeat to Monty Laud, the Southern Area champion, at Brighton in his last bout (12 October 1965).

After failing in a civil suit for £15,000 damages against Docherty in Glasgow Sheriff Court, Caldwell worked as a pipefitter, shipyard worker and taxi driver, briefly emigrating to Canada. From the 1990s, having separated from his wife, he lived in sheltered accommodation in Andersonstown, Belfast. In October 2002, Alex Maskey, lord mayor of Belfast, hosted a civic reception in Caldwell's and Gilroy's honour. Having endured throat cancer for nine years, Caldwell died on 11 July 2009 in Belfast. After a funeral service at St Agnes church, he was buried in Milltown cemetery wearing his Irish Olympic blazer. A statue of Caldwell was unveiled 12 May 2016 in Dunville Park, Belfast.

Ir. Press, 17 Apr. 1956; 20 Dec. 1957; 21 Mar., 10 Apr. 1962; 13 Feb., 28 June, 23 Dec. 1963; 9 Feb. 1968; *Sunday Independent*, 30 Dec. 1956; *Times*, 10 Feb., 26, 28 Nov. 1960; 4 Feb., 31 May, 29 Aug., 5 Sept. 1961; 22 Oct. 1962; 6 Mar. 1964; *Cork Examiner*, 24 Feb. 1960; 23 Feb. 1962; *Ir. Independent*, 2 Nov. 1960; 21 Apr., 2 June, 7 Nov. 1961; 2 Feb. 1962; 1 Oct. 1964; Patrick Myler, *The fighting Irish: Ireland's role in world boxing history* (1987); *Kerryman*, 19 Dec. 1997; *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 July 2009; Barry Flynn, *The best of enemies: John Caldwell vs. Freddie Gilroy* (2014); Sean McGoldrick, *Punching above their weight: the Irish Olympic boxing story* (2015); footage of Jofre–Caldwell fight, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW-_Nfkb7NM; footage of Caldwell–Gilroy fight, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NTxKbcgvqY; The Boxing database, boxrec.com/boxer/11575; boxinghistory.org.uk/records/100191-Johnny-Caldwell-Belfast.pdf (internet material accessed Jan. 2016)