

Khan delivers KO to self-doubt

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The British boxer tells how being counted out for the first time has made him only more determined to succeed.

It is the place where boxers, never mind angels, fear to tread. It is the dark side. It is what keeps them awake at night, staring at the ceiling in a cold, clammy sweat.

Amir Khan has been there. He didn't like it – and he is in no rush to go back.

"It is the worst feeling in the world. It is really weird."

Khan was describing how his fledgling career, which had been kick-started with winning the 2004 Athens Olympics silver lightweight medal and was seemingly inevitably heading towards world titles and domination, was brought to an earth-shattering halt by the Colombian Breidis Prescott in just 54 seconds in Manchester last month when he was surprisingly knocked out.



Amir Khan talks frankly about his first loss as a professional boxer. **Paulo Vecina / The National**

The 21-year-old Muslim from Bolton bows his forehead in prayer on his own cornerpost before a fight. But it was the back of his head resting on the bottom of it, with Khan in shock, that will be the abiding memory of the fight with Prescott.

"It was the first time I have ever been knocked out, be it in the playground, amateurs, sparring or professional," said Khan. "I knew exactly what was going on, but my body couldn't react or respond."

He pauses in thought. Maybe my verbal sparring had probed him too far. "I'll show you what it's like if you want?"

I politely decline the offer of being knocked out by the man who feels he is still destined to become a world champion and, despite offering to punch my lights out, is a charming lunch companion at Dubai's Al Qasr Hotel.

"It was a funny feeling, man. But I am glad it happened, in a way, if it was going to happen, I am glad it happened before a world title fight. That would have knocked my confidence, but I can learn from this and make sure it never happens again."

Now Khan is heading to Los Angeles and linking up with Freddie Roach after parting company with Cuban Jorge Rubio, the trainer of Mario Kindelan, the Cuban who beat Khan for the gold medal at Athens. He will be sparring with the Filipino Manny Pacquiao, widely regarded as the best pound-for-pound boxer in the world, as he gets in shape for his clash with Oscar de la Hoya on Dec 13. Khan himself is preparing for a fight at London's ExCel Arena on Dec 6.

"I've already had a couple of weeks there training with him," said Khan, who went to sort out living accommodation. "You learn so much from being in the same ring as someone like him and that can only be good for me in the future."

"He is easily one of the best fighters in the world and it tells you how you are doing when you are put up against him. Sparring with the likes of Manny is tough and hard. But that's what I need to progress."

A rematch with Prescott is on the cards, although it is unlikely to be straight away. Unbeaten boxers can be gold dust at the box office, but there can be a question mark on a 100 per cent record.

"Sometimes it means you haven't faced anyone dangerous and been protected," said Khan.

"My trainer at the time told me to go out and go for Prescott as soon as the first bell rang and I got caught."

"Freddie has since already said to me that, if you are up against a dangerous puncher like Prescott, sound him out for one, two or three rounds and then go in. Box him, see what they have got first and take a decision. So I am already picking things up from him." The defeat still weighs heavily on his mind.

"It was a shock and really upsetting," said Khan. "I will learn more off than a year in the gym. I've got to change my approach to the job before a fight. There are always people in the gym, which I like, and the media are there wanting to talk and take pictures, but I've got to stop that and focus on the fight."

Khan was in Dubai to launch the Tejarah Executive, a new commercial tower in Ajman. He will be a brand ambassador for the tower which is a joint initiative between Profile Group and Moosa Group Enterprises. It is run by family friends from Bolton, but now based in Dubai, Reeyaz Moosa, group chairman and CEO of Moosa, and co-founder of the Profile Group, Imtiaz Khoda.

And they may also help him fight in Dubai with Sky Sports, who have the rights to Khan's next fights, investigating the possibility of him appearing in UAE in the near future.

"I would really like to fight here," said Khan. "They might have heard of me here, but they haven't seen me live and that is something I would like to change."

"It would be brilliant to fight here. Dubai is so cool and I've been lucky that I've got such a fan base in England. They could come out here, have a good time, and watch me fight."

"I am sure we could sell out the show. It's a wonderful place. Every time I come to the UAE there is something new and different to see."

And a fight could happen in the UAE, with Dubai and Abu Dhabi being discussed as possible venues.

"We are serious about fighting here," said Khan. "This is a happening place. Everything's here and we will have discussions on putting on an event here. My friends here have all the right contacts and I am sure it can happen."

Unlike many other boxers who see their money frittered away, Khan is already looking to the future and is hoping to invest his finances wisely.

"I am lucky to have my family around me, and they look after most of my finances. But I want to invest in Dubai in the future. It is important I look after life after boxing and this looks like a good place to do it."

"I intend to stay in boxing until I am 28 and then see what happens from there. I may be at my peak then, who knows, and then carry on. But I want to encourage people to box from my gym in Bolton and, maybe, that's something I can get involved in down the line."

Khan's brother, Haroon, 16, who is also in Dubai this week, is hoping to make the British Olympics team for London 2012 and Khan is backing the promising amateur, who is due to face the Irish champion next month. "There's little point him turning professional before then," said Khan, who virtually had to finance himself through the Athens Olympics.

The British Amateur Boxing Association had their funding withdrawn as the British Olympic Association were not happy with the way they were conducting themselves.

Khan, at 17, was officially too young to represent Britain in Athens, as boxers had to be 18, but he was given special dispensation after saying he would fight for Pakistan instead. As a result of his win, funding was restored.

"I was the only British boxer in Athens," said Khan. "But in the Beijing Olympics, England had eight boxers and won three medals, so that shows the way things have improved."

"I didn't find the transition to professional from amateur too huge. But there is more intensity and power. There's more power and the extra minute in the round makes a huge difference."

"When I was an amateur I was picking shots and building points. In the professional game, you just got the job done as quickly as possible. You get paid the same for winning in one round as 10 rounds."

"If [his promoter] Frank Warren was paying me by the round, I'd try to make every fight last 12 rounds."

"But I will be working hard to become world champion. It's what I said I would do when I turned professional. I gave myself four years to do it and that means that I have to become a world champion in the next 12 months and that is what I will be working on doing."

The new European champion Jon Thaxton, who won the title in Norwich on Saturday night, could well be next in line for Khan.

Khan is an icon, not only for British youngsters, but particularly those of Asian background. It sits relatively comfortably on his shoulders.

"My religion is important to me. I still pray five times a day," said Khan, who is often joined at the town's mosque by Bolton Wanderers' Omani goalkeeper Ali Al Habsi.

"I think it is important to do that. Some Muslim sportspeople don't do that when they are in the public eye, for whatever reason."

"But I feel very confident and comfortable going to the mosque in the community that supports me and that is very important as I hope to represent them as a world champion. That is my dream."

Khan seems like a genuinely nice guy. But the nice guys don't get the girls (well, that was always been my excuse). Can the nice guys win the world title? "Of course they can," said Khan. "I'll prove it!"

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