

Wladimir Klitschko: That Last One Percent

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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What is going through his mind? I'm talking about the heavyweight contender who no more than 18 months ago was thought by many respected boxing observers to be the heir apparent to heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis—Wladimir Klitschko. On March 7th 2003, Wladimir was considered the more complete and better overall fighter than his older brother Vitali, who is currently the WBC heavyweight champ and presumed to be the most formidable heavyweight alive.

On March 7th last year, Wladimir was all the rage and being trumped by HBO as the future of the heavyweight division who couldn't miss. He had it all. He had the size at slightly over 6'5" and weighing in the 240-245 range. Over the seven years he had been fighting as a pro, Wladimir showed good boxing skill and pretty quick hands for a fighter so big. But the thing that stood out about Wladimir was how fluid he put his punches together. And not only did he put his punches together, but he could really hit with both hands. Wladimir also did something that all fighters, not just heavyweights, don't do enough, if at all. He hooked off his jab to the head and body which enabled him to close the distance between him and his opponent.

Wladimir could boast what no other heavyweight in the world could. To go along with his size and two handed knockout power, he could also box. In the heavyweight division, there is only one thing that can keep a skilled heavyweight like Klitschko from ruling it. What kind of chin does he have and how good of a punch does he take? It doesn't matter who it is, somewhere along the line a world class heavyweight is going to get caught with a bomb from his opponent. What happens after that will determine if he's for real or not.

On March 8th 2003, Wladimir Klitschko defended his WBO heavyweight title against South African knockout artist Corrie Sanders. Despite a chin that was still a question mark, Klitschko was heavily favored to beat Sanders without much trouble. Midway through the first round, the southpaw Sanders smashed a beautiful straight left hand against Klitschko's lower jaw that dropped him like his legs were taken out from underneath him. Wladimir was badly hurt, but beat the count only to be sent back down. Wlad beat the count again, but barely made it back to his corner after the first round. At the start of the second round, it was clear that Klitschko was still foggy and Sanders jumped right on him putting him down twice more leading to the fight being stopped.

I've said this before and I'll say it as long as I'm breathing, regardless of how magnificently talented and skilled a heavyweight fighter is offensively and defensively, he better have a big time chin as his last line of defense. In professional boxing, a fight can end at anytime with just one punch. However, this is even more likely in the heavyweight division, simply because all heavyweights can hit.

After being stopped by Sanders in two rounds, Wladimir was written off by just about everybody. The thought was, he had everything a top heavyweight needed to win the title, but it was what he lacked in durability that defined him most. In the Klitschko camp, the knockout by Sanders

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was thought as being nothing more than Wladimir getting caught with a big shot early in the fight by a proven knockout artist. To his credit, Wladimir got right back in the ring and scored knockout wins over two journeymen shortly after losing to Sanders.

Thirteen months after being stopped by Sanders, Wladimir came full circle. On April 10th he fought Lamon Brewster for the vacant WBO title. During the first four rounds of the fight, Klitschko hit Brewster with every punch in the book and even dropped him in the fourth round. Brewster, who has a cast iron chin, endured some massive power shots from Klitschko that would have knocked out most of the world's heavyweight elite.

In the 5th round the tide turned completely, and Brewster dropped Klitschko. Wladimir beat the count, but was out on his feet leading referee Robert Byrd to stop the fight at the end of the round. In a fight that Klitschko was winning handily, Brewster turned it around completely with one clean punch landed squarely on the jaw. A punch that Wladimir never recovered from, ultimately leading to him being stopped for the third time in his career.

It's been six months since Wladimir Klitschko 42-3 (39) was stopped by Lamon Brewster. Tonight he fights DaVarryl Williamson 20-2 (17) in the featured heavyweight fight at the new outdoor Amphitheatre at Caesars Palace. Williamson is also on the comeback trail since being stopped by Joe Mesi in the first round in September 2003.

"I think enough time has passed," Klitschko said. "It's not easy for me to handle getting upset in April. It is past. I think this fight with DaVarryl Williamson is going to be very, very interesting because everyone is wondering which one of us will survive. I am focused and looking forward to it."

I can't help thinking what is going through Wladimir's head? No doubt his confidence is reeling. And as much as he tries to justify what happened against Sanders and Brewster as a fluke or just one of those things, there's a voice in his head that is always whispering that it wasn't. That voice tells him that the skeptics and critics are right, his chin is his Achilles heel and will betray him again.

He'll even have to fight himself. His instinct will be to fight careful and smart, only punching when he feels safe and can't be countered by his opponent. In other words, instead of exchanging, he'll either be on offense or defense, just to keep from getting caught with that one shot that's capable of ending it for him. Somewhere down the road, but maybe not in this fight, he'll realize that he can't win by fighting not to lose.

I haven't been told by him, but my guess is that this is his last shot. I think Wladimir has it in his head that he's going to fight until he either wins the title, or is stopped again. And if he is stopped again, there will be only a slight difference in his mindset from what it is now.

The difference will be instead of being 99% convinced that, because of genetics, he'll never realize his dream, he'll be 100% convinced, and he will finally be able to let go knowing that he gave it his best shot, but it wasn't meant to be.

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At this time he's being driven by that last one percent. And it's so hard to let it go as long as he still has it!