

What A Year: Lewis, Klitschko, and Sanders

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Saturday, 06 March 2004 18:00

What a difference a year made in the heavyweight division. On March 7th 2003, Wladimir Klitschko was the talk of the heavyweight division. Wlad was actually being touted as being the fighter most likely to succeed Lennox Lewis, and not just by Jim Lampley? On March 8th 2003, South African heavyweight Corrie Sanders derailed the Wladimir bandwagon with one straight left hand to the chin. When Sanders stopped Klitschko in the second round, and took his WBO heavyweight title, he changed the landscape of the heavyweight division.

Back in 1996 when Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko turned pro, it was a widely held opinion that Wladimir was the better fighter of the two brothers, and had the better future. He was the more Americanized fighter with better balance and more fluidity. He had faster hands, was a better boxer, and more versatile. Basically, Vitali was considered second string when compared to his younger brother Wladimir. Boy, have things really changed in the last 365 days? Now most view Vitali as possibly being the fighter to succeed Lewis, and Wladimir with trepidation and doubt.

Since Wladimir's stoppage defeat by Corrie Sanders, he has had two fights which have proved absolutely nothing. Nor have the questions hovering over his durability and chin ceased. And they won't go away until he steps up and fights one of the world's top heavyweights. I doubt his next opponent, Lamon Brewster, is the one to change that perception.

On the other hand, Vitali's career has skyrocketed. It was just a few short years ago that the heart and toughness of Vitali were being questioned. After Vitali resigned in his corner after the ninth round against Chris Byrd, due to a torn rotator cuff, some closed the book on him and his career. Just as some are now doing the same to Wladimir. Over the course of the last year, Vitali has been on a roll. In June of 2003, Vitali gave recently retired heavyweight champ Lennox Lewis all he could handle in losing after the sixth round due to a severely cut eye. Six months later, he destroyed one of the world's top ranked contenders, Kirk Johnson, in two rounds. Now the perception of the Klitschko brothers has totally flip-flopped.

Corrie Sanders, the man who landed the shot heard round the heavyweight world last year, has done nothing since. All he has done is kept his pace of fighting once a year. Fighting once in 2001, once in 2002, and only Wladimir Klitschko in 2003. Sanders has been an enigma. Before fighting Wladimir, he wasn't viewed as a serious contender, and thought to be a set-up for Wlad. In fact Wladimir was even ridiculed for fighting Sanders, due to his disappointing loss to Hasim Rahman in May of 2000. Since beating Klitschko, now some think he's the most dangerous heavyweight in the world? Don't count me among them. He just turned 38, and has fought a total of five rounds in the last three years. Lucky for him, he finally may have parlayed his big win over Wladimir into a big fight with Vitali for the vacant WBC title this coming April 24th.

Lennox Lewis this time last year was still basking in the glow of his utter destruction of Mike Tyson. Three months later he would have one of the toughest fights of his career with Vitali Klitschko. The fight with Vitali took a lot out of Lennox mentally and emotionally. And probably had a lot to do in influencing the decision he would later make to retire. It's quite possible

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Lennox realized he wasn't the same fighter he was just a year or two ago?

When looking back over the last 365 days, Lennox Lewis and Vitali Klitschko had the best year. Corrie Sanders didn't capitalize on his victory over Wladimir Klitschko. And Wladimir hasn't done anything to make anyone forget the Sanders fight. In early April Wladimir fights Lamon Brewster, and Vitali fights Corrie Sanders. Most likely these two fights will start to pave the heavyweight landscape for 2004?

Last March Wladimir Klitschko was supposed to be the main man in the heavyweight division. Now there are legitimate questions about his chin and durability. Corrie Sanders was a non factor, and thought to be nothing more than a stepping stone for Wladimir. Although he has not fought since then, he is in line to fight for the vacant WBC title versus the other Klitschko. This time last year Vitali Klitschko still hadn't erased the stench of the loss to Byrd. Now he has replaced Wladimir as the main man in the heavyweight division and is about to get a second title shot. And this time last year, Lewis was three month's shy of making the last defense of his heavyweight title. Now he is a retired ex-champ, who will most likely never fight again. Lewis beat the odds by retiring champ with good health and more money than he'll ever need. If he never attempts a comeback, his legacy will no doubt endure and grow through the years. What a difference a year made in the heavyweight division.