

## April's Heavyweight Identity Crisis

Written by Frank Lotierzo  
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During the month of April 2004 there will be three Heavyweight title fights, excluding the not to be taken seriously WBO title tiff between Wladimir Klitschko and Lamon Brewster. On April 17th IBF Champ Chris Byrd defends his title against the recently resurrected Andrew Golota, and WBA Champ John Ruiz defends his title against Fres Oquendo. It just so happens that Don King is the promoter of all four fighters participating in both title fights on the 17th. The following week top ranked Vitali Klitschko fights former WBO Champ Corrie Sanders for the WBC title that was vacated by Lennox Lewis when he retired this past February.

As George Foreman was recently quoted as saying "they can fill a big void but none of them can hold the sport up, none of them will be a famous Heavyweight Champion." Unfortunately Foreman may be right. Not only does this current Heavyweight division lack depth, it also has no identity. It seems with the retirement of Lennox Lewis, the division is in dire need for some fighter to take it over and make it respectable again.

The Heavyweight division needs an outstanding fighter in it to carry Boxing, that is irrefutable. Regardless of how mediocre some thought their contemporaries were, Holmes and Tyson were able to keep the title somewhat respected. Holmes was a great fighter who had one of the best left hand's in Heavyweight history, which made it hard for any clear thinking fight fan not to see his greatness. Plus he had Sugar Ray Leonard underneath him keeping Boxing in the mainstream press and keeping the quasi Boxing fan interested.

As the Holmes era was coming to a close, Mike Tyson came along and bridged the gap into the Holyfield, Bowe, Lewis era. Tyson by himself kept Boxing on the mainstream Sports pages due to his combination of punching power and hand speed. And sometimes Tyson even put Boxing on the front page of the World's major newspapers for better or worse. The fact is Boxing had a fighter in which it could hang its hat on and declare this is our guy. He is the fighter we can be identified with for better or worse. At the worst people had an opinion. In order to have an opinion, whether it be good or bad, you have to care somewhat. This is what scares me. Who is that guy come the end of April who can possibly be defined as the future Holmes, Tyson, or Lewis?

Lets be honest, regardless of what happens in the Klitschko-Brewster fight, nobody on April 11th is going to be saying I saw the future of the Heavyweight division last night. If Brewster wins, Wladimir Klitschko will be looking up at both Mesi and Guinn in stature. If Klitschko wins, as expected, questions will still hover over him. Forget that fight settling anything.

The next title fight is John Ruiz vs. Fres Oquendo for the WBA belt. I certainly don't see the winner of this fight being the standard barer of the Heavyweight elite. I hate to rip John Ruiz, but he lost the title once to the Light Heavyweight Champ, all be it a great one. And hasn't fought a big time puncher since Tua. So it's not out of the question that he could get dumped again by either Klitschko, Sanders, or Golota. Oquendo is decent but just not good enough to be a major factor even if he beats Ruiz. Fres just doesn't have that one signature weapon that you can

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hang your hat on in thinking that he can beat the upper tier Heavyweight's that will hopefully emerge by the end of April.

The Chris Byrd vs. Andrew Golota IBF title bout will follow the Ruiz-Oquendo fight. Lets be pessimistic and say Golota wins. He definitely is not the fighter to bring any credibility back to the division. Not only did he quit against Tyson and Grant, he was destroyed in one round by Lewis back in 1997. The main reason Golota is a live dog versus Byrd is because he does have some skill and power, it's just that he makes Tyson look like the ultimate warrior when it comes to character and heart. The fact that Byrd is not a puncher will keep Golota in this fight much more than I'd like to believe.

What if Byrd wins? Along with Vitali Klitschko, Byrd has the best resume of all the Heavyweight's fighting in title fights this month. Byrd holds wins over Vitali, Tua, Holyfield, and Oquendo. And his two defeats are to the two fighters many thought were the future of the division at one time, Ike Ibeabuchi and Wladimir Klitschko. As good and as willing as Byrd is, the fact that he is not a big puncher or a seek and destroy style fighter makes it hard for him to capture the publics imagination. The average Sports/Boxing fan can't appreciate what he does in the ring. And lastly, only Muhammad Ali was a true superstar on the World's stage who wasn't a puncher. Byrd would have to beat Golota and the Klitschko-Sanders winner convincingly to gain acceptance as being the man in the Heavyweight division.

The last title fight in the month of April is between Vitali Klitschko and Corrie Sanders. This fight has one advantage over the others. It's for the vacated WBC title recently held by former Champ Lennox Lewis. Another thing this fight has is two fighters who the public just may accept provided they not only win, but perform like a champion. If Sanders wins, he'll have the fact that he can hit going for him which will make it easier for him to be accepted and taken seriously. And if he holds two convincing wins over the Klitschko's, it will add to his stature. However, he must beat Vitali impressively for this to be realized.

The fighter that has the most to gain and lose in this month of Heavyweight Championship bouts is Vitali Klitschko. Klitschko has many things in his favor when it comes to his body of work. He was the first fighter to stop Larry Donald. His two loses are to former Champ Lennox Lewis and current IBF Champ Chris Byrd. In the fight with Lewis he suffered a horrible eye cut which led to the fight being stopped, despite leading slightly in the scoring. Granted, Vitali may not have faced the same Lewis that fought Holyfield and Tyson, but he did beat Lewis up more so than either one of them did. His first defeat was to Chris Byrd when he tore his rotator cuff and had to stop after the ninth round. In the Byrd fight he was ahead in the scoring, and to his credit Byrd is one of the toughest guys to fight in the division.

The way I see it, Vitali Klitschko is the fighter who has the best chance to emerge as the fighter who may, I repeat may have the best shot to give this division someone to identify with. He's big and can punch, two things that usually always captures the publics imagination. He is also tough and showed against Lewis that he can take a good punch, another must for the Heavyweight Champion. And the thing that really looks good for him is that he fought the best Heavyweight in the world 10 months ago, and gave him nine kinds of hell.

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I think that the only fighter who can possibly come out of this Championship month with a chance to bridge the gap from Lewis to the next generation of Heavyweights's is Vitali Klitschko. I know one thing, Boxing would benefit tremendously if one of these Heavyweight's makes a statement this month showing that he has what it takes to be a special fighter and possibly a great? I'm not sure that will be the case, but it would be a great place to start. What a great month to be a Fight Fan !!