

No Middle Ground for Heavyweight Chris Byrd

Written by Rick Folstad

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Jameel "Big Time" McCline and Chris Byrd are close friends, which, in this business, is like saying McCline drives a sports car and Byrd likes pickups. It doesn't mean a thing when the bell rings for the 10th round and no one can pick a winner.

Besides, you don't have to hate a guy to want to knock his block off. Anyone growing up with an older brother will tell you that.

So when the two fight Nov. 13 at Madison Square Garden for Byrd's IBF title, don't expect them to pat each other on the back before the fight. Don't look for anyone to hold back a punch, apologize for a body shot or back off when he knows his buddy is hurt and in trouble.

Funny thing about prize fighting. It's still a mean, brutal business first, second and always, and the two heavyweights understand that better than anyone. Pal or no pal, Byrd, a southpaw no one wants to fight because he makes everyone look clumsy, tells you that at the top level of the fight game, every fight and every fighter is dangerous. There are no gimmees, walk-overs or time outs. No one reaches down to help you to your feet if you get knocked on your ass.

"McCline is 265 pounds, 6-foot-6 and very dangerous, but that's just part of the sport," Byrd said on a recent conference call. "Our wives (also close friends) are nervous wrecks, but when that first bell rings, we'll throw our friendship out the window."

And they'll welcome it back Sunday morning.

If you don't know about this fight, think of David and Goliath and take away the sling shot, the rock and the poor crowd. Then move everything to New York. Byrd, who stands 6-foot-1 and weighs about 208 pounds after three helpings of ice cream and cake, comes in as the small guy, an overgrown middleweight who dreamed of some day growing up to be heavyweight champion of the world. He couldn't punch his way out of a PTA meeting, but he's got more moves and quicker hands than a pickpocket at a jewelers' convention.

He trains in a tiny, 9 by 11-foot ring, which is like working out in a shower stall.

"That way, I've got to find every hole I can to get out," he said. "My whole thing is to keep it in the center of the ring and avoid every punch they throw. If I don't want you to touch me, you won't."

That might be great for the ego, but it doesn't do much for the guys on the construction crew paying a week's wages for a ticket. They don't want to see a 12-round dance. They like to see heads roll.

"I don't care if they boo," Byrd said. "People either like me or they don't. There's no middle ground." Byrd hasn't exactly built up his fan base in his last two fights. He beat Fres Oquendo in

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a close fight in September of last year, then fought to a draw against Andrew Golota this past spring.

Against Golota, Byrd chose to settle down and mix it up a little instead of fighting his own fight, maybe listening too hard to his critics. He probably won't make that mistake again.

"I'm a small guy going up against bigger guys and people don't appreciate that," he said. "They think, 'he's not big enough.' After my career is over, I think they'll appreciate (my fighting skills). But right now, I don't care. I'm enjoying myself in the ring. I love the sport."