This past weekend I was at the Mandalay Bay in Las Vegas to see Winky Wright and Shane Mosley battle it out for supremacy in the jr. middleweight division. Wright, using his superior size and skill, would handily beat Mosley via 12-round decision.

On the undercard, I got my first live look at 'Baby' Joe Mesi, the latest in a long line of 'great white hopes' in the heavyweight division. All I can say is that after seeing Mesi hold on for dear life against a blown up cruiserweight in Vasilliy Jirov, that to call Mesi a 'great white hope' is an insult to fine fighters such as Gerry Cooney and Tommy Morrison.

Let me make this clear, Mesi is a very nice guy, intelligent, articulate, personable and good looking. It's really a shame that he really can't fight that much, because he would be great for the business and industry of boxing.

It was just four months ago that Mesi faded late- after another fast start- against trial-horse Monte Barrett at the Madison Square Garden in New York. After knocking down the native of Brooklyn early and getting out to a big lead, he would be floored himself and have to hold on for a narrow victory. It was brushed off as a bad night and a learning experience for a still-developing heavyweight. Ok, I guess you could buy that rationale then.

For this fight he came in much better physical condition and came in at 227- 11 rounds lighter than the Barrett fight- and he was facing a fading cruiserweight in Jirov, who had struggled mightily in comeback fights against Ernest Mateen and Joseph Kiwanuka, two guys who were blown-up light heavyweights. This wasn't so much a fight, but a sacrifice of a pretty good fighter. Jirov, simply hadn't looked the same after his brutal fight with James Toney last April.

Mesi would build up a huge, seemingly insurmountable lead throughout the first eight rounds. All the scorecards had him up by seven rounds but in the ninth he would be sent to the canvas with a clubbing left hand. It seemed like just another blip on the radar screen but it was much more than that when for some reason instead of sitting on his big lead and going into the boxing version of 'the four corners' and getting on his bicycle, he would engage Jirov in toe-to-toe action.

And if there's one thing that Jirov still has, is a willingness to fight till the very end and he would land a series of hard left crosses and uppercuts that would send a fading Mesi to the canvas twice. But to his credit, Mesi would hold on and survive the onslaught and win a close decision as all three judges had Mesi on top by a score of 94-93.

This was a night that was supposed to bring added exposure to Mesi. Instead, it was a night that exposed him.

Exposed him as a guy with just a decent punch, shaky chin and the stamina of a sprinter. The bottom line is, no matter what HBO, Buffalo or his promotional team may try to tell us, he just

doesn't have it. At least Cooney had a monster left hook, as did Morrison. Mesi, is a decent puncher in his own right, but they never really struggled as badly as he did against such hand-picked opposition. It was only till they faced the Larry Holmes' and Lennox Lewis' of the world, did those two really struggle. It's just my opinion that Cooney and Morrison don't even need four rounds to get rid of the guys that Mesi has been struggling against.

This is very reminiscent of a few years ago when HBO pushed the services of another flawed heavyweight, Michael Grant. Grant, like Mesi, was highly marketable and had the look that networks, sponsors and promoters coveted. But there was one problem, he really couldn't fight all that much. But I will say this, to his credit, despite his limited amateur background, Grant does have wins over serviceable guys like Obed Sullivan, David Izon, Lou Savarese and Andrew Golota. In retrospect, for his inexperience, I'd say he had a helluva run. Not bad for a guy more suited to be a power forward than a heavyweight champion.

Mesi, a 1996 Olympic alternate, really doesn't have that excuse and at age 30, he's not exactly a young prospect anymore. His management now faces a serious quandary, do they cash out immediately and try to get the biggest payday against the likes of a Mike Tyson or Roy Jones? Or, do they go to the graveyard and dig up a bevy of dead bodies to knock over and then go for an even bigger payday down the line?

Now I'm not a manager, but I play one behind the keyboard, I do the latter. Because no matter how carefully you match Mesi, you run the risk of getting him tripped up in smaller fights. I say take the sure thing, try and get a multi-million dollar fight with a marquee name way beyond his prime and call it a career.

And you know what? If they do that, win or lose that fight, it can be considered a highly successful run. For a guy with just mediocre skills, to have made that much money in a relatively short time, speaks volumes.

But his chances of being a real heavyweight contender?

I think it's hopeless.