

Lamon Aimin' for Respectability

Written by Jake Donovan
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It's not much fun being a heavyweight titlist these days. Long considered the glamour division of boxing, today's model is hardly appealing. It even lacks the pleasant personality oft served as a consolation prize for those falling short in the looks department.

Those at the top of today's heavyweight heap can be one of two things: a realist, or an idealist.

Most boxers today are idealists. They fail to see why the public is reluctant to embrace them, and more often than not overestimate their market value.

Regardless of your opinions about WBO heavyweight champion “**Relentless**” **Lamon Brewster**, he at least deserves credit for being a realist. So much so that chances are he'll agree with your opinion about his achievements to date.

“I don't ever downplay why heavyweights are looked down upon, myself included in that bunch,” admits Lamon, who prepares for his title defense against **Andrew Golota** this Saturday in Chicago (9:45PM ET/6:45PM PT, live on HBO). “I admit, if I was a boxing fan, I wouldn't be very impressed either.”

His last two performances left plenty to be desired, but they weren't lacking in heart.

It was far more will than skill that enabled Lamon to win the WBO title last April. A huge underdog going into his fight with former champ Wladimir Klitschko, Lamon knew his limitations going in – and the best way to work around them.

“The way I beat Klitschko certainly wasn't the most glamorous way to get the job done,” Brewster admits. “My strategy was simple: I knew he'd try to overwhelm me, so I would let him burn himself out. Simply put, there's more than one way to skin a cat.”

From the outside looking in, it appeared as if Brewster barely escaped by the skin of his teeth. Wlad did punch himself out, but not before landing everything but the kitchen sink through five rounds of action. Wlad's offensive attack resulted in the first knockdown of Brewster's career, but it wasn't enough to put him away. As planned, Brewster took Wlad's best – repeatedly – and jumped on him late in the fifth round. Wlad wound up crashing to the deck, partially due to Lamon's power, the rest due to exhaustion. He never recovered, slowly staggering to his corner as referee Robert Byrd waved off the bout.

Brewster realized his longtime dream of becoming heavyweight champion. What he didn't envision was his first defense posing a far greater challenge than that of Klitschko.

“I admit it, I made the mistake of taking on a friend for my first fight,” say Lamon of title challenger **Kali Meehan** from last September. The mistake in judgment nearly cost Brewster his

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title. In fact, many who watched the SHOWTIME card that evening thought the split decision verdict should have gone to Meehan. Whether or not Brewster agrees is irrelevant; he knows that the performance left a lot to be desired.

“The biggest mistake I made going into that fight was meeting with Kali beforehand and talking to his kids,” says Brewster about what he considers to be his least impressive win to date. “That just took the hunger out from inside me. I went into that fight not set in the right frame of mind. It took for him to bring the fight to me the way he did before I could finally wake up and do anything. It was just an off night. It was a lackluster performance, and I don’t blame fans one bit for criticizing me afterward.”

Brewster is hoping to change that by bringing a positive vibe back into both his career and the heavyweight division. There is no fear of letting friendship get in the way of his fight with Golota this weekend. They’re not friends (though certainly not bitter enemies). More importantly, Golota has something Brewster craves, name recognition and a newfound respect.

Lamon is anxious to fight in Chicago, where Andrew now lives and trains. Many view it as a hometown disadvantage. Lamon sees it as a homecoming.

“I’m definitely up for this one,” he says. “There’s no chance of feelings getting in the way here. I’ve been away from the Midwest for a while, but my heart will always belong here. Chicago isn’t that far from my old hometown of Indianapolis. Andrew will be bringing his fans from Chicago. I’ll be bringing mine from Indy. Fighting here isn’t as much of a disadvantage as people think. In fact, I’m looking forward to it.”

Lamon also looks forward to revisiting his roots. Born and raised in Indianapolis, Brewster long aspired to be a professional prizefighter. A brilliant amateur, Lamon’s only handicap was location; Indiana is hardly a boxing hotbed.

Wondering when his big break would come, fate would soon step in and lead the way.

“Of all the ways to wind up traveling,” recalls Brewster of his journey to Los Angeles, “the last place in the world I expected it would be at a family reunion. I went to my reunion with some high school friends, having a good time and all. There, one of my relatives wondered how she was getting back to California. Her mom was supposed to take her, but had fell of a ladder and broke her hip earlier in the week.” Brewster shrugged. “I felt bad for her.”

His sympathy led to a spur of the moment decision that would change his life.

“Out of nowhere, I was like ‘Alright, I’ll take you.’ The moment it came out of my mouth, I said to myself, ‘Dang, did I just say I’d take her to California?’ But I said I’d do it, and being from the Midwest, we mean what we say. So I followed through.

“Before we left, I decided to grab my boxing bag, and make it a one-way trip. I figured I had nothing to lose, so let me see what I could get going out there. I got there, people liked what they saw, and I’ve been in Los Angeles ever since.”

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He liked it so much he finished out his amateur career, which soared to new heights. Brewster made it all the way to the Olympic Trials, before dropping a decision to eventual 1996 U.S. Olympian Nate Jones. He returned for the Olympic Challenges, where he was forced to settle for the silver as he dropped a decision to DaVaryll Williamson in the finals.

Turning pro soon thereafter, Brewster was an instant hit. He stopped his first eleven opponents, and rattled off twenty-three straight wins to start his career. He was so hot that the now defunct HBO series "KO Nation" scouted him out to appear in their inaugural episode.

Unfortunately, Lamon was anything but relentless the afternoon he fought Cliff Ettiene. He was humbled and dropped a very one-sided decision. His first loss was soon followed by his second loss, dropping a decision to Charles Shufford six months later. After starting out 23-0, Brewster was now one for his last three.

Beaten but not broken, Brewster kept his faith in the Lord and his fists. He traveled the low road back to contender status, still believing he'd fight for a world title one day.

"One thing I was always taught at an early age," says Brewster, "is a simple quote in regard to patience: He who is patient shall eventually prosper."

Prosper he did. A five fight win streak included a victory over Nate Jones to avenge a loss from the Olympic Trials. All five wins during the run came by knockout, before being named the WBO mandatory challenger. When Corrie Sanders gave up his belt in favor of a WBC title challenge, Brewster's patience paid off big time. In he went against Klitschko, and the rest is history. Though so far, he prefers it to be the past, with the best yet to come.

"I know I have a lot more to offer this sport than what I've given so far," says Lamon, who plans to start with an impressive showing in Chicago. "I know that people don't believe in me just yet, and I don't blame them."

Nor does he blame the oddsmakers, who have him as a 12-5 underdog as of press time. But hey; it's not the first time he played that role in a world title fight.

"I'm pretty sure the odds were greater that I would beat Klitschko."

That is is true. But most will point to what it took for Lamon to prevail. Perhaps it can repeat in Chicago. Golota may have better stamina, but is certainly far less mentally stable. Combine that with Brewster's inhuman ability to absorb punishment, and it's not a stretch to suggest that Brewster once again beats the odds.

Lamon agrees, though not necessarily with the strategy.

"I don't want to psyche myself up and automatically assume that he'll fall apart. The problem with that is – what's the plan if that doesn't happen? Then I'd be sitting around without a backup plan, and eventually without my title. I know THAT is not happening, so instead I train as if he fights his A-game. If I trained any other way, I might as well just give him the title right now."

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Golota brought his A-game to his last two fights, and his career came back from the dead as a result. Many believe that Golota was robbed in his fights with Chris Byrd (a draw last April) and John Ruiz (points loss in November) last year. Such logic would mean that this fight would rightfully be for the WBA, IBF and WBO title. It would certainly help clear up the heavyweight picture, though Brewster believes that everyone just needs to offer more reason for fans to pay attention.

“What’s happening here is that there are too many different groups looking at one picture, and not all seeing the same thing,” suggests Brewster. “When Lewis was champ, there was only one person to turn to, and he wasn’t popular in the least bit.

“Now, yes you have four different champs. But with Vitali, he brings in the European fanbase, all claiming he’s the best. With Ruiz, you got the Latinos and East Coast cats claiming he’s the best. With Chris and me, we bring in the brothers, especially from the Midwest and our adopted homes (Las Vegas and Los Angeles, respectively) cutting for us. So, yes, the heavyweight picture is a bit muddy. But there’s also intrigue involved as a result. But what we need to do is get together and help clear it all up.”

What the division needs is a personality to turn to. Vitali is perceived as the leader, but has yet to connect with mainstream America the way many had optimistically – and prematurely – figured. More fans seem to loathe Ruiz than they do love him. As long as Byrd is feuding with King and fighting once or twice a year, he remains anonymous.

That leaves Lamon with a problem. In an era where trash talk and all forms of disrespect are celebrated, Brewster finds himself without much support in looking to offer a positive role model, in and out of the ring.

“The weird thing about sports, is that everything is the opposite. Bad is viewed upon as good, and being good is viewed as a weakness. It’s crazy today. But I pay it no mind. I was raised to be humble, and always exude class. Just be where you’re from. I try to bring class to this game, and pay my respects for those who paved the way before us. Boxing has enough controversy as it is. The more negativity brought to the sport, the more people will want to shut it down. Our pioneers worked too hard to keep the sport alive. That’s all I’m looking to do, and I’m not done yet.”

For his efforts, all Lamon asks is that you wait before writing him off.

“I know that my fights in 2004 left a lot to be desired. I know I could have done more, especially against Meehan. What I ask is that you don’t judge me just yet. I just won the title, just got my foot in the door. I may not make a lot of noise, because I’d rather speak in the ring, with my actions. Maybe that’s viewed as being weak, but I call it being myself. And I know that being myself will eventually get me to where I want to be.”

In the end, the meek shall inherit the earth. Or as Lamon would put it, the nice guy finishes first.