

Vassiliy Jirov – “The Tiger” No More

Written by Joey Knish
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There was a time when Vassiliy “The Tiger” Jirov was just that – a tiger in the ring who mauled opponents with a punishing balanced attack for as long as they could withstand the pressure. More often than not they couldn’t take it. That was as a cruiserweight a couple of years ago, not today as the plodding heavyweight Jirov has become with a 2-2-1 record fighting over 200 pounds.

Thursday on Fox Sports and coming from the Palace Indian Gaming Casino in Lemoore, California, the heavy Jirov (35-3-1, 30 KO) managed a draw against 39-year-old former cruiserweight Orlin “Night Train” Norris over eight rounds. “Night Train” had looked as if his train had passed into the night in his last bout – a six-round majority loss to Albert Sosnowski – but managed to stick around for 24 minutes and be competitive against the once dangerous Jirov.

There is no disputing the fact that Norris (57-9-1, 31 KO) can be a difficult opponent, but recently he has had the look of a guy who should no longer be in the ring. For Vassiliy Jirov, Norris was to be the much needed “name” win to put some value into his stock as a legitimate heavyweight. He opened his heavyweight career with back-to-back losses, to Joe Mesi and Michael Moorer, and then put together consecutive victories against a pair of journeymen who have never gone very far – Forrest Neal and Troy Beets. Following those bouts with a draw against Orlin Norris has done little to add luster to a once shiny career at cruiserweight.

Thursday night it appeared as though Jirov was looking for the knockout as means to make a statement in the division and resurrect what hope still flickered. The problem with looking for a knockout is that the strategy often makes the desired impression less probable. Had the Kazakhstan fighter applied his usual formula of pursuing his opponent and punishing the body in a relentless attack, he would have had a much better chance to wear down the 69-fight veteran and then go for the big finish. Instead, Jirov fought sporadically and lost close rounds he could have and would have normally taken. The fact that the bout was fought outdoors in 108-degree heat and over just eight rounds hurt his chances even more, as Norris countered his way through the bout looking to counter, survive, and test the cards.

As one of the world’s best cruiserweights – Jirov was 33-1 with 29 knockouts fighting below the 200-pound limit – with his lone loss coming to James “Lights Out” Toney – he owned the division for nearly five years. He was marketable thanks to his aggressive, attacking style that resulted in a high knockout ratio. Most lefties tend to be crafty stylish boxers, but Jirov came at opponents with a southpaw stance and took their bodies first and then worked his way up top. It was a sound strategy when he could overpower people at cruiserweight, but the formula has yet to yield results as a heavyweight.

The laws of the boxing land suggest that as a fighter goes up in weight his power does not normally go. Jirov certainly is a prime example of that, as he no longer extracts the same price from his opponents with each formerly crushing body blow. The toll paid to get inside on a true heavyweight can be costly, and at 6’ 2” and 220 soft pounds (Jirov tipped the scales a career

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high 223 for the bout with Norris) Jirov has yet to find the right balance. He was never a tactical boxer that would stick and move around the ring and defensively he is at time darn right offensive.

Now 31 years of age, Jirov faces a dilemma in terms of what direction his career takes. He may try to squeeze back down to the cruiserweight level hoping to make one more run at a title, or accept the fact that he will be nothing more than a journeyman heavyweight. The road of denial is a long lonely trail and dreams of heavyweight fortunes may still flicker for Vassiliy. Certainly it is much easier for the fighter to look through rose-colored glasses and believe that he has a chance at heavyweight glory rather than suffer the enduring stress that might come with trying to slip back into the lighter weight class.

It is a tough decision but one which has to be made with heavy thought.

Thursday night on Fox Sports we saw a lumbering heavyweight who fought only in spurts and clearly came out looking for a knockout that never would materialize. As a cruiserweight Vassiliy Jirov truly was a “Tiger” in the ring. As a 223-pound heavyweight he looks to be little more than a fat cat.