

Wladimir Klitschko Gets Respect

Written by Joey Knish

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Has Wladimir Klitschko lost it? Does he see something we don't? Or does the big man from the Ukraine have sweet dreams when he thinks about fighting the "Nigerian Nightmare" Samuel Peter?

It may be pure madness on the part of Dr. Klitschko or just a calculated risk, but he has accepted the challenge of taking on Peter this September in Atlantic City in an IBF heavyweight title eliminator. Whether you hold the younger brother of WBC champion Vitali in high regard over his career success or poke holes at him based on his glaring failures, you have to give Wladimir Klitschko credit for accepting this challenge from a fighter not many seem to want to face. And so I have.

Klitschko still boasts an excellent 44-3 record as a professional pugilist and holds an impressive victory over current IBF champion Chris Byrd, stopped title challenger Monte Barrett after dropping him five times, and knocked out Jameel McCline, Derrick Jefferson and Ray Mercer. His 40 knockouts among 44 victories are downright frightful, but so is the manner in which he suffered his three defeats.

The first career setback came when Klitschko's corner was forced to stop his bout with journeyman Ross Puritty when their fighter simply ran out of gas. That was in 1998 in a fight Wladimir was winning, but many people have yet to forget the way he suffered his first defeat. People began question whether the 6'6", 240 lb. behemoth had what it takes to become champion, despite the fact that he wasn't truly beaten.

Klitschko erased many of those doubts after he clipped Byrd for the WBO title and reigned as their heavyweight king from 2000-2002. He then successfully defended the title five times – but he wasn't out of the fans' doghouse yet. With 2003 came the infamous Corrie Sanders bout in front of thousands in his adopted homeland of Germany and seen by many more on HBO. The South African veteran Sanders showed little respect for the hulking champion and simply exposed him. Klitschko looked downright amateurish, with no clue how to handle the heavy-handed southpaw, and, once hurt, seemed confused as to how to protect himself. Sanders repeatedly tagged Wladi and made him crumble to the shock and horror of big brother Vitali at ringside. To his credit Klitschko kept getting back up, four times in total, but in less than six minutes the fight was over – as was his rule over the WBO heavyweight title.

The road back for Wladimir has been bumpy at best. He came back from the Sanders loss to knockout Fabio Moli (now 32-4) and Danell Nicholson (42-5), earning a date with Lamon Brewster for the vacant WBO title. Despite punishing Brewster for most of five rounds, Klitschko lost it – again – as he practically collapsed returning to his corner after the fifth round. Unable to continue and simply out of gas, the bout was stopped as Brewster stole the WBO trinket and the Indianapolis native has yet to look back. For Klitschko it was back to the drawing board and now, after a tough win against DaVarryl Williamson (22-3) and stopping Eliseo Castillo in four, the 29-year-old Klitschko is knocking on the door of another title shot.

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Standing in Klitschko's way is the undefeated hotshot that some feel is the best prospect in the division today. Samuel Peter, 24-0, has stopped 21 opponents on his way to becoming a Top-5 heavyweight according to most rankings. He has heavy hands and looks built to last with a thick neck and tree trunk thighs. The ability to go deep could be of major importance against Klitschko, who has tired down the stretch, when he makes it that far. While Peter has been very impressive in dismantling second-level heavyweights, it will be interesting to see how he does against the powerful Klitschko.

Wladimir Klitschko certainly is the best fighter that Peter will have faced to date, and Peter will have over five inches in height to overcome when they meet. The "Nightmare" doesn't do many of the basics with much flare, but when he does connect the results are often terminal. For Klitschko to be successful in this eliminator he will have to pace himself, as his success is based on the fight going deep, and it isn't likely he can stop Peter early. He will have to work behind his jab in order to keep Peter off him and to wear down the Nigerian. Once in close, look for Wladimir to use his height to lean on the 24-year-old and tie him up. It will also be interesting to see how Peter responds to being hit hard, likely harder than he has been hit thus far. The hardest puncher he has faced was Jeremy Williams (41-5-1), but Williams hardly had a chance to land a punch as he was disposed of in less than four minutes.

There is no doubt that Samuel Peter is a very dangerous opponent. In fact, linesmakers spotted him a -250 favorite over Klitschko and tipped the fight to last less than seven full rounds. The line has been bet down some as there was value in the towering Klitschko, but as far as bettors are concerned he is the underdog for the first time in his career.

There have been many occasions where Wladimir Klitschko has been chastised, and rightfully so. His petition to the WBO to be reinstated as their #1 contender after falling apart against Brewster was disrespectful to the sport; he looked as awful against Sanders as four knockdowns in 3 minutes and 27 seconds suggest; and his loss to Puritty was a lesson that seems to have been lost rather than learned. However, he was a legitimate champion and beat some very good fighters, perhaps better fighters than Samuel Peter, so it would be premature to write him off just yet.

With a once promising future in the balance and one defeat away from the scrapheap of former prospects, Wladimir Klitschko said "I do" to the toughest fight of his career. And for that alone he gets respect.