

Klitschko vs. Peter: Bad Blood Planet Hollywood

Written by George Kimball

Wednesday, 21 September 2005 19:00

Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!

--- Samuel Beckett, "*Waiting for Godot*"

During the interminable wait for the arrival of Samuel Peter in New York last Tuesday, at least one question was answered. We'd always wondered what the school colors of the University of Kiev might be. When Wladimir Klitschko and his sizable entourage walked into the Planet Hollywood clad in matching red jumpsuits with yellow trim, they could have been the cheerleading squad from Klitschko's *alma mater*.

As they assembled for an assault on the buffet line we unsuccessfully attempted to discern which member of the posse had been assigned the unwelcome role of Wladimir's official food-taster. Since the Ukrainian heavyweight claimed to have been poisoned before his last loss, we must assume there was one.

On the sidewalk outside Planet Hollywood, tourists stopped to pose alongside a life-sized statue of Sylvester Stallone-as-Rocky before moving a few steps away to a photo op with yet another Times Square fixture – the 'Naked Cowboy,' who obligingly posed wearing the ten-gallon hat atop his head, the guitar slung around his neck, and little else. A gaggle of professional photographers, expensive equipment dangling from their necks, milled about in front of the restaurant. Since most of them spoke in German, they were awaiting Klitschko's arrival, and they sprung into action at the first sighting.

Almost lost in the buildup to Saturday night's fight is the fact that the combatants are not, as is commonly supposed, complete strangers. Four years ago in Las Vegas, as Klitschko prepped for a WBO title defense against Charles Shufford, he sparred several rounds with a young Samuel Peter back when the Nigerian Nightmare was still an unformulated dream.

Wladimir claims to have little recollection of the episode ("I honestly don't remember sparring with Samuel Peter, but it was in Vegas before the Shufford fight"), but by most accounts he got the better of Peter back then.

"It was just about the time I was getting together with him, and I wasn't there, but from what I've been told, Wladimir outboxed him but Sam got in a few good shots," said Dino Duva.

"Klitschko handled him pretty easily then," recalled Freddie Roach, who would later briefly train both Brothers Klitschko. "But a fight is a fight and the gym is the gym – and I'm not sure Wladimir is as good now as he was back then."

Samuel Peter does not dispute the essential characterization of the sparring session, but noted that "I was still a 4-round fighter, and he was already a world champion."

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The heart of New York might have seemed an odd place to boost an Atlantic City fight between a Ukrainian domiciled in Hamburg and an opponent who bills himself as the “Nigerian Nightmare,” but Duva and HBO apparently found the opportunity to prime the ticket pump with a side trip to the Big Apple an irresistible opportunity.

Although no title is at stake, both the IBF and the WBO have officially designated the Klitschko-Peter fight a championship eliminator. What makes the matchup so intriguing, though, is not so much that the winner of the Boardwalk Hall fight will assume a place of prominence on the world stage, but that the loser will almost certainly be consigned to boxing oblivion.

“It depends on the fight,” said HBO executive vice-president Kery Davis. “If the loser loses a spectacular fight I don’t think he’ll necessarily lose ground. If it’s a good, competitive fight, the winner will be elevated for sure, but it won’t be over for the loser.

“But if it’s a one-sided blowout either way, I do think it becomes a crossroads fight. The loser will take a giant step backward because there are questions about both guys which would only be magnified. If Peter gets blown out by Wladimir, they’ll say ‘Oh, he was overrated; he was never any good.’ If Wladimir gets blown out by Peter they’ll say ‘He’s gone.’”

Asked Tuesday what a loss might do to his sagging career, Klitschko appeared to take umbrage.

“I ignore the question,” Dr. Klitschko replied defiantly. “There is no space in my mind for any looses (sic).”

But since the good doctor already has three looses on his record, the question was hardly off-base. In a 1998 fight back in Kiev, Wladimir was surprised by Ross Purrrity, who stopped him in the 11th round. Two years ago he defended his WBO belt against Corrie Sanders in Germany and was whacked out inside two rounds. And last year in Las Vegas, fighting for a vacant WBO title, he was ignominiously knocked out by Lamon Brewster in a fight memorable primarily for Klitschko’s ungracious response to the defeat: He claimed to have been slipped a mickey.

Although his older (and marginally larger) brother Vitali is presently the more visible heavyweight, as owner of the World Boxing Council title, for much of their careers Wladimir was considered the more talented of the two. In 1996 he won the Olympic super heavyweight gold medal at the Atlanta Games (Vitali sat that one out, having been barred from the Ukrainian team after failing a steroids test), and quickly mowed down his first 24 professional opponents (all but one of the fights taking place in Germany) before running into Ross Purrrity. Both brothers earned PhDs (in “sports science”) from the University of Kiev and are, by boxing standards, considered erudite.

Samuel Peter was also an Olympian. Young (he turned 20 in Sydney) and untested, he was eliminated in the quarterfinals of the 2000 Games, and has accumulated a 24-0 mark as a professional, albeit mostly against opposition even more suspect than Wladimir’s. The Nigerian Nightmare prepped for the Klitschko fight by sparring with Ray Austin, Maurice Harris and Al Cole, any one of whom might be more dangerous than any of the 21 guys he has knocked out.

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“But you haven’t seen all that Sam can do,” cautioned Pops Anderson, who trains Peter in tandem with Cornelius Boza-Edwards. “We haven’t had anybody stay the course to show what he can do, but the better the opponent, the more he can do.”

“The heavyweight division needs a fresh new face,” said Duva. “If Sam wins we plan to call out Vitali. Maybe we can get rid of both brothers in the same year.”

Duva had to do more than his share of talking at Tuesday’s Times Square get-together, because his fighter showed up half an hour late. When Klitschko spokesman Bernd Boente accused the Peter camp of unprofessionalism by failing to produce their fighter, he had threatened to leave and take the entire entourage with him, only to have Duva demand that they stay. Then, once the Nigerian Nightmare did show up, Duva told the Klitschko people to leave. Nobody seemed to much care either way.

The Klitschko camp was so enraged by the delay that once the Nigerian Nightmare, elegantly turned out in a floor-length dashiki, finally materialized, they allowed their fighter to pose for a couple of photos (which, if nothing else, revealed that Wladimir is at least half a head taller than Peter) before storming away to join the Naked Cowboy.

“It is very important that Samuel Peter come to the fight and not miss it, too,” grumbled Klitschko on his way out the door.

“He’s a loser, because that is how losers behave,” said Peter. “They leave.”

Trainer Emanuel Steward believes that Peter’s lack of experience on the world stage will prove his undoing.

“We get into the ring,” said Steward, “and we say ‘Welcome to big-time boxing.’”

As Dino Duva pointed out Tuesday, the four participants in Saturday’s “Boardwalk Brawls” doubleheader own a collective 120 wins against just three defeats (all by Klitschko), and boast 107 knockouts.

The other half of Saturday night’s Boxing After Dark twin-bill was to have been another showcase for fast-tracking Puerto Rican star Miguel Cotto (24-0), but what was supposed to have been a perfunctory WBO junior welter title defense against 35-year-old Italian Gianluca Branco may have turned into a real fight when Branco was injured in training and replaced by the undefeated Ricardo Torres.

“We sort of knew what we had with the original fight between Cotto and Branco,” said Kery Davis. “I think people expected Branco to give him a tough fight, but Cotto was going to win. Now we don’t know. We have the unknown with this guy. He’s 28-0 with 27 knockouts.”

When Torres stopped Edwin Vasquez in Puerto Rico last month it was the first time in his career he had fought outside his native Colombia.

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“He could be another Ricardo Mayorga. Who knows? The replacement has actually introduced an element of surprise,” said Davis. “I’m not saying he’s great, I’m not saying he’s horrible. I really don’t know. I’ve seen one tape of him and I can tell you this: He *is* a professional fighter. He knows what he’s doing.”