

Remembering Vitali and All I've Forgotten

Written by Joey Knish

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When consensus heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko hung up his boxing gloves for good, he, like his predecessor Lennox Lewis, left a big void at the top of the sport's marquee division.

Unlike Lewis, however, Klitschko still had some unfinished business to tend to among the division's contenders and leaves us still searching for our savior. While constant contender Hasim "The Rock" Rahman inherits the WBC crown, he didn't acquire it the old-fashioned way, as he wasn't given the chance to earn it in a bout with Vitali.

I remember way back hearing of these two massive brothers fighting in Germany who were demolishing what Europe had to offer in terms of heavyweight competition as they fine-tuned their skills on their way to inevitable world domination. The Klitschko Brothers – Vitali and his younger brother Wladimir – were fierce creatures right of a "Rocky" movie; these living, breathing "Ivan Drago's" were knocking out whoever was put in front of them.

I forget how both brothers aided to the fall of their own dynasty by pulling out of fights they had both been winning. In 1998 Wladimir did his part by punching himself out of his fight with Ross Puritty. That night Klitschko's corner was forced to stop the fight in the eleventh round as "Steelhammer" ran out of gas and was unable or willing to lug his 225-pound frame around the ring to last the distance and win a decision. Older brother Vitali followed suit when he surrendered his WBO heavyweight title when a shoulder injury rendered him unable to continue with nine minutes left in his April 2000 bout with Chris Byrd. Vitali was dominating the smaller Byrd, but gave away his title rather than continue one-handed, or at risk of further injury.

I remember that Vitali Klitschko rose to the challenge of fighting Lennox Lewis in June 2003 in an epic heavyweight bout that left us wanting more. Dr. Klitschko was ahead 58-56 on all three judges' scorecards when the battle of big men was stopped due to grotesque cuts suffered by the 6'8" 250-pound Ukrainian giant. The challenger, more than holding his own against the legendary Lennox Lewis, gained more respect from fight fans in losing than he had in any prior victory.

I forget how Vitali had his big frame break down on him time after time in training, leading to the passing of the WBC heavyweight title without a fight taking place. The Rahman-Klitschko bout was going to be the biggest test for Dr. Klitschko since his loss to Lewis, but the void that Lennox left remains. Klitschko victories over Kirk Johnson, Corrie Sanders and Danny Williams were against suspect opponents who have since disappeared from the heavyweight landscape. "The Rock" possesses one of the divisions' sturdiest jabs and a very heavy right hand. We should have been given the opportunity to see the fireworks unfold.

I remember how valiant Vitali Klitschko was in his fight with Lennox Lewis as he challenged the champion on foreign territory and won over the crowd with his aggressive attack. He took the fight to Lewis and was willing to put it all on the line to win the title, and answered every critic who questioned his heart as he bled profusely from his mouth and eyelid yet begged for one

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more round with Lewis. I will remember how he knocked out all but one opponent among his 35 professional victories – only Timo Hoffmann lasted twelve full rounds with Vitali – and how he used his steady jab to launch a destructive right hand. He gave hope to a division in a time that it had none.

And that's how I will remember things.

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I would be remiss if I did not mention the loss of Agapito Sanchez this past week, who was shot to death in the Dominican Republic. Sanchez held titles in his native land before going on to win several pseudo titles and eventually taking the WBO super bantamweight belt in 2001. Most recently Sanchez upset Artyom Simonyan for the USBA 122-pound strap and was enjoying a career resurrection at 35 years of age. He was never in an easy fight and as tough as they come; and now he's gone.

Agapito Sanchez was crafty and brave inside the ring while being modest outside it. He shouldn't be forgotten.