

## Kirk Johnson: The Fire to Fight or a Passion for Pay?

Written by Joey Knish

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Anticipating any fight involving Canadian heavyweight Kirk Johnson always comes with a hope and a prayer. At the best of times Johnson looks impressive impersonating a heavy hitting 6'3", 245-pound boxer-puncher with fast hands and nimble feet. During the worst of times, however, Johnson seems to be an oxymoron of the word "fighter" as he smothers his own aggression in order to avoid a costly counter attack. There isn't much risk in that approach, and as a result, no reward.

We always hope to see the confident fighter who strung together 33 consecutive victories as he began his professional career. What we fear, and have almost come accustomed to now, is that the timid fighter that was once filled with such potential shows up and does another 10 or 12-round ring waltz.

Injuries, ugly losses and uninspired outings have taken the luster off the 1992 Olympian and now the 33-year-old native of North Preston, Nova Scotia must battle time on top of quality opponents. A broken right hand suffered during his TKO 8 victory over Gilbert Martinez in 2004 meant a year off from the sport as he readied to rebuild a career that was derailed in less than two rounds by Vitali Klitschko. Johnson followed the Martinez TKO victory with a Technical Decision in five rounds over Juan Carlos Gomez conqueror Yanqi Diaz in June of last year.

Prior to his complete collapse in the WBC eliminator in December 2003 against Klitschko, Johnson (36-2-1, 26 KOs) had challenged for the WBA title in 2002 against rough and rugged John Ruiz. A close fight – two judges had the fight 84-85 in favor of Ruiz at the time of the stoppage – was waived off in the tenth round by referee Joe Cortez as "Bubba" Johnson repeatedly landed blows south of the border. Johnson claimed his intensity level was so high that he got caught up in the moment and fouled out of the title bout. That in itself is a rather ironic claim as Johnson often comes across as too passive for a fighter; a lack of intensity or focus might have made more sense.

Making a case for Kirk Johnson as a legitimate heavyweight contender falls apart when examining his debacle against Vitali Klitschko and fouling out against Ruiz. On the biggest stages Johnson self-destructed despite his obvious physical skills. In particular, his lack of production against Vitali in a WBC Eliminator and his appearance coming into the fight raises many doubts about his mental makeup.

First off, Johnson came into what may have been the biggest fight of his career, against Klitschko, carrying a career high and highly bloated 260-pounds on his 6'2" frame. The previous maximum for "Bubba" was 244 and in his first bout after Klitschko he came in at 242. A few extra pounds when facing a big man like Vitali might make sense, but not coming in more than 15 pounds over his previous high. Also, when entering the ring that night, Kirk Johnson simply looked scared. And he fought like it. Klitschko erased Johnson inside of two rounds as Vitali landed 55 of 113 total punches (49%) in less than six minutes while Johnson touched "Ironfist" a mere 9 times during the abbreviated bout. Johnson's overall lack of passion, preparation and

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fouling out raise concerns that have yet to be addressed.

With two victories under belt-less midsection, Johnson had planned to continue along the trail to contention in March when he was set to take on Javier Mora at the Gibson Amphitheatre in Universal City, California. That entire card has since been cancelled but what exactly was Mora going to bring to the table that would benefit a former title challenger like Kirk Johnson? Mora boasts a 19-2-1 record with 17 KOs and signed to fight a bout he was supposed lose. He is a 24-year old with an impressive record and nothing more. A quick look at Mora's record shows it is littered with the "who's who" of "who knows" including losses to Charles Wilson and Charles Davis, 8-5-0 and 10-8-1 at the time, respectively. Based on those two losses and the fact that he has been dropped twice against lower tier opposition, Mora certainly would have made Johnson look good. On paper the bout was an opportunity for "Bubba" Johnson to get some work done but little else.

And that leads to the big question – why is Kirk Johnson still looking to fight?

If Johnson and his team have dreams of heavyweight glory there is much work to do but little time to do it in. This year will mark Johnson's 14th year as a professional fighter. He has lost his two biggest bouts as a pro, and looked bad in doing so. Another opportunity may come his way, but when he gets there, what happens next? Fighting opponents such as Javier Mora do little to strengthen his mettle although they at least provide a payday to keep his financial house in order.

It would be nice to think that the man once known as "Captain Canada" can save the heavyweight division, or at least add some excitement to it. But realistically boxing seems to be more like work to Kirk Johnson . . . and how many people really love their job?