Written by Phil Woolever
Wednesday, 19 April 2006 19:00

Chris Byrd looked genuinely jovial and carefree heading into the final hours before his return engagement with Wladimir Klitschko this Saturday at the SAP arena in Mannheim. Considering the heavy hometown leather Byrd tasted during his October 2000 excursion, such an attitude might be surprising.

A resounding wall of whap, whap, whap workout sound as Byrd crouched low and pounded upward into an extra large heavy bag offered intriguing evidence that his confidence had foundation.

For one thing, despite the bruises, now Byrd's been there, done that, tagged and been tagged. Primarily though, Byrd has reached self-satisfaction in his successful campaign through the heavyweight ranks.

"He beat me last time and I won't make any excuses," said Byrd, "I had a bad day and I get a chance to avenge it. I'm 35-years-old and I feel great. I want to rise to the top, but until I fight all the so-called best guys, who knows? I'm having fun. It's a blessing to be in this position. It's great to be a champion. It's great to be going over to Germany to fight in front of a huge crowd again.

"I'm not gonna duck anybody. Klitschko beat Samuel Peter and I knew they weren't going to have the fight here in the States. At that time he had his choice between me and Lamon Brewster and I couldn't risk it. My goal was to be a champion and to prove everybody wrong when I first moved up to heavyweight. To this day people say I'm too small, I can't punch, I can't do this or that, but I'm still champ."

A few days before departing for Germany, Byrd held a lighthearted but impressive workout before a small contingent of media, and displayed plenty of lean muscle at UFC Gym. The gym is just up the street from the prototypical Palace Station, where they still write plenty of boxing parlays by hand, in a classic sports book.

Odds around his adopted Vegas hometown list Byrd as a slight underdog defending the WBO portion of the heavyweight title, by around half a buck. Considering the fight's location and previous result those are fairly conservative numbers, probably showing inside word on how strong, and especially fast, Byrd looked in training.

The most memorable scene during Klitschko's dominant thumping in the first fight came when a painfully Rocky-esque-faced Byrd, already dropped twice, convinced his father-trainer not to stop the contest and have the German crowd see a USA fighter quit.

Looking at Byrd in the days before the fight, you'd think things ended up the other way around.

"This is my chance not only to have revenge on a loss, but to say I beat both the Klitschkos,"

mused Byrd, who stopped Vitali in April 2000. "I could be the only man to say that. Five years ago he was on top of the game. He's a real good big man that can really fight. He had adversity but he bounced back. You can go down as much as you want, as long as you keep coming back. He proved with Peter he can take hard shots and keep fighting. I'm looking at the same fight I looked at five and a half years ago, when everybody said he'd be the next big thing.

"I know its going to be rough but I'm looking forward to it because my style has changed a lot. Before, it was finesse these big guys, (like) they're not that good, they're big punchers but they can't move. Then, a whole new wing of guys came in, big, 6'4 or 6'5, 240, who could actually fight. So now, my finesse game as far as outboxing them is really hard because they're a lot smarter a lot more athletic and things like that.

"I'm telling you the truth, I don't care how big and strong they are. I'm gonna stay right in front of their face and fight. Most guys say I can't punch but nobody runs me over. I'm very underrated. If you drop me I get up and I keep fighting. They'd walk through me if I couldn't punch a lick, so they feel something. My toughness is very underrated, plus my slipping ability.

"We can go in the trenches. I'm not going to back down from anybody. At the same time, I'm not going to be stupid and leave myself open."

The image of Byrd darting low and firing stiff southpaw jabs high over head into the giant heavy bag conjures distinct visions of an upset, or at least a Nikolay Valuev- John Ruiz-type robbery.

If good guy Byrd can find that range and back up his heartfelt proclamations with an undeniable victory, it's a giant step in boxing's global scenario. His claim to ultimate heavyweight laurels would be further fortified. The usual suspects will hang around.