

Can Chris Byrd Fight?

Written by Rick Folstad
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How'd a nice guy like Chris Byrd wind up in this line of work? Guys like Byrd usually find their niche in the social services, maybe the ministry. They become preachers, kindergarten teachers, or Boy Scout leaders. They rescue cats out of trees, help old ladies cross the street, and work the soup line when they're short-handed at the downtown YMCA.

Nice guys don't fight, they hand out free turkeys at Christmas.

Heavyweight champion of the world? That's usually associated with the Sonny Listons of the world, the Mike Tysons, guys with a rap sheet and an attitude.

After all, if you're going to be any good at this game, you need some demons dancing in your head, a streak of meanness the size of the interstate running through your psyche. You don't have to do hard time, but you can't be seen giving small children piggy back rides in the park, either.

So how did Byrd get in here? Who opened the door and invited the nice guy in?

And what about Wladimir Klitschko? He sounds almost as polite and respectful as Byrd.

That's great if these guys are going to be guest hosts on Sesame Street. But what if they're getting ready to fight each other for Byrd's IBF title Saturday in Germany? Doesn't that require a strong dose of arrogance? Some bad-mouthing? Some cheap shots?

No.

All that's required is a healthy dose of self-confidence, and both these guys seem to have it.

"Wladimir is more than worthy (to fight for the title)," Byrd said Wednesday on a conference call from Germany. "I feel he's the best guy in the division right now outside of myself. It's a very intriguing fight with a lot of drama because of the last fight. I'm very confident in my ability. I want to show the world I'm the best in the division. I'm looking for a great fight."

When Byrd says "last fight," he's referring to the first time the two fought five years ago. Klitschko won that one by an easy, one-sided decision.

So can Klitschko do it again? That's one question that will be answered when the fight is televised live on HBO starting at around 5 p.m. on the East Coast.

Byrd (39-2-1, 20 KOs), who has been a world champion since December 2002, says the big difference is that he's five years wiser, while Klitschko (45-3, 40 KOs) is just five years older.

"Five years ago, I was a little timid against the bigger guys," he said. "Now, if I need to box from

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the outside, I can do it and make you miss. But if I want to get into the trenches and fight, I can do that also. I don't fear anybody anymore as far as taking their shot."

Five years ago, he didn't even know what the trench was. But that's all part of the past, part of the change.

Though small for a heavyweight (he plans to weigh between 212 and 215 at Friday's weigh-in while Klitschko expects to be about 240), Byrd said he wants to loom large in the division.

"I want to prove I belong here," he said. "If I get beat and beat soundly, I'll take it as a man."

Klitschko said he's also looking for a wiser Chris Byrd in this fight.

"With his experience, I think he is much better than he was five years ago," he said.

Byrd said he can't just sit back and let a guy 6-foot-7 and 245 pounds outbox him from a distance. If he has to go inside, he will. He just has to be aware of Klitschko's power.

"He's got great punching power," Byrd said. "Hey, he dropped me twice. He can punch. He's a big guy. Get hit right, you're going to sleep. If you catch somebody, you catch them. If not, you go 12 rounds."

What this fight really comes down to is legitimacy. Is Byrd really that good, or is he too small for today's heavyweights? Can he handle Klitschko's power?

Can he survive a night in the trenches?

We already know he's a nice guy and says all the right things. But can he fight?

"I'm just trying to prove to the people that I really belong in this division, always have," he said.

Saturday, he gets the chance to show us.