

Who Needs a Heart When a Heart Can Be Broken?

Written by Michael Katz
Thursday, 27 April 2006 19:00

LAS VEGAS, April 28 – Beware of love. It is a terrible trap. As the wise book says, “Never fall in love with a fighter, he’ll only break your bank.”

Betting on guys you like can lead to worse heartbreak than psoriasis. Hearts full of passion, jealousy and hate will surely be broken, on that you can rely. The objectivity of the press box, one would think, should protect us from allowing rooting interests to bet on nice guys like Chris Byrd.

But there’s no use crying over spilled Dewars, just as long as we don’t think with our hearts in the next couple of weeks. You don’t have to love a fighter to make a stupid bet. If your emotion is a lot darker – ranging from mild dislike to borderline hatred – it is no difference. As soon as you start thinking with anything but your brain, you’re in trouble.

So it is that this Saturday I almost have to pick Acelino Freitas to win, though I would much prefer to see Zahir Raheem outbox the Brazilian terrier. And the following weekend, while I would prefer to see Oscar De La Hoya shut the big mouth of Ricardo Mayorga, it seems too dangerous to bet that way.

I’m hoping the Byrd lesson sinks through my thick skull. It is not easy, the heart is easiest mark in the game. I remember a few esteemed colleagues picking the frayed version of Muhammad Ali to upset Larry Holmes in 1980. Wishing won’t make it so.

Chris Byrd is one of the nicest guys I’ve met, which is not to say anything derogatory about Wladimir Klitschko. Au contraire, the Klitschkos will be accorded tenancy in the PENTHOUSE more for their actions after battering the hapless Byrd.

But knowing how brave Byrd has been, giving away size, strength and power to all his opponents, knowing how much he had wanted this victory, it was easy to be ignore the X’s and O’s and believe somehow in the Why’s. Wladimir’s confidence had been shaken since he first battered Byrd over 12 one-sided rounds almost six years ago. Byrd’s game of reinforcing the giant’s doubts seemed entirely reasonable: he almost wanted to get hit by Klitschko and then tell him, see, you can’t hurt me, make him worry about his stamina. Then, when he was unsure and fatiguing, when he was ripe, attack.

In the meantime, with Klitschko’s hands held high to protect his suspect chin, Byrd would further weaken the big man by punching to the body. In the first round, he did land a couple of decent body blows. But as early as the second round, it was clear that there was a big flaw to the game plan: he couldn’t get past the Klitschko jab. He forgot about bobbing and weaving, the way he had worked in his Vegas gym. He forgot about slipping punches and moving laterally. He thought his chin could overpower Klitschko’s punches.

As his buddy, and now the only remaining American heavyweight titlist, Hasim Rahman, said

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the other night on ESPN, "Chris fought like there were two big men out there, but there was really only one."

He fought bravely, but he fought badly. "I was knuckleheaded," he would say. John Hornewer, his longtime attorney and friend, said, "I really love Chris and to watch him commit suicide like this was hard." When love congeals, as Larry Hart wrote, "it soon reveals the faint aroma of performing seals." Let the poets write of love, they'll never hit a parlay.

Emanuel Steward, who already has a long lead for trainer of the year (and let's see how he gets Jermain Taylor to handle Winky Wright), was more than a chess master in developing the winning game plan. He made Klitschko a winner again, the same way earlier this month he gave Kermit Cintron another chance at a successful career after a devastating knockout loss.

Klitschko's collapses against Corrie Sanders and Lamon Brewster and his wobbly moments against such as DaVarryl Williamson and Samuel Peter, do not allow me to anoint him as the heavyweight division's "savior." He is not, as HBO's Larry Merchant said, "the mythical Muhammad Dempsey" the boxing world has been awaiting. He's proved, however, that he's probably the best around. As the wonderfully modest Rahman said, "You have to put him No. 1."

He did not come back from adversity against Sanders or Brewster. But he got up three times against Peter and was strongest at the finish. And he came back from a deep trough in his career. Against Byrd, he demonstrated not only his quick hands and good power, but a much calmer demeanor in following the X's and O's.

Steward had coached him to stick out the long left jab and keep it in Byrd's face, setting up the right hands that followed in horrific succession.

"He never saw the right hands," said Steward afterwards. "He could never get past the extended left hands."

He could have been listening to the Byrd corner. After the first knockdown, in the fifth round, Chris asked his father and trainer, Papa Joe Byrd, "What he hit me with?"

Everything. It was to Byrd's credit that he gave Klitschko all the credit. He probably won't retire. He has no future in the heavyweight division, but his competitive drive will probably spawn a new career, even at age 35, as a cruiserweight.

At least this fight was a strong counterpunch to all those black eyes the game has been receiving. And, yes, there was someone who ran into the ring in Mannheim. But that's for the PENTHOUSE which follows.

PENTHOUSE: Almost the first person in the ring was Justin Byrd, Chris's 11-year-old son. And you know who gave Justin a big hug? Wladimir Klitschko. In fact, Wladimir and his brother, Vitali, were among the first to check out Byrd to make sure he was not too battered. The brothers then went to Byrd's dressing room. Wladimir said it was a "bittersweet win," because

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the Klitschkos love the Byrd family. He keeps this up, he'll have a lot of people rooting for him. Love is easier the second time around.

OUTHOUSE: The nationalists who now have loaded on Hasim Rahman's shoulders the, shall we say, "black man's burden." Rahman is now the only one of the four "major" heavyweight titleholders who is not a former Soviet citizen – there's Klitschko of the Ukraine, Sergei Liahkovich of Belarus and Nicolai Valuev of Russia. And Rahman now has to deal Aug. 12 with Oleg Maskaev of Uzbekistan, who knocked him out – of the ring and almost onto Jim Lampley's head – several years ago. Bob Arum is already gearing to promote the Rahman-Maskaev rematch as America's last stand. He will probably buy little American flags by the lot from Don King and give out two with every ticket (I made that up, but don't be surprised if it is done).

The Rock won't bite. Maskaev, who was one of my favorites until he hooked up with Dennis Rappaport, has only that questionable history on his side. Rahman said he wasn't worried about what happened in 1999. "I thought HBO was giving me some free money," he said of the Atlantic City match. "I saw him get knocked out in the first round by Oliver McCall (in 1996)." Maskaev was also knocked out by David Tua – no sin, that – and after beating Rahman, was stopped by Kirk Johnson, Lance Whitaker and Corey (not the South African) Sanders.

In any case, Rahman grew up on the streets of Baltimore and now lives here in Vegas and is one hell of a nice guy. So is Maskaev. In his early career, against the wishes of his people (including the late great trainer and cut man, Al Gavin), he confessed that all his early pro victories in the Soviet Union were against amateurs. It makes up for Rappaport. May the best man win, and damn the flags. It is an individual sport; let the jingoists stick to their war games.

MEDAL MELTDOWN: Hate to mention this to Oscar, but there were three American medallists at the 1992 Olympics. De La Hoya won a gold, Chris Byrd a silver and Tim Austin a bronze. This month, Byrd and Austin were knocked out. De la Hoya now goes into his May 6 bout here against Ricardo Mayorga trying to stop a streak. His problem, and the reason I can't support him at minus \$3.30 against the wild-swinging Mayorga though he is an infinite number of classes higher, is that he hasn't fought since quitting on all fours against Bernard Hopkins in 2004. Yes, he should have no trouble handling the crazy Mayorga, a plus \$2.70 underdog. But even in his prime, and we don't know how far Oscar is from that, he was prone to tiring late in fights. What if he can't take out the stubborn Mayorga? Could he be in trouble late? Naturally, I want Oscar to win. I resent Mayorga calling him "Chicken" De La Hoya.

ZZZZ: Zahir Raheem is minus \$1.30 against Acelino Freitas in some sort of lightweight "title" bout in Connecticut on HBO. As much as I respect Zab Judah's old Olympic Trials roomie (how many ZZZ's does it take to snore?) for his decisive victory last September over Erik Morales and for his stoicism over a career that has never blossomed, it strikes me that the oddsmakers have chosen the wrong guy as favorite. Yes, I don't think much of Freitas for the way he quit against Diego (Chico) Corrales; it was okay for him to put on a beating, but as soon as the tide turned and it appeared that he would have to absorb some punishment, he just flat out quit. I also didn't think much of his gonads for his refusal to give Joel Casamayor a rematch after I thought the Cuban star defeated them in their 130-pound unification bout.

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I will be rooting for Raheem, but I think the Philadelphia gym rat will have great trouble with Freitas. The Brazilian is not simply a big puncher. He has fast hands, fast feet and is an unorthodox boxer. His speed will negate Raheem's. The American has stepped up only twice – he upset a lethargic Morales and was unlucky not to get the decision against Rocky Juarez. But his chin is suspect. He was knocked out in the 1996 Olympics in the opening bout against the Cuban veteran, Arnaldo Mesa, who had had to go down to 119 pounds from featherweight to replace the defected Casamayor, but who still had enough to swat Raheem. Then, in an early pro match, Raheem was dropped a couple of times early by Lionel Odom, whose face I did not recognize because of the ravages of drugs. Odom quickly faded and Raheem managed to win, but the chin did not earn many points. I hope I am very wrong and his superior character enables him to make Freitas quit again.

MORE DIS AND THAT: About a year ago, Don King tried to get Chris Byrd to make an optional defense against Wladimir Klitschko, but he refused to guarantee in writing either a third match in case of a loss, or a \$1 million "comeback" fight. It was an offer Byrd found easy to refuse. Byrd got a bigger straight purse for a mandatory defense against Wladimir, but for the \$1 million next fight, King missed out on a chance to gain three options on Klitschko....Floyd Mayweather, his right hand still swollen from hitting Zab Judah, opted to pay Bob Arum \$750,000 to get out of his promotional contract, thereby scuttling a planned Aug. 12 match against Antonio Margarito. Boxing's best is waiting to see what happens May 6 here. He's hoping for a \$20 million plus bonanza against De La Hoya, but even if there's an upset, a match against Mayorga figures to make him more than the \$8 million Arum offered him to face Margarito....Michael Moorer showed again why he's probably going to be a successful trainer when he joined his old trainer, Teddy Atlas, ringside at the Wednesday night fights. Moorer immediately pointed out that Allan Green, the big wind from Oklahoma who was talking about how easily he was going to beat Joe Calzaghe, was obviously so overconfident against late sub, and former sparring partner, Donnie McCrary, that the undefeated prospect was carrying his hands much too low. Splat, just as soon as Green dropped the overmatched McCrary with a left hook to the body in the third round and moved in for the finish, he ran into a left hook that set up a series of staggering blows that put Green down. A more accomplished opponent would surely have finished Green. "I'm glad it happened now and not later in a bigger fight," the blowhard said afterwards. Sorry, if he doesn't correct his wide swings and careless defense, there won't be bigger fights.