

The Fight To Save The Heavyweights

Written by Joey Knish

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Much has been made of the malaise that has infected the heavyweight division since the departure of consensus champion Lennox Lewis in June of 2003, but the solution is out there, we all know what it is. It just has to happen.

There is little debate as to who the current champion of the big boys is—Wladimir Klitschko holds that claim with little debate.

The IBF champion has been more economical and disciplined during his current five fight winning streak and the results have been very good. With a thudding jab and a right hand that hammers into opponents like a cannon ball, Wladimir has punished opponents of late. Under trainer Emanuel Steward, the younger Klitschko has kept it simple, and kept on winning. At 6'6" and 240 pounds, "Steelhammer" doesn't need to do more than what he has shown in his past two bouts, TKO 7 victories over Chris Byrd and most recently Calvin Brock.

While Byrd never did get moving and shaking against the heavyweight giant, Brock at least had moments of success in the first few rounds of their bout in November of last year. In the end, though, it didn't matter as "The Boxing Banker" learned that getting within striking distance is much easier said than done. And the price to do so is more than most can handle. Klitschko's jab wears down opponents and the searing right cross finishes them off.

Samuel Peter took Wladimir the distance when they met in September of 2005 as the stout Nigerian banger made the most of his opportunities when he got past Klitschko's jab. The "man" in the heavyweight division went down three times, and while he lasted until the final bell, it seemed that Peter was always just one punch away from a knockout victory. All three judges agreed that Klitschko landed enough punishing jabs and rapier right crosses to carry the fight while he wasn't on the canvas or holding.

Despite being a competitive fight, a Samuel Peter-Wladimir Klitschko rematch isn't going to be the marquee fight that saves the big boys' division. What the heavyweights need is a mega-fight that has everyone talking from the moment it is announced to months after it goes down. While Peter (28-1-0, 22 KO) has heavy hands and more experience now under his belt, he isn't the kind of fighter who puts much meat in the seat. Wladimir is a bit of a draw because people are more interested in seeing his chin, stamina and balance catch up with him once more as it has in the past.

Wladimir, 47-3-0 with 42 knockouts, has been stopped in each of his three losses, and each case it was a combination of his chin, stamina, and balance betraying him. Ross Puritty (TKO 11 in 1998, Ukraine), Corrie Sanders (TKO 2, 2003 in Germany) and Lamon Brewster (TKO 5 winner in Las Vegas, 2004) all exploited the perceived weaknesses that Emanuel Steward has since been trying to mitigate.

Klitschko's next scheduled bout against Ray Austin in Germany won't be the one to save us and

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drawn fans to the arena or TV screen. Facing fellow Kazakhstan fighter Oleg Maskaev, the current WBC titleholder, wouldn't exactly have those fans stateside reaching for their credit cards for the opportunity to witness what might transpire. Certainly a showdown with 7'0", 325-pound WBA champ Nicolay Valuev has its appeal, but most of that interest would be based on the enormity—based strictly on height and weight—that the fight would be. Unification is great, but only if the fights are too.

Is there any debate then that the biggest heavyweight fight since Lennox Lewis vs. Vitali Klitschko in 2003 would once again have to involve Vitali Klitschko? Brotherly Love aside, the two Klitschkos are likely the best heavyweights in the division; that is of course, if big brother Vitali actually reenters the heavyweight ranks.

Rumors had been circling that "Ironfist" was considering a ring return as the time off has likely allowed the injuries that forced his retirement in 2004 to completely heal. An unsuccessful run at politics may now have Vitali with more time on his hands than he knows what to do with, other than what he has always done—train. Vitali has only lost to Chris Byrd when an injury forced him to fold, and to Lennox Lewis as a grotesque cut impaired his ability to continue in what was a highly competitive bout. His mark of 35-2-0 with an astounding 34 wins by knockout is certainly impressive, he demonstrated much heart in his loss to Lewis, and all along we had been told that baby brother Wladimir was the better of the two.

So let us find out. Just today Vitali announced that he is coming back and so the first hurdle to the superfight has now been passed.

In terms of marketing and sales the potential of a Klitschko vs. Klitschko fight is enormous. On a global scale there is no bigger fight, perhaps none bigger in all of boxing, than Wladimir and Vitali meeting in the ring. Assuming the brothers put their relationship aside and actually "fight" it would set up as potentially the most intriguing bout in ages.

Money is the root of all evil and it also may be the one thing that can make such a fight a reality. If Oscar De La Hoya will pocket a reported \$25 million (or more) for his farewell fight against Floyd Mayweather in May, wouldn't the Klitschko Brothers reel in a similar or greater amount to face one another? As good as "Pretty Boy" Floyd is and as big a draw as the "Golden Boy" can be, the magnitude across the globe of The Brothers Klitschko is bigger.

First thing first is that Vitali Klitschko confirmed the rumors and in fact will come back. Both will have to keep winning, stay healthy, and then they'll have to do what they have denied they ever would, the unthinkable—beat each other up for millions upon millions of dollars.

With one greatly intriguing and potentially thrilling fight the entire heavyweight division and all of boxing could return to the glory days that passed so long ago.

Who would win? First and foremost the sport and business of Boxing would. Secondly . . . ?

Let the debate begin.