

## Klitschko calls his shot

Written by Patrick Kehoe

Saturday, 27 January 2007 19:00

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"I am returning to the ring to get my WBC Heavyweight Championship back. In November 2005, due to a serious knee injury, I retired without having lost the WBC belt in the ring. At the WBC gala event on December 20, 2005 in Cancun, Mexico, the WBC designated me as 'WBC Champion Emeritus' and assured me that whenever I was ready to return, I would become the immediate mandatory challenger for the title." Thus runs the official statement made by Vitali Klitschko on Tuesday, January 24th 2007. I guess we are all supposed to stand up and applaud; many did. Others sighed in relief that the heavyweight division stands to regain a notable talent, a selling point man to help blast away the problematic reputation of the heavies being an infestation of mediocre ex-champs and limited contenders.

If boxing is a spectacle entertainment product, then being a draw, a fighter with name recognition able to command something akin to the general attention of the sports industry patronage and the attendant media, well, then Klitschko comes fully certified, ready for primetime. The 'board' at the WBC certainly have taken their cue, suspending due diligence with regard to recertification and access and done the Ukrainian's bidding (i.e. the obvious: putting Klitschko back at the top of the heavyweight theoretical ladder).

Yes, we know the bylaw wiggle room that allows for former WBC champions to return and fight for titles. Especially, it seems those deemed emeritus champions. Such an academic term for such a streetwise sport! Then again, Mr. Klitschko is a Ph.D., we are told. Toss in the knee injury to Klitschko and you get all the justification they need to put Vitali right back in the ring for a title shot, no questions asked. Apparently, Klitschko, two years removed from fighting, doesn't need to reestablish anything. Just being Vitali Klitschko is enough for the WBC.

Ya, we know... it's all about the Benjamins; tell that to Mr. Peter and Mr. Duva and their lawyers going over the matter as we herein dwell.

You have to love that quote that we started off with, do you not? The injury thought at the time to be career ending heals itself and thus the great man commeth back to regain "my title." The rhetorical punch of those two small words – my and title paired – come at us as self-justifying, evidencing the legitimacy of Mr. Klitschko being given what Mr. Peter has just finished earning, in the ring, where it sometimes counts and sometimes doesn't. Who is the mandatory man? What can you do with a mandatory challenger who will not step aside for the sake of an ex-champion's mandatory dreams renewed? Well, you ignore him as a first principle. Then you negotiate upon a settlement in the form of currency – money – or access – a title shot 'guarantee' written on paper, notarized, witnessed and hopefully not destined to be come another Munich Agreement. We know, we know, the ironies are so thick here it sounds as if you can say anything in boxing and make it real and binding and as inevitable as the law.

So – where were we? – Klitschko, former heavyweight monster man and never quite successor to Lennox Lewis, has decided he's not only fit again to fight and reign but being of good mind and body is actually entitled to the designation of automatic title challenger. Perhaps, in all of

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this 'to-do' we have found a new designation for the 'truly' title worthy: the automatic title challenger. That little old knee injury is just yesterday's news. "My injuries have healed and after much hard work and with the approval of the doctors, I am cleared to continue my boxing career." That would also make Mr. Klitschko's 'retirement' a temporary work stoppage, a forced layoff and not really a retirement at all. Would it not? Or do we term that an unofficial medial layoff, subject to a return clause, date and time unspecified, in good standing, at such time as the good doctor's good doctor deems him ready to take up the cause of world heavyweight domination once again. We are kidding, but all kidding aside, the rhetorical plant here is to make all appearances of reality – medical dispensations are common in boxing – have the import of the real. Klitschko retired due to repeated injuries, he once admitted AND a growing fatigue with the rigors of training. Clever use of the injury hook by his advisors – we note this for the purposes of edification not challenge, exactly.

And, after all, he was "assured" he'd be named the "immediate mandatory challenger for the heavyweight title" – not just any old mandatory challenger for the WBC heavyweight championship, like, say, Samuel Peter. Well, he is after all a WBC Champion Emeritus or is that reigning WBC heavyweight champion emeritus? We won't wonder about, nor speculate upon, who would inherit that 'title' now that Dr. Klitschko has returned to... his rightful place?

Sure we understand fighters retire and then change their minds all the time. But after two years, he's decided to what? Just get back in the ring and take on the WBC champion, in Moscow? Yes! Well, "Sugar" Ray Leonard – who was off one month shy of three years – did walk back into a showdown with Marvin Hagler, no questions asked. Then again that was Marvin Hagler, who had disposed of Thomas Hearns and John Mugabi. But that was also an epic contest about history and generation greatness and – yes, right – a Brinks load of Benjamins, then known simple as a ton of green. Do we need to know that champions, typically, are allowed the discretion of a title defense against a 'somebody' before they take on the mandatory man? In this case, it's been made repeatedly clear that Oleg was being directed to fight the winner of Samuel Peter and James Toney, pronto. That was BEFORE Mr. Klitschko made his announcement. Can you imagine the phone calls to Mexico when Team Klitschko floated that one to Mr. J. Sulaiman?

No matter how you spin the rights and duties of a champion, newly minted or not, it seems like Mr. Maskaev wants to accept the money and ignobility of defending his WBC heavyweight title belt in Moscow against V. Klitschko, no matter that Samuel Peter has fought and won the right to challenge him for his championship, as per the directives and stipulations of the WBC. Of course, we know that Team Klitschko have stressed the date of this "assurance" so to be able to make the "case" his was an understanding in principle that predates the entire Peter-Toney mandatory box-off. And, now doubt, it would only take the expressed written confirmation from Mr. Sulaiman to prove that to be the case.

Still, the WBC certainly appears to have put itself into a situation of possible compromise, painted itself into a corner of one color or another. Can a legal challenge be far away? No doubt the offshore-ness of this proposed April fight, to be staged in Moscow, makes moot such a legal challenge. Or does it? One can only imagine the outrage, flying invectives and fuss that would be dumped on the WBC and Team Maskaev if it was James Toney who had won the WBC

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mandatory box-off last month. The mind reels just considering the stink Toney and promoter Dan Goossen would have made had the WBC played that kind of political card on them. One has to wonder what commentator of principle, HBO's Larry Merchant, thinks of this kind of maneuvering. For some reason I just don't feel like calling him about it; we'll let him tell us on the air, when we are all together, watching.

In understanding that the WBC bylaws allow for a champion to fight a former champion and effectively suspend the rules of mandatory engagement, we wonder about the matter of good faith and the public record. On both accounts, both Toney and Peter were of the understanding that their fight and mandated rematch was, in fact, a title eliminator, moving the victor into direct line for a title challenge. Fees to sanction such a designation were paid and received by representatives of Mr. Peter to the WBC, were they not? Now because 'WBC heavyweight champion emeritus' Klitschko decides he's medically fit, emotionally ready and financially stimulated to fight again, he imperiously jumps the cue to take HIS place at the front of the line. So, what ever happened to a mandatory contender actually being the fighter who had, via his industry and persistence, earned via merit, the status as championship challenger of the moment? Right! We forgot... money... and sentimentality, suspension of dis-belief?

"I am ready to take my title back!"

Right...

Sure, television entities and the promoters that facilitate major events may attempt to break all the rules by offering the justification of economic primacy; but, isn't that precisely when the world governing bodies have to take the lead and bring something like regulatory oversight to the process? It isn't as if Mr. Klitschko can't find someone willing to take a co-featured card pre-championship pounding on the night of a Maskaev-Peter title fight, in Moscow; why not? Do we need to go into the background of Mr. Klitschko's promoter and Russian cultural and economic politics? No, if we need to get into that we will at another time. We don't want to dilute the moral argument. We don't want to let slide the notion that Mr. Klitschko, Mr. Maskaev, Mr. Peter, Mr. Sulaiman and all the suits involved on all sides could get most all of what they want, and still do the right thing all at the same time. Do what's appears to be in the best interests of boxing? And they know exactly what that means.

One can only say career ending injuries aren't what they used to be. Medicine truly has come of age. Injure a rotator cuff or a knee or have your mouth lacerated from having it hit by a leather guarded fist tossed by a Jamaican-English-Canadian and that need not keep you from your (re)calling as THE heavyweight of note in your time. Miracles still abound like the Klitschko brothers being heavyweight champions of the world at the same time.

"I look forward to seeing us all together soon and I am also excited about having the opportunity to fulfill the dreams of the Klitschko brothers being Heavyweight Champions at the same time," Klitschko has said in one form or another for over seven years. Of course, that just proves my point I made months ago about the end of the heavyweight championship of the world, as singular, iconic, hierarchical, an end its embodied self.

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Still, Vitali, the big guy, he's back. Or so he says. And he's apparently got a date with Oleg, springtime in Moscow indeed. Can't you feel the love?

There are a lot of people getting excited over all of this, no matter what you think or feel about the details of Mr. Klitschko's return.

One thing is for sure, 2007 certainly has gotten off to an interesting start; although, in the heavyweight division at least, it feels a lot like Orwell's 1984 from where I am sitting.

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