As one of the premier referees in the business, Wayne Kelly of Long Island, New York, has been the third man in the ring with many behemoth heavyweights. Although probably best known for disqualifying Andrew Golota after he incessantly fouled Riddick Bowe in their 1996 Madison Square Garden bout that led to a full scale riot afterwards, he has also spent a total of 14 rounds in the ring with current IBF heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko.

Generally regarded as the best of the four heavyweight belt holders, the 31-year-old Klitschko will put his 48-3 (43 KOS) record on the line against 34-year-old Lamon Brewster, 33-3 (29 KOS), in Cologne, Germany, on Saturday, July 7.

Although Brewster survived a third round knockdown to brutally stop Klitschko two rounds later in April 2004 in Las Vegas, Kelly believes that Klitschko will emerge victorious in the rematch.

“I’ve been in the ring with Klitschko for seven rounds against Calvin Brock and seven against Chris Byrd,” said the eternally youthful Kelly who, although in his late fifties, appears decades younger. “I can tell you that his right hand is devastating. He doesn’t have much of a jab or a hook. The right hand is his main arsenal. The sound it makes when it lands is unbelievable. He’s probably the best heavyweight that I’ve ever refereed.”

Although he is not a betting man, Kelly, who has officiated bouts featuring, among others, Roy Jones Jr., Arturo Gatti, Chris Byrd, Ray Mercer, Michael Dokes, John Duddy, O’Neil Bell, Jean Marc Mormeck, Jameel McCline, John Ruiz and Joe Mesi, is surprised that Klitschko is a 5-1 favorite in some quarters.

“I think Klitschko will probably win – and win big – but 5-1 is ridiculous,” he said. “Brewster is a tough guy, plus he’s already beaten him. And Klitschko has that questionable chin, so you never know what could happen.”

Kelly says that the press lambasted former heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson for having a glass jaw, but said that Patterson’s “heart, determination and spirit” enabled him to get up when the going got tough.

Kelly was impressed with the way Klitschko kept picking himself up against the hard-punching Samuel Peter in September 2005. Despite being knocked down numerous times, he still won a unanimous decision.

As a former professional light heavyweight who compiled a 4-3 (3 KOS) record while campaigning from 1975-79, Kelly knows a thing or two about overcoming adversity. I remember seeing him take on Tom Healy of Bayside, New York, who, by May 1977 standards, was a behemoth. The fight took place at the now defunct Long Island Arena in Commack.

If my memory serves me correctly, Healy weighed 227 pounds while Kelly tipped the scales at

about 180.

Although outweighed by nearly 50 pounds, the much shorter Kelly never stopped trying to work his way inside behind a very effective jab. He lost a four round decision, but brought the crowd to its feet with his gutsy performance.

While the size disparity between Klitschko and Brewster is not that significant, Klitschko, who is 6’6 ½” and weighs around 245 pounds, will definitely have the advantage over Brewster, who is 6’2” and about 230 pounds.

A couple of scenarios could play out, explains Kelly, now speaking as an ex-fighter more than a referee. “Brewster might be thinking to himself, ‘I beat him once, so I can beat him again,’ which could work for or against him,” he explained. “He might think he doesn’t have to train as hard this time around. Or he might train twice as hard to prove the first time was no fluke.

“Klitschko realizes how important this fight is to his legacy, but in the back of his mind realizes that this guy already survived some of his best shots and came back to win,” he continued. “All of these intangibles will make for a compelling fight.”

In several ways, Kelly is as much of an enigma as Klitschko. Although a tremendous fighter, Klitschko is a very cerebral man who earned a doctorate degree in sports medicine. If one was to meet Klitschko away from the sporting environment, he would seem an unlikely boxer who could converse comfortably about a variety of topics.

And Kelly is far from what many perceive to be a typical ex-pug who found a niche as a referee. He served as a U.S. Army officer in Vietnam where he earned, among other medals, a Purple Heart. In 2000, at the urging of his friend, fellow Long Islander Nelson DeMille, the best-selling author who is also a Vietnam veteran, he returned to Southeast Asia for a “vacation.”

Seeing his old stomping (battle) grounds as a vacation paradise, explains Kelly, “was very therapeutic for me” and making the trip was “one of the best decisions of my life.”

A graduate of Hofstra University where he earned a degree in psychology, Kelly has been employed as a social worker for several decades. He is also a voracious reader of everything and anything he can get his hands on.

As an armchair psychologist, Kelly said that he, like most people, is not only multi-talented but also multi-faceted. That is why he has so much respect for fighters, who he believes are the most misunderstood of athletes.

He cites Klitschko and Brewster as the epitome of all that is good about the sweet science. Especially close to his heart are Klitschko’s philanthropic efforts on behalf of needy African children.

He laughs when asked what people think when they learn that he, a social worker who might be trying to get an octogenarian into senior housing, is a world class referee in a sport that has

more detractors than supporters.

“Sometimes they are perplexed, but I think they get a kick out of it,” said Kelly. “There is a misconception that boxers are all tough guys, but the fact is I’m a compassionate and caring person who loves to help people. I love being a referee. That is a dream come true for me, but I also love being a social worker.”

Kelly then offers two analogies that make clear just how much he understands the human condition. He says that DeMille is nothing like the hard-boiled, grizzled and weather beaten gumshoe depicted in his scores of books that continually reside at the top of the best-selling charts.

“Nelson is most comfortable in flip flops, shorts and a golf shirt,” said Kelly. “If you meet him, you’d never guess he was an author, much less the character many people think he writes about.”

Kelly then described a man he had met several years ago at a Long Island flea market. The guy had shoulder length hair, was festooned with tattoos, and wore Harley Davidson garb. After becoming somewhat friendly with the fellow, Kelly asked him what kind of a motorcycle he rode.

“None,” the guy responded to Kelly’s surprise. “I used to always get beat up as a kid, so I started dressing like this so no one would [mess] with me. And since then, no one has.”