

A Tall Order: Valuev Wants Back In The Mix

Written by Ronan Keenan

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When Don King acquired a promotional stake in the then-WBA heavyweight champion Nicolay Valuev in 2005, the giant Russian was soon dubbed “King’s Kong”.

In the following twelve months Valuev would brush aside the hapless challenges of three American fighters en route to proposed mega fights in the US.

But before King’s plans could materialize, his Kong was shot down by the unbeaten Ruslan Chagaev last April. The defeat wasn’t devastating, but it could pave the way for a sorry ending to Valuev’s once lucrative career.

When the St. Petersburg native wrenched the WBA belt from John Ruiz in December ’05, the media immediately took notice of Valuev with high-profile magazines such as Sports Illustrated and Rolling Stone devoting space to the intriguing new champion.

Yet the boxing community was mixed in its response to Valuev’s emergence on the world scene.

There were those who thought the largest heavyweight champion in history would bring much needed mainstream attention to the sport, but many critics believed the sight of a cumbersome 7ft 2in, 323-pound behemoth was further evidence that boxing had become an irrelevant circus.

Valuev’s pugilistic skills are far from polished. Despite his extraordinary height he has to-date neglected an authoritative jab and instead reacts with short punches that carry a modicum of the power expected from such an enormous body.

Yet Valuev’s failure to produce the anticipated highlight-reel knockouts can partially be attributed to the negativity of his opponents. The sight of a man who makes 10oz boxing gloves look like mittens has led to many fighters valuing their safety over victory.

Ruiz decided he’d rather cling tightly to Valuev to prevent the Russian from launching any significant offense. Jameel McCline blew out his knee while attempting to evade Valuev’s strikes, while Gerald Nobles intentionally got himself disqualified by repeatedly fouling with shots below the Russian’s high belt.

Clifford Etienne took intimidation to new levels when, after realizing Valuev’s size at the weigh-in, he began drinking at the hotel bar while uttering “nobody told me I was taking on Bigfoot.” His unsurprisingly pitiful performance the following night saw him slump to the canvas in the third round.

But Chagaev, a former amateur world champion, came to the ring with a different mentality when he faced Valuev in Stuttgart, Germany. Aided by a winner’s mentality and a thorough training camp that included watching tapes of Valuev on the largest available plasma TV and

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having his trainer stand on a box while working the pads, Chagaev carried the resolve to execute a winning gameplan.

The 6'1" Uzbekistan native continually slipped Valuev's slow right crosses and countered with his own southpaw lefts to score with regularity on the tentative giant. Valuev occasionally put Chagaev under pressure, albeit using his size more than punches, but ended up losing a justified majority decision by scores of 117-111, 115-113 and 114-114.

"Ruslan managed to shatter the illusion, the myth that had built up around Valuev," said Chagaev's promoter Peter Kohl. "It was almost like opponents would just crumble into dust before [Valuev], but, mentally, Ruslan was too strong a man for this to happen."

But in today's climate it is questionable whether the other top heavyweights possess such psychological fortitude.

Losing a close points decision to the still relatively unknown Chagaev may prove to be no disgrace. Chagaev, 23-0-1 (17), is a highly accomplished boxer that may have the tools to topple the division's elite.

So if "The Beast from the East" can notch up a few spectacular blowouts to add to his 46-1 (34) record he may get another opportunity to leave his footprints on the sweet science. This Saturday he will face the untested Canadian Jean-Francois Bergeron in Germany in what may prove to be a career-hinging bout.

An impressive display of improved boxing skills under the tutelage of new trainer Alexander Zimin could well propel Valuev back into the spotlight and away from the type of sideshow bouts that made up the first ten years of his career.

But a more disconcerting scenario could arise if he struggles to regain the mystique that saw 13,482 fans turn out at the Allstate Arena in Chicago to watch him swat aside journeyman Monte Barrett last October. If influential promoters such as King and Wilfried Sauerland decide that Valuev is a futile investment and turn their back on him, what sort of future would await the 34-year-old?

As writer Brian Doogan recalled in *The Ring* magazine earlier this year, Valuev's predecessor, the previous largest heavyweight champion Primo Carnera, was left directionless after his boxing career and was forced into performing degrading circus-like acts in America before returning to his native Italy where he died alone, forgotten by "the carrion birds who had picked him clean."

Both real and fictional hulks from the Cyclops to Goliath to Carnera and Andre "The Giant" Roussimoff are typically portrayed as simple-minded oafs whose only talent is their strength. Moreover, they ultimately meet an ignominious end.

But beneath the surface Valuev doesn't quite fit the archetypical mold. Despite always towering above his peers, Valuev's size didn't affect his lifestyle until he took up boxing at the relatively

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late age of 20. Only then did he realize that he could make a career from his enormous frame.

Before that, Valuev lived a working-class life, engaging in activities that belied his size.

“[Childhood in St. Petersburg] was like growing up in the ghetto in a large American city, though the old Soviet system was different,” he said in 2006. “Everyone worked. Everyone was equal. I had the same childhood as every other child. We all shared the same life experiences, the same toys.

“Life was basic, yet we made the most of it. I liked history, geography, natural science and literature at school and I was no different to any other child.”

Indeed Valuev is still a keen reader, enjoying the works of Tolstoy, Arthur Conan Doyle and Tom Clancy. And he has even expressed his creative side by scribing poetry for his wife Galya.

But even after claiming the world title he stayed true to his blue-collar roots, shunning the glamorous lifestyle and maintaining his modesty.

“I am a boxer and also a giant man, but a person needs to be interested not only in how to smash someone in the face or how to be a winner or where to look for the flash of a camera. Every person is more, much more, than what people see,” said Valuev, while also admitting that he regularly travels by train instead of flying since his young son Grisha prefers the railway.

And in the aftermath of his victory over Ruiz, he told the LA Times that he would “concentrate on improving, so I can keep the title two or three fights.”

Regardless of the outcome of Saturday’s showdown with Bergeron, it is evident that Valuev has little intention of remaining in the spotlight forever. He seems to view the profits he makes from boxing as unfulfilling.

“To me, a person should be interested in surroundings and in surrounding people, because the human is not an animal. God made him for things other than fighting. I want Grisha to know and understand this, and one day he will.”

This skyscraper of a man is very much down to earth.