

Wlad's Surly: Bad Mood Is Bad News For Sultan

Written by Michael Woods

Monday, 11 February 2008 19:00

As I waited for the Wladimir Klitschko/Sultan Ibragimov conference call on Tuesday to begin, I was on hold. There was music playing as I waited, and the first song I heard was by the Monkees, "Daydream Believer."

I liked the symbolism of that song as I pondered the Klitschko/Ibragimov matchup, because the only people, seemingly, that are giving the Sultan a chance to topple Wladimir, are he and his crew.

I wondered, as I waited for the call to kick off, are Sultan and Jeff Mayweather and Sultan's management just daydream believers, or does the former Olympic silver medallist really stand a chance at wresting Klitschko's IBF title from him, on February 23rd at Madison Square Garden?

Klitschko (49-3, 44 KOs) has been playing up the unification angle of this fight. He is jazzed that he may be able to move closer to consolidating the heavyweight titles that are currently around the waists of Ibragimov (WBO), Ruslan Chagaev (WBA), and Sam Peter/Oleg Maskaev (WBC). It believe he chooses to focus on the unification angle simply because the pickings are pretty slim in potential opponents who could provide a fierce challenge and compelling storyline that will drive PPV buys.

"The sport of boxing needs a heavyweight champion badly," said the Ukrainian born hitter, who fielded questions, somewhat testily at times, alongside his guru, Emanuel Steward.

When asked if he needs to corner the market on all the belts, and who he might target next, Klitschko answered, "I don't want to get involved in this discussion. You guys can do it from the outside."

Klitschko took me down a peg when I asked if it is possible that he could be overlooking Ibragimov, who, yes, owns a nice record, but hasn't looked scintillating at times (against Ray Austin, Shannon Briggs, Evander Holyfield).

"This is totally the wrong attitude you have," Klitschko tsk-tsked me. "This guy is very intelligent, very smart, he's undefeated. I'm not underestimating his skills, he won a silver medal at the (2000) Olympics. He's a very effective fighter, and I'm not underestimating him."

Point taken, though it must be pointed out that I was speaking of conventional wisdom, not of my own viewpoint. I think Manny has Wlad pissed and pumped, and he maybe displaced some of that 'tude on a mere messenger.

In fact, my attitude is that it would not be wise for Wlad to look past a 22-0 cagey southpaw, who has decent hand speed and above average foot movement, who may be able to potshot effectively, and then scurry out of range of counters.

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Steward is the Kronk sage who has rebuilt Klitschko from a fighter one fight away from being swept out of the pro ranks, to being the dominant heavyweight of his era. Yes, we all know that era is supermodel thin, but still. Manny is savvy when it comes to not letting his guys underestimate anyone typically assumed to be a non-threat...though we do consider that just now former client Jermain Taylor has been admitting that he underestimated Kelly Pavlik before their September clash. That probably says more about Taylor, who was getting tired of the game coming into that first Pavlik fight, than it does Steward.

Manny countered Wlad's saltiness when he fielded the question whether Wlad's perceived overwhelming edge, on the part of fight fans, could lead Klitschko to overlook Sultan's attributes.

"I understand what you are saying," he said. "The fight against Austin, against Briggs. But we've been looking at him very closely. He will be the best opponent Wladimir has fought as a pro. He's a little guy who knows how to win. I told Wladimir that Sultan is the best fighter he's faced as a pro."

As proof that Klitschko isn't looking past the 32-year-old Sultan, Steward said that he's been training six hours a day. He is not peering at Povetkin, the Russian who won the boxoff with Eddie Chambers for the right to face the Klitschko/Ibragimov winner, and discounting Sultan's chances.

Steward did admit that he gets frustrated that his skilled, humble client toils in this woeful era, and therefore doesn't get the credit he deserves.

"It does frustrate me, because I feel he's one of the best heavyweights in history," Steward said.

The unification goal, Steward admitted, has come about because no clear Frazier has emerged to Klitschko's Ali.

Wlad, in salty mode, didn't take the bait.

"I'm not frustrated at all," he said. "I'm just getting ready for this fight and I'm not thinking about it."

His edgy side emerged again when a reporter asked if his hand, hurt in the Brewster rematch, was still sore.

"I can talk about that only with my doctor," he said. "Thank you, I'm healthy, I'm ready to fight."

So, we'll take that as a yes, the finger is fine, then?

Klitschko has gotten some helpful sparring from southpaw Andy Lee, who mimics Ibragimov's move and groove style. "Lee is faster than Sultan," he said.

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Steward said that he and Wlad have gone the extra mile in scouting Sultan and have pored over his tapes so much, they'll be able to predict what he does in between rounds. This is not the language you'd hear from a tandem in autopilot mode. Steward punctuated that theory.

"I've found Ibragimov to be much more of a threat than Holyfield was to Lennox Lewis," he said.

Steward continued the comparison when he said that Wlad and Lennox both waited patiently for the perfect opening before they'd pounce, often times. "Both are chess players," Steward said.

Klitschko did say that he expected to end the fight before the 12th round, but that he is ready for a distance outing.

It is interesting that the "chin problem" none of us could get past a few years ago has diminished, when pundits discuss Wlad, almost completely. Steward said that his fighter was never in psychological crisis when he was stung by Corrie Sanders and petered out and got stopped by Brewster. "He never really lost his confidence," the trainer said.

The fighter, who turns 32 in March, says he feels better than ever.

"I feel better now than I did in my 20s," he said.

With expectations so low, ordinarily I'd say we should be on the lookout for an upset win from Sultan. He's a winner, even if he doesn't always look like a million bucks in doing so. He's gotten smarter under Jeff Mayweather, and maybe that southpaw stance surprises Wlad. But I do believe he and his crew are still daydream believers. Wlad and Manny are too sharp to underestimate any fighter, even if he is undersized and has looked underwhelming at times. Wlad's chin woes may have receded in the memory banks of pundits, but they haven't to him. He'll not let the Sultan catch him with something he doesn't see. I see Wlad battering Sultan after a lengthy feeling out period. Too much height, weight, reach and power. Klitschko TKO 6.

SPEEDBAG Manny and Wlad both agreed that the Peter/Maskaev fight on March 8th is a pick 'em. Both feel that Peter has regressed since he fought Wlad, and batted him to the mat three times, in 2005. Wlad said he might be ringside for that one, in Mexico.