

BORGES: Sultan's Reign Likely To End Saturday

Written by Ron Borges

Wednesday, 20 February 2008 19:00

Can unseating a Sultan make you a king?

That is the question hovering over Saturday night's heavyweight unification fight at Madison Square Garden between IBF titleholder Wladimir Klitschko and WBO belt wearer Sultan Ibragimov. Odd things certainly can happen inside a boxing ring but for the 6-2 Ibragimov to leave it grasping the 6-6 ½ Klitschko's belt seems unlikely unless he's being dragged from the ring behind the massive Ukrainian.

So what can we conclude then from the expected conclusion of this fight, which is that the Sultan's reign will end abruptly at some point? Probably not much because while a victory would rid Klitschko of one of the four men presently claiming portions of the title, it will also burden him with two belts to defend against mandatory challengers of little import to anyone but the sanctioning bodies who cash checks in exchange for allowing them a brief presence in a heavyweight title fight.

The upside Saturday night at the Garden is that it will be the site of the first heavyweight unification match since 1999, which is in itself an accomplishment that speaks to the belief that some of the suits who run boxing concluded about a year ago that they need to start giving fans the fights they want or their growing exodus into the murky world of MMA will only increase.

The down side is that even a spectacular victory by either fighter is unlikely to convince anyone that the winner is the best heavyweight in the world. That's because when you have four champions you really have none, just as when a football coach says he has two quarterbacks what he really means is neither guy is good enough to convince him he deserves the job.

If somehow Ibragimov finds a way to continue his improbable time as a heavyweight champion after winning the title from a disinterested Shannon Briggs and defending it against an aged Evander Holyfield, no one outside his family and friends would be terribly happy about it. That's because Klitschko was long ago anointed the true champion, although he has correctly argued that coronation is impossible until someone sorts out all these belt holders from the true champion.

"At this point in the heavyweight division, we are desperate," Klitschko admitted one afternoon in New York after the Ibragimov fight was announced. "We have a real problem with the heavyweight division right now. We have so many champions who are not either fighting or they are fighting and losing and winning the title again and then losing. So we are looking for only one person. I believe this fight is the next step to that.

"As a fan of boxing I am looking for only one heavyweight champion. I'm not talking about myself. In general, as a fan, I'm looking forward to that. Imagine how many fans around the world are looking for it too. We need only one champion and stop all these conversations when the next unification is going to be. With this press conference it is over."

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Actually it is just beginning but even that is momentous. After Ibragimov first won his title by easily out-pointing the somnambulant Briggs last June, the 2000 Olympic silver medalist thought he'd made a deal to fight WBA champion Ruslan Chagaev in Moscow to unify those two titles before the end of last year. That would have put the winner ahead of the unification curve but in heavyweight boxing the road is full of curves and one arrived quickly when Chagaev claimed he'd fallen ill and could not fight.

That opened the door for the 44-year-old Holyfield, although not for long because Ibragimov's fast hands were way more than he could handle last October in Moscow. Ibragimov (22-0-1, 17 KO) gave him a boxing lesson that night. A few years ago that victory would have made Sultan the king of the division but Holyfield is no longer able to crown anyone, either with his fists or his reputation, and so began a brief negotiation with Klitschko.

Both sides were eager to sign for the unification, which made them rare commodities among heavyweights, and so we have reached this point. But exactly where are we really?

"I think most people consider Wladimir as the heavyweight champion," said Klitschko's trainer, Emanuel Steward. "But he said, 'Forget that. The rest of the world will look at me as the champion when I beat everybody else and that's what I'm going to do.' If they fight him, he will be the unified heavyweight champion."

For that to happen he has to first solve the Sultan's riddle and that may not be as simple a task as some expect. Ibragimov will give away nearly five inches of height, 20 to 25 pounds and most importantly a half a foot in reach (81 inches to 75). For a guy with the kind of punishing jab Klitschko possesses and the powerful right hand he unleashes behind it, that kind of reach difference will probably decide the fight.

But Ibragimov is a technically sound fighter with a good right jab of his own, a surprising quickness and a sense of timing that often allows him to move inside, throw punches and then escape before his opponent has time to respond. That is what he intends to do against Klitschko but he'll have to find a way to get past that jab first because if he can't he'll never touch the IBF champion but will eventually be touched by him in a way that tends to induce drowsiness.

"He doesn't look impressive but he's very effective," Klitschko (49-3, 44 KO) said of the WBO champion. "He's a southpaw. He's shorter, which means he's faster. I expect him to jump right out and be explosive."

That is what Klitschko hopes because the whole idea is for him to not only win but to look impressive enough doing it that the boxing world will begin to see him more and more as the inevitable champion if not the true one at the moment. His handlers hope he will be impressive enough to force a unification bout with Chagaev, who recently defended his portion of the championship against a pretender named Matt Skelton.

If that doesn't happen the pace of unification will slow considerably because next month WBC champion Oleg Maskaev defends his fourth of the title against Sam Peter, who holds the interim

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version of the same championship (as if there is any other kind of champion but an interim one).

Since Klitschko defeated Peter once already but was knocked down three times in the process, a logical next step would be for the winner of these two bouts to face off. That is impossible however because of boxing's politricks, as the last undisputed champion Lennox Lewis calls it, but also familial love.

Klitschko's big brother, Vitali, is coming out of exile and has already been awarded the Maskaev-Peter winner. If the elder Klitschko prevails he will not fight his brother and hence the mystery will continue.

Even if Vitali does not prevail, the WBC winner seems likely to be forced to square off after that with former cruiserweight champion Juan Carlos Gomez, thus further forestalling a continuation of the unification process that begins this weekend unless Chagaev agrees to face the Klitschko-Ibragimov winner.

If that fight happens in short order, then a king might actually have been crowned in a sense by unseating a Sultan. Unless, of course, it's the Sultan who upsets the king.

Confused? Get used to it.

"People want to see one champion," Ibragimov conceded. "I want to show the people just one champion. I hope if I win the next fight will be for another championship. Whether me or Wladimir, for the people the next fight should be another championship (fight)."

If it is then what happens Saturday night in New York will have been the catalyst for it all. Whether the unification bouts continue or not however, a Sultan will not become a king of the ring at Madison Square Garden nor will a new king be crowned simply by toppling a Sultan.

But, you gotta start somewhere.

--photo courtesy of Redline Media