

Piano Mover Sultan Must Get In Wlad's Grill

Written by Ron Borges

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NEW YORK – Sultan Ibragimov knows where he needs to be Saturday night to dethrone IBF heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko. He needs to be in his grill.

Upon first blush one might take one look at that plan and another at the towering, sculpted Klitschko and think that insanity. Distance might seem the wiser choice, the more of it the better, but in a boxing ring that would be suicide, especially for an undersized heavyweight like the WBO champion, Ibragimov.

To beat Wladimir Klitschko you first must find a way to get around his arms, which extend roughly from the ring at Madison Square Garden to the East River. With an 81-inch reach and a potent left jab, Klitschko likes to stay on the outside and pound an opponent until he has tenderized him like young veal before unleashing his knockout punch – a straight right hand down the middle behind that jab. At several shades less than his reported 6-2 and with a half a foot disadvantage in reach, Ibragimov cannot sit outside then and try to avoid the right hand because if he does he'll be pounded into mincemeat by Klitschko's long left all night.

So the safest place, and the place where he will be most effective, is as close to Klitschko as he can get. While Ibragimov may not be either the greatest inside fighter in heavyweight history or all that heavy handed, he cannot waste his effort in a jabbing contest with a guy whose jab can reach him from across the room. He must put the pedal to the metal and get inside.

Although few know it, Ibragimov will come to Madison Square Garden better equipped to do that than anyone outside of Emanuel Steward, Klitschko's trainer, understands. He has the faster hands of the two and he is technically a sound boxer with the ability to slip inside and under Klitschko's jab, land at close quarters and then spin out. Whether he can do that successfully the number of times it will be required without being caught by an explosive right hand remains to be seen but what is clear is that if he can stay close he not only will be in position to attack Klitschko but also to take away his offense.

The first thing a smaller fighter must do against a bigger opponent is control the distance. Most long-armed fighters like Klitschko are not effective in close because they smother themselves. They need ample punching room to do their business. Ibragimov (22-0-1, 17 KO) understands this and, more significantly, at least knows in theory how to prevent it from arising.

Aware that a size disadvantage is his lot in life once he decided to become a heavyweight boxer, what he's learned to do is control what he can, which is the distance at which the fight will be contested. Klitschko wants to keep it on the outside, where he can bounce his hard jab off the smaller man's head and then throw right hands straight down on him, lashing his face like a hail storm.

If Ibragimov can't counter that with movement that keeps turning Klitschko, he has no chance. But if he can make the bigger man have to turn to find him and then slips the jab and goes to

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work inside there is a chance he could take away Klitschko's strengths and use them against him, wearing him down and frustrating him into a series of mistakes.

Because of his fast hands, Ibragimov on the inside becomes a difficult and dangerous opponent. The cost of getting there makes Klitschko equally dangerous, which is why Steward believes the WBO champion will not spend much time on the outside looking in unless Klitschko finds a way to keep him there.

"You have to fight Wladimir's arms before you can fight Wladimir," Steward said this week. "He's a master at controlling distance with his arms. Sultan is used to fighting big guys so he knows what to do. He likes to get them out of position, explode on them, then move away before they can get off.. Wladimir won't let him in (to do that)."

He may not, which is why Klitschko (49-3-, 44 KO) is a prohibitive favorite to become the first unified heavyweight champion (multi-belt holder) since Lennox Lewis did it in the rematch with Evander Holyfield in 1999. Frankly, that's very likely to be what happens. Yet Ibragimov has made his name beating down bigger men in the same way he'll have to counteract Klitschko's offensive arsenal.

He did it to Shannon Briggs, who outweighed him by 50 pounds, to capture the WBO title. He nearly did it to the great Cuban amateur, Felix Savon, in the 2000 Olympics final. He did it to Lance Whitaker, who towered over him, and to several other bigger opponents.

None possessed the power or the skills of Klitschko but the same could be said for most of Klitschko's opponents, at least when it comes to comparing them to the pure quickness and boxing skill of Ibragimov. What is oddest about that is that upon first glance Ibragimov looks nothing like what he turns out to be in the ring.

Built like a piano mover, Ibragimov appears to be a stumpy (don't believe that 6-foot-2 propaganda because he'd have to stand on a stool to see 6-2), bull-necked brawler. Yet once the fight begins, he's a quick-handed, surprisingly agile heavyweight who comes with the added difficulty of also being left handed.

"He doesn't look so impressive but he's effective in what he does," Klitschko admits.

The great question which will create the fight's tension is whether or not Sultan Ibragimov can time after time be effective in the way he needs to be to win without suddenly, blindly putting himself in a situation from which the only escape is temporary unconsciousness.

If he can, he could be the one with more belts than he has waistlines by Sunday morning. I wouldn't bet on it because the risks he must take to win are great. To be constantly in the grill of an opponent like Wladimir Klitschko opens you up to the strong possibility of ending up under the grill. But then again, stranger things have happened in boxing.

*poster courtesy Redline Media