The most consistent thing about the present crop of heavyweight champions is that the moment you see one of them fight you become almost instantly convinced that the ones you aren't seeing fight have to be better.

This notion is what keeps battered, old Evander Holyfield dreaming the delusion of old men and fellows like Shannon Briggs, John Ruiz, Hasim Rahman, Andrew Golota, Jameel McCline and Sergei Liakhovich hanging around at a time when few fans care to see them any more. They stay because not one of the top heavyweights does enough to convince them the wiser course would be to pursue day work.

Unfortunately for boxing that was again the case Saturday night when IBF titleholder Wladimir Klitschko became the first heavyweight champion since Lennox Lewis in 1999 to unify any portion of the title by outpointing WBO belt holder Sultan Ibragimov at Madison Square Garden. Klitschko accomplished this in the easiest of ways. His opponent made no effort to stop him.

It is very likely a fact that Klitschko is the best heavyweight in the world at the moment but that's a bit like claiming to be the best hockey player in Mexico. It may be a distinction but how much of one?

Ibragimov was giving away at least a half a foot in reach and nearly as much in height yet made a decision to fight all night on the outside, a choice akin to smoking in the midst of a wildfire. You can do it, but it's probably not going to help you achieve your goal...unless, of course, his only goal was to get paid without suffering major damage. That Ibragimov managed to do, unless one factors in what was done both to his reputation and that of the diminished one of heavyweight boxing in general.

By the fight's midpoint a good crowd of 14,011 began booing at the end of every round and they were well within their rights. By that time Klitschko was piling up points with his long left jab but doing little else, including take a risk. Yet by comparison with Ibragimov he was working harder than a tax accountant on April 13th.

Truth be told, the two of them fought like accountants. They looked like two guys who had looked at the actuarial tables, assessed the risk:reward ratio and concluded the best investment was to put their money in CDs for now. The return might not be great but it was safe.

Safety seemed what Ibragimov in particular was fixated on as he leaned back all night on his left leg, his head and chin pulled so far away from Klitschko that he seldom came anywhere near proper punching distance.

As for Dr. Steelhammer, he was not a steel drivin' man Saturday night. Klitschko (50-3, 44 KO) opted to play it safe as well, rarely throwing the straight right hand that is his power punch and later blaming Ibragimov for that.

"I wasn't always in position to land the right hand,'' Klitschko admitted after his hand was raised following a decision in which one judge felt the WBO champion won only one round, another gave him only two and third, feeling particularly generous, gave him three. They all gave him what he deserved with the possible exception of the guy who gave him three rounds.

Ibragimov's refusal to engage with Klitschko seemed to daunt the IBF champion, who according to CompuBox numbers averaged 1/3 fewer punches thrown per round (29) than his normal average (46). That seemed a result of his own frustration that Ibragimov was leaning back so far that he looked like a guy who had been lassoed from behind and was being pulled backwards by someone sitting in the fifth row.

Still, Klitschko did little to combat that. He took few risks, seldom came forward with anything but the meekest of intentions and overall appeared content simply to win a boring decision that didn't please the crowd and couldn't have pleased executives of HBO Sports, who keep insisting he's the real deal.

He may well be the real deal by today's standards but one shudders to think what any of the great heavyweights, including the last former undisputed champion who was sitting at ringside, would have done with a constantly retreating and seldom punching opponent like Ibragimov.

According to Compubox, Ibragimov landed an average of eight punches a round and most of them were roundhouse hooks to Klittschko's mid-section that had little effect on anything. He also, they said, landed only 16 jabs all night. That was in part because of the obvious size disparity but it was also symbolic of how unwilling he was to get anywhere into a range where he had a chance to land, because to do so would have put him at risk and risk was not what anyone was interested in taking Saturday night.

Where this leaves the heavyweight division is really no better off than before this happened. The hope was one of these two would unify in emphatic fashion, thus making a case for themselves as boxing's supreme heavyweight. Instead while one belt holder was at least eliminated temporarily from the conversation they left open the lingering doubt that none of these guys are anything special.

The next test now comes in two weeks when WBC champion Oleg Maskaev takes on interim champion Samuel Peter, who dropped Klitschko three times when they met but couldn't manage to win another second of that fight and thus lost one-sidedly despite those knockdowns. Later this year undefeated WBA champion Ruslan Chagaev (24-0-1, 17 KO) fights a rematch with towering, 7-foot former champion Nikolai Valuev. What those fights will do to advance the public perception of the division remains an open question.

Meanwhile, poor Klitschko would like to continue trying to unify the belts under the quite right theory that if someone can win them all, even if in less than thrilling fashion, he will have established at least his superiority in an inferior age. But first he has to fight an IBF mandatory against another Russian, undefeated Alexander Povetkin, who won that right by outpointing another guy seemingly obsessed with defense, previously undefeated American Eddie Chambers (30-1). If Klitschko is successful in that he'll then be saddled with a WBO mandatory

against another American challenger, Tony Thompson (31-1, 19 KO), while the Maskaev-Peter winner is already obligated to fight Klitschko's older brother, ex-champion Vitali.

The winner of that fight seems destined to be forced next into a bout with former cruiserweight champion Juan Carlos Gomez (43-1, 34 KO) and in no way is it possible that the two Klitschkos will ever face each other if each wins titles, so you see the problem.

Unifying a title as fractured as this one by someone from a group of guys who are less than awe-inspiring is no easy task. If it's accomplished, the politics of the sport will soon enough break it up again but, as was the case with Lewis back in '99, if anyone can at least do that it won't matter what the organizations say. Until that guy is beaten or retires, as Lewis did, he'll at least be perceived by a skeptical public as the one true heavyweight champion.

"People need one champion, like Rocky Marciano and Mike Tyson,'' Boris Grinberg, Ibragimov's disappointed manager, said before the fight. He had no idea at the time that his man had no interest in being mistaken for either former champion.

To his credit, Wladimir Klitschko is at least trying to get this done. He agreed to a 50-50 split with Ibragimov even though he was the bigger name and could have driven a harder bargain. He seems just as willing to do the same with the Maskaev-Peter winner or whomever emerges from the Chagaev-Valuev rematch.

In the end, sadly, that's probably the best we can hope for from any of these guys. A willingness to at least sign to fight, even if, on the night of the fight they change their minds like Sultan Ibragimov and Wlad Klitschko appeared to do.

Watching it all as part of HBO's broadcast team sat Lewis, the once and some hope future champion. The 42-year-old Lewis has consistently said he will not come out of retirement to reclaim the title he gave up after beating up Klitschko's older brother in a way that made the challenger look like someone had gone after him with a sand wedge in his final fight.

Yet as he prepared to exit the Garden Lewis was stopped by an old inquisitor and asked if it was difficult to watch the kind of heavyweight title fight he's just seen without considering a comeback of his own.

"Yes!'' he said with uncharacteristic candor. "One billion per cent!''

Then he left the arena, still the real champion in the eyes of many 4 1⁄2 years after last having entered a boxing ring.