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When Samuel Peter enters the ring Saturday night in Cancun he will be introduced as the WBC's interim heavyweight champion. The same could be said of present WBC titleholder Oleg Maskaev when he follows him into that concussive space because aren't all champions interim?

For the good of boxing one of these interim periods is about to end and the heavy money has come down on Peter, who is a 4 1⁄2-to-1 favorite to make clear why Maskaev has worked harder the past 15 months to avoid him than he has on honing his fading skills. Peter is 12 years younger, been far busier of late and is believed to be bigger, stronger, hungrier and a more powerful puncher than Maskaev. Other than that, the 39-year-old champion has every advantage…which is to say he has few.

Yet while Peter (29-1, 22 KO) seems likely to prevail, those who are giving Maskaev (34-5, 26 KO) no chance are continuing to make the same mistake so many have in recent years when it comes to pre-judging heavyweight boxing. Perhaps because the talent pool is barely as deep as a wading pool there is a tendency to inflate the skills of the men who have reduced the reputation of the division to its lowest ebb since Pinklon Thomas ruled the earth well beyond their merits. This tendency is most often known as wishful thinking.

The names of these belt holders are compared by people who should know better with past heavyweights from whom they would not just run away but speed away under cover of darkness if ever actually forced to get into the ring with them. Eventually, one or two of these lumbering fellows climbs clumsily between the ropes and by the end of the fight we're talking about someone else entirely while we wait for the odor to clear the arena.

This was the case two weeks ago when much was made of the unification fight between IBF champion Wladimir Klitschko and WBO belt holder Sultan Ibragimov. There had not been a unification fight since 1999 so it was much anticipated by many, but after 12 somnambulant rounds the best one could say was that at least one less guy could now claim to be heavyweight champion, even though no one had proven who actually was.

The hope this time is that Peter-Maskaev will at least produce a concussive ending for two reasons. First, both can punch with reasonable power, although the fact that Peter has been taken the distance in five of his last six fights (including twice by a fat former middleweight champion) calls that into some question. Second, both have proven to be somewhat chin challenged themselves so it is unclear exactly how hard either has to be hit to be rendered hors de combat.

Add to that the fact that Peter should have been given this opportunity more than a year ago but instead had to twice fight James Toney in WBC title eliminators to eliminate him once and one can at least assume enough bad blood has coagulated between these two as to make it unlikely the public will be doomed to watch a re-run of the Klitschko-Ibragimov grappling contest.

"I want to tell you one thing, I'm going to knock you out,'' Peter (29-1, 22 KO) said menacingly to Maskaev (34-5, 26 KO) at the final press conference in Mexico earlier this week. "I'm going to eat you alive.

"I'm coming to fight on Saturday night and I promise I'm going to beat you. I'm going to punish you and beat you up. I've been fighting for seven years and I've never ducked anyone. I hope you're planning on coming to fight on Saturday. You can run no more."

Earlier in the week Peter made a similar pronouncement, predicting a fourth round knockout after three rounds of pain, all to be inflicted by him. Such speeches are not common with Peter, who is clearly cheesed off about the fact that after Maskaev won the title by knocking out Hasim Rahman in the final round to first win the WBC title he defended that crown only once in the past 15 months, a lackluster win over Peter Okhello on Dec. 12, 2006. You may not have heard of Peter Okhello. Do not be alarmed. That is a trend that very likely will continue.

Peter, meanwhile, was forced by the WBC to beat Toney twice in back-to-back elimination fights for the right to face Maskaev, only to watch in frustration when the champion pulled out last October 2 1⁄2 weeks before the fight claiming a back injury. No longer willing to wait, Peter threatened to sue the WBC if they didn't do something so the decision was made to set up an interim title fight with Jameel McCline, who promptly dropped Peter three times (once in the second and twice in the third) before he became Jameel DeClined after declining to throw any more blows in anger and lost a 12-round decision that led some to trumpet Peter as the next big thing.

Had it not been McCline's fourth loss in a title fight without a win there might have been some merit to those who tried to argue Peter and Klitschko the Younger were the class in the division. But it was and so there wasn't. But we digress.

One interesting aspect of Saturday night's confrontation is that while Peter is widely perceived to be the bigger man Maskaev stands nearly three inches taller and has a two-inch reach advantage (79 inches to 77). At 240 pounds he's also far from a miniature version of the 250-or-so pound Peter. The problem is that Maskaev does not have a particularly effective jab and his work rate is not likely to overwhelm anyone so his own size may not be of that much assistance.

Conversely, Peter's jab has improved greatly since it was all but non-existent three years ago when he lost his first title shot to Klitschko on a night where he drove the champion to the floor three times but didn't manage to win another minute of the 12-round discussion.

After working of late with veteran trainers Pops Anderson and Stacy McKinley, Peter's boxing skills have improved and his work rate has picked up. No one will ever mistake him for Muhammad Ali but he has improved, although his apparent disinterest in moving his head has not. The latter is why one still wonders what happens if Maskaev comes out early and drops a bomb on him. Judging by recent past history (down three times against the less than power punching McCline) it seems likely he'll implode.

To his credit, Peter does have a history of getting up which Maskaev does not share however. The aging champion was stopped in all five of his losses and that history has not been enhanced by the long layoff he's coming off. Even his normally bombastic promoter, Dennis Rappaport, has been strangely mute in the lead up to this match, making one wonder if he knows something the rest of the world does not - which is that Maskaev will prove to be an old man trapped in the wrong place when he finds himself inside Estadio Olimpico with Samuel Peter.

Yet despite this constant fear of disappointment whenever two heavyweights meet these days because of what this fight leads to – which is a match with former WBC champion Vitali Klitschko – the outcome is among the more significant ones on the horizon.

If Peter can finally rid himself of Maskaev it would set up what could become a two-fight bonanza both for him and the division. If Peter can defeat both Maskaev and the elder Klitschko it might create a mega-fight rematch with Klitschko's younger brother that would at the very least finally crown one heavyweight champion.

There is, of course, a problem there too because the WBC is threatening to force a title defense against former cruiserweight champion Juan Manuel Gomez first but before any of that materializes Peter has to deal with the fact Maskaev packs enough of a whallop to do him serious damage if it lands sight unseen.

Maskaev quietly tried to remind him of that during the week when he turned to Peter during the final press conference and said, "I'm ready and I'm coming to win.''

Not exactly Russell Crowe in "Gladiator'' but it will have to do. What is more important is not what he said but whether or not he can shake Peter early in the fight, reminding him that safety first is a good approach. If he can, it will reduce the effectiveness of Peter's somewhat improved boxing skills, hard jab and sometimes clubbing aggressiveness when left to his own devices.

If he cannot, Maskaev very likely will be worn down by Peter's relentlessness, more apparent jab and a powerful right hand that can do much damage to a guy with the kind of defensive lapses Maskaev has at times exhibited. Yet when one postulates that Samuel Peter is a better boxer than Oleg Maskaev it's not like either one will ever be called "The Artful Dodger.''

The one thing we can be sure of is there will not be much art to what goes on Saturday night in Cancun. If there is also not much dodging the public will be all right with that though because it would mean someone's interim time period as heavyweight champion ends inside the 12-round limit. In these sad days for the heavyweight division, that seems to be the best you can hope for.

Little is set in stone in the division however, including the powerful Peter being able to beat down his better conditioned and strong minded elder because while Maskaev's chin is suspect and he has not fought in 15 months he remains dangerous for the same reason Peter is: because he can punch and because Peter's technique is as suspect as his own.

Although Peter has improved he still tends to make Clubber Lange look like Sugar Ray Robinson, wading toward his opponent with an occasional jab ahead of him, exhibiting little or no head movement while winging sledge hammer shots that come neither quickly nor without a wide arc.

This led the wisecracking Rappaport to say of Peter after the McCline fight, “People are trying to make Peter the next Mike Tyson. He’s more like Cicely Tyson. He’s amateurish.’’

Certainly he’s vulnerable but although Rappaport has long claimed Maskaev is the most underrated fighter in boxing, the reality is he is what most people think he is. He is dangerous but also old and shop-worn. He is as capable of knocking out Peter as of being knocked out by him because he punches straighter and carries power that must be respected but he is also suspect in many areas.

Thus, in the end, Samuel Peter would seem to have the upper hand in Estadio Olimpico. Certainly much of the boxing world would prefer to see him prevail because of the belief his power gives him a legitimate shot to stop the 6-8 elder Klitschko and thus set up a compelling rematch with Klitschko’s little brother. Yet for any of that to happen Samuel Peter has to have mastered a skill he’s seldom exhibited before.

He has to move his head because if Oleg Maskaev hits him on it the right way things could go all wrong for him in a hurry and he could find it more difficult to get off the floor to fight back than it was to get Maskaev into a fight in the first place.