

BORGES: Heavyweight Picture Ain't Pretty

Written by Ron Borges

Saturday, 08 March 2008 19:00

There are two fewer heavyweight champions than there were two weeks ago this morning but the heavyweight muddle remains just as muddled as when there were more than four.

That's because Wladimir Klitschko did little to enhance his reputation with a boringly cautious points victory over Sultan Ibragimov to unify the IBF and WBO versions of the title two weeks ago. And Samuel Peter's sixth round stoppage of a 39-year-old man coming off a 15-month layoff to successfully trade in the WBC interim title for the full-time version Oleg Maskaev had been wearing was far less resounding than the cacophony of noise that followed it from observers who desperately want these guys to be seen as more than what they are.

HBO commentator Max Kellerman had it right when he labeled Klitschko the No. 1 heavyweight in the world and then quickly added that this did not make him heavyweight champion of anything because, truth be told, there still is no champion.

There are three remaining belt holders (Klitschko with the IBF and WBO straps, Peter with the WBC's belt and Ruslan Chagaev clinging to the WBA version) but there are just as many questions about all of them today as there were when this effort at unification began at Madison Square Garden with Klitschko jabbing his way past a Quaker-like Ibragimov.

One cannot totally blame Klitschko for what went on that night because Gandhi advocated more violent behavior than Ibragimov engaged in, but a bolder man would have done much more with his physical advantages than Klitschko attempted.

When a guy who claims to be the best heavyweight in the world keeps telling you that he didn't throw his right hand because that's what Ibragimov was looking to counter, it doesn't conjure up images of Joe Louis. You don't think of Jerry Lewis either because there's nothing funny about hearing such a statement if you're in search of a heavyweight to bet the future of the long dormant division on.

Then there's Peter, who as we said here a few days ago makes Clubber Lang look like Sugar Ray Robinson. In that regard Peter didn't disappoint Saturday night, when he beat down Maskaev at 2:56 of the sixth round with a flurry of wild right hands and amateurish lefts that stunned Maskaev and left him haplessly trapped on the ropes as one wide shot after another rained in on him (too often well behind his head, by the way) until referee Lupe Garcia stopped the fight.

If Peter is the thudding puncher some claim, how come none of those shots could knock down a 39-year-old who hadn't fought in over a year and who had already been stopped five times in his career when he was far younger and fresher than he is today? Maybe because none of them found his chin?

That was the state of affairs at the Plaza de Toros in Cancun largely because if Peter threw any

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wider punches his elbows would have been outside the arena. Watching him slam away at a pace that resembled that of the rotation of the Earth, one began to easily understand how he could have knocked Klitschko down three times when they met in 2005 and still lose by a rightfully deserved three-point margin on all the judges' cards.

As for Maskaev, if anyone wondered why he defended the title he won by stopping another fraud, Hasim Rahman, only once in 18 months don't look at the X-rays of the back injury he says he sustained. Look at how slow his hands moved and how his pace made Peter's resemble Floyd Mayweather, Jr. by comparison.

To call these two guys "ponderous" would be to minimize the meaning of the word. Having said that, at least we're down to three fighters who can call themselves heavyweight champion and a path to a unified title does now exist. Whether it will be followed is another matter because this is the sport of politricks, as Lennox Lewis so often said.

Speaking of Lennox Lewis, one measure of how dreadful the division is at the moment is that we now long for the return of the quite often boring and always safety first Lewis. But I digress.

The call has already gone out for a rematch between Klitschko and Peter, who are widely regarded of the best left standing. That call has been answered but only partially.

Before Peter and Maskaev met they had to agree that the winner would next fight Klitschko. Just not the right Klitschko. Rather than a multi-million dollar unification fight that would make clear whether Kellerman's assessment of the IBF-WBO champion is justified or not, Peter must now fight his older brother, whose only qualifications for being made the mandatory challenger are that he hasn't fought in three years and that he "won" the title by having his left eye nearly knocked out by Lewis.

Lewis retired after beating the elder Klitschko up and the WBC decided, "Well, why not give him the title?" And so they did after first asking him to knock out Kirk Johnson and Corrie Sanders, the latter a guy studying for the previous 18 months to become a golf pro in South Africa. The wrong Klitschko then defended the WBC belt once before repeatedly postponing fights with Rahman due to enough injuries to qualify him for a permanent disability from the WBC.

He got it, but then announced he wanted to come back after three years of resting and running for political office in the Ukraine. The WBC tried to force-feed him right into a title fight but thought twice about it after being threatened with a lawsuit it couldn't win and made him the mandatory contender instead. It might have been nice if someone suggested he fight for that but no one did and so he's next for Peter even though it's the younger brother the world wants to see him facing.

"I'm the best heavyweight in the world!" Peter said, showing more animation than he'd exhibited while actually fighting. "I'm going to get the rematch because I'm going to beat his brother."

He might but then again he might not. The only thing sure is that the elder Klitschko will not

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step aside so his younger brother can fight Peter first. The other sure bet is that if the two of them do square off it will be as inelegant an exhibition as Peter and Maskayev put on...and probably just as ponderous.

If Klitschko avoids more injuries and wins, he and his brother have already said they won't fight each other and the WBC has hinted it likely would make who ever prevails face former cruiserweight champion Juan Carlos Gomez (42-1-1) next. With his biggest heavyweight win a decision over Oliver McCall it's easy to see why Gomez is next. He must have pictures of WBC president Jose Sulaiman in a compromising position, a jokester might guess.

Regardless, those two fights would delay any unification bout until next year at the earliest while Klitschko the Younger must contend with at least one mandatory defense (either IBF No. 1 Alexander Povetkin or WBO No. 1 Tony Thompson) first to retain his titles.

Povetkin has had only 15 professional fights, and at 6-2 has huge physical disadvantages against the 6-6 1/2 Klitschko. Also, he had his eye half closed by the punches of American Eddie Chambers before he outboxed him to victory. None of that strikes me as reason to make him the favorite against a guy who's 50-3 and technically the most proficient fighter in the division, especially with the jab.

As for Thompson, he's 31-1 but at 36 he hasn't beaten anyone of note unless you call Luan Krasniqi noteworthy. I don't in case you were wondering.

Meanwhile Chagaev (24-0-1) next defends his title against former WBA champion Nikolay Valuev, from whom he won it by majority decision last April. Valuev is the 7-foot giant of limited abilities and even more limited punching power who "threatened" to break the 49-0 record of Rocky Marciano. Fortunately there is a God in Heaven and he is a fight fan and Chagaev beat him.

The WBA champion is an undersized 6-1 heavyweight whose biggest win was a split decision over John Ruiz, who lost the WBA title to Valuev by majority decision. Do we see a lack of an overwhelming endorsement here?

If barely beating John Ruiz in your adopted country of Germany is a career highlight, it seems a safe bet you won't have a lot more of them.

So there is the heavyweight picture. There is now a clear way to unify the title before the end of the year if the WBC would allow Peter to fight the right Klitschko and then allow the winner to fight the Chagaev-Valuev winner in the fall or early winter. That would at least give us only one heavyweight champion and, considering the dearth of talent in the division at the moment, that's the best fight fans can probably hope for for now. But that's very likely a long way away.

So what's the good news? Not sure about that but the best news for the division over the weekend was that cruiserweight champion David Haye made good on his promise to destroy WBO champion Enzo Maccarinelli and grab all the belts that matter in the 200-pound division before departing for life among the giants.

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Evander Holyfield did the same thing in 1988, winning three of the cruiserweight titles before moving on to become the greatest heavyweight of his era and one who (along with Lewis, Riddick Bowe and to a lesser extent the by then faded Mike Tyson) kept interest in the division alive.

Haye punches like a mule, especially with the straight right hand, and is far quicker of both hand and foot than any of the present heavyweight titlists. He also has wisely said he would not fight at more than about 215 pounds, sacrificing size in exchange for the same kind of speed advantage Holyfield had over many of his opponents when he was at his peak.

The difference is while Haye probably punches harder than Holyfield (witness his second round destruction of Maccarinelli) his chin has proven suspect. A chin made of china is not something that serves a heavyweight well, even if he's in with Clubber Lang or a less skilled boxer than he, say like Peter or Maskaev. Big men still do a lot of damage when they land and Haye has shown that when cracked on the mandible he tends to fall down.

This is alarming but his obvious power and hand speed will serve, for the moment at least, as a satisfactory antidote to skepticism until one of these heavyweight giants puts one on him. Until then he may be the great heavyweight hope for the future unless, of course, Wladimir Klitschko finally decides one night to live up to all the hype that has surrounded him for so long and fight in the ring as good as he looks standing in his corner.