

Chris Byrd Returns-At 175 Pounds

Written by David A. Avila
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Former two-time heavyweight world titleholder Chris Byrd returns to the ring once more, but in the form of a 175-pound light heavyweight.

It's a daunting task that even one of the greatest fighters of this generation was unable to do without stumbling.

Now Byrd will skip the cruiserweights and meet true light heavyweight boxer Shaun George (16-2-2, 7 KOs) as a much slimmer 175-pounder at the Cox Pavilion in Las Vegas on Friday May 16. The fight will be shown on ESPN2 live.

Looking at Byrd, it's hard to believe he's the same guy who battled against heavyweight behemoths like Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko, Jameel McCline and Evander Holyfield.

The only thing that looks the same is the dreads.

It's even hard for Byrd to believe.

"I really don't know what to expect," said Byrd (40-4-1, 21 KOs), who lives and trains in Las Vegas. "You never know until you get into the ring."

Considered one of the finest technical fighters in the heavyweight level, the Michigan native is bringing his craft down to the world of the quicker, more agile and dangerous light heavyweights.

What's remarkable is that Byrd, a southpaw, began his pro fighting career at 160 pounds in 1993 after a stellar amateur boxing career, which included a trip to the Olympics in Barcelona. He was a teammate of Oscar De La Hoya.

Now he's stripped himself of about 30 pounds and doesn't resemble the same fighter despite bearing the same dreadlocks.

After the Bernard Hopkins light heavyweight title defense against Wales' Joe Calzaghe, Byrd walked around the post fight press conference and caught numerous fighters unaware of his new physical transformation.

"I didn't even recognize him," said David Haye, the cruiserweight world champion from Great Britain looking to move the other direction to the heavyweight division. "He was talking to me and I didn't know who he was at first."

When Roy Jones Jr. first saw Byrd, his lower jaw literally dropped. Others, like Bernard Hopkins, were similarly shocked. Both fight in the 175-pound division and realize they may have to make room for the new kid on the block.

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Or will they?

RJJ

Roy Jones Jr. knows what Byrd is about to experience. He took his own journey into that path years ago and needed several years to recover when he zoomed up to heavyweight, then dropped back down to light heavyweight.

Quite simply: The legs can't take it.

Jones tells people that his two knockout losses came about because of the weight shedding he undertook for his fights against Antonio Tarver and Glen Johnson. The Florida speedster claims that the extra bulk he added to take the WBA heavyweight title from John Ruiz in 2003 took a huge toll on his legs and body when he returned to light heavyweight. It was scientifically added with pure muscle.

"I think I'd do it with fat this time," Jones said about adding extra weight to fight as a heavyweight. "It took a toll on my body when I went back down."

In his first fight back at 175 pounds, Jones barely beat Tarver by majority decision. His legs looked like spaghetti and his usual stamina wasn't present at the 2003 fight. In the rematch six months later, Jones ate overhand lefts that dropped him twice for his first real career loss.

Four months later, he sought a match against Johnson, not known for knockout power. But in their match, Jones was knocked out cold in the ninth round.

The rocket legs that had provided Jones the ability to get in and out of trouble had disappeared. The legs never really returned 100 percent, but there was a hint of leg quickness when he fought and beat Puerto Rico's Felix Trinidad last January.

Floyd Mayweather doesn't believe Jones has it any more.

"He don't have his legs no more," said Floyd Mayweather Jr. about Jones last December.

For a boxer the legs are as important as punching power, defense and stamina. It's the foundation for most fighters.

Byrd knows this and has concern about his own legs.

"I've done a lot of running, working on my legs. That's an important thing to do because I felt off balance, my legs were so weak," said Byrd, 37, about cutting down in weight. "Now I feel much better. My balance is good but I won't know how I truly feel until I get into the ring."

Quicker and harder to hit

So far, Byrd has found it uniquely different sparring with smaller guys.

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“It’s kind of weird sparring with smaller guys. I’m used to hitting guys with all of my power and all my might. The heavyweights would look at me like ‘is that all you got?’ kind of look,” said Byrd. “Now when I hit a smaller guy I have to say whoa to myself, I got to take it easy.”

Another thing Byrd discovered is the vast quickness light heavyweights harness.

“With heavyweights I could sit in the pocket and make them miss,” Byrd said describing the different weight divisions. “These guys (light heavyweights) are quicker and harder to hit. They also throw punches much faster, and it forces me to move my head more.”

Still, it’s a far different world than the heavyweight world of giants.

“Those big guys were really taking a toll on me,” said Byrd, who lost the IBF heavyweight title he won against Evander Holyfield to that man Wladimir Klitschko again. “In almost every one of my title defenses I fought with an injury, but I never wanted to cancel a fight.”

Injuries like separated ribs, broken hands, fractured nose, and swollen eyes were some of the wounds Byrd took in the ring while defending his IBF title five times between 2002 and 2006. Most of those injuries came during preparation.

Behind his beautiful Las Vegas home, Byrd set up a small boxing ring that looked about 10-feet by 10-feet wide. When two heavyweights sparred inside the ring it looked like a phone booth. That’s where he sparred most of the time.

“When you have three sparring partners at 245 pounds and I’m about 202 pounds, they’re beating you up after 15 rounds of sparring,” said Byrd. “As I got older I couldn’t take it no more.”

The amiable fighter describes enduring immense pain after almost every victory and especially the overseas fights.

“I would be coming home and the plane ride would be horrible,” Byrd recalls. “I didn’t even want to talk to anyone. I just wanted to be alone and try to sleep through the pain.”

Ironically, Byrd said, he realized that even opponents he beat were in far better shape than he after their fights.

“I know my opponent could go out after the fight with no bruises or pain,” he said. “I’d be laying in bed for days.”

Last October, in Byrd’s last bout at heavyweight, Alexander Povetkin stopped him in 11 rounds. After that fight, he realized to continue fighting at heavyweight was no longer a reality. He chose to fight in a lower weight division. Only a very few number of former heavyweight contenders have accomplished the feat successfully, men such as Jones, Archie Moore, Bob Fitzsimmons and Sam Langford.

It’s a very select few.

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Byrd knows that dropping down to the light heavyweight division has its obstacles and questions too.

“It wasn’t until three weeks ago that I felt comfortable at this weight,” said Byrd who looks like a shrunken version of his self, except for the hair.

On Friday, Byrd fights for his boxing future. It’s possibly his last crack at the sport he loves.

“I’m training hard but you never know,” Byrd said. “I lost so much weight.”

At least the days of sustaining power shots from guys 245 pounds and more are over.

“I couldn’t take it no more,” said Byrd.