

## Boxing World Tackles Recession

Written by Ron Borges  
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Saturday night Wladimir Klitschko rid himself of another of what will become an endless string of meaningless mandatory title defenses if he ever achieves his goal – which is to unify the heavyweight championship for the first time since Lennox Lewis briefly accomplished that in 1999. As Lewis once learned, this is a curse not a cure-all, but if Klitschko fails to do it heavyweight boxing will continue to be a marginalized aspect of the sport it once dominated.

Unfortunately, if he does do it, the same might still be true.

“Teddy Brenner used to tell me when he was the matchmaker at Madison Square Garden that boxing was two sports,” former HBO Sports president Seth Abraham said recently. “There’s boxing and then there’s heavyweight boxing. But the division has become so devoid of talent that it no longer is the engine that runs the sport.”

True, but what Klitschko’s underwhelming performance Saturday in Berlin while stopping a far from willing challenger named Tony Thompson in 11 rounds proved is that it has become the engine that is ruining the sport. Boxing will never again have the kind of hold on the national sporting mind it once did in the Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s or even in the glory days of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. That is simply a truth that has to be accepted by the sport’s ardent followers.

There are many factors behind it, the faded state of heavyweight boxing being only one component. Yet try as cable executives and boxing aficionados might, they cannot manufacture a compelling fighter when none exists and that, sadly, is what Klitschko’s performance re-established last weekend. No matter how loudly chipper Jim Lampley tries to convince fans that there is more there with Klitschko than his work seems to prove, it is not a radio broadcast he is doing. There are pictures.

Since Lewis retired following his destruction of Klitschko’s brother five years ago, the titles have become as fragmented as Balkan political interests. No one has emerged above the rest, not even with all of HBO’s efforts to push the Klitschkos on the rest of the world. As of this writing, the elder Klitschko intends to challenge WBC champion Samuel Peter in Berlin on Oct. 4 but that presumes he can first survive a training camp, which his body has not done in 3 1/2 years. He doesn’t deserve the fight and has done nothing to earn it but he’s getting it anyway and it’s difficult to get too worked up over it because all he’s doing is passing over other guys who haven’t earned title shots either, so who cares?

If Peter wins though it would set up an obvious big-money unification fight with the younger Klitschko, who already holds a points victory over Peter but went flat on his fanny three times that night in the process. What that says about either man is difficult to digest.

Can the oft-felled Wladimir Klitschko now take a better shot than in his early days or is he as vulnerable as ever to the ravages of an infiltrated mandible?

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As for Peter (30-1, 23 KO), can he really punch or not? And what of the elder Klitschko (35-2, 34 KO)? He has a better than 90 per cent knockout rate and was ahead of Lewis when the champion took a divot out of his eye that looked like Tiger Woods exploding out of the rough at the British Open. Klitschko was soon a blood-smeared mess and his challenge ended with him loudly protesting a stoppage that certainly looked more than warranted and he hasn't really been the same guy since.

If Peter loses, it means the belts will not soon be unified, which is the only hope for heavyweight boxing at the moment, because not even Don King could make a brother fight a brother. The Klitschkos have promised their mother this would never happen and seem like the kind of guys who will stick to their promise.

Meanwhile, the WBA title is in such a state that it is back to replaying Nikolai Valuev vs. John Ruiz for the "interim title," a fight no one wanted to see (and few outside of Germany did) the first time they met three years ago. If the seven-foot Valuev wins, he wants the younger Klitschko and vice versa. What the world wants is something else all together. It wants Pacquiao-Marquez III, a showdown between guys who weigh 100 pounds less than the average heavyweight champion today.

If Ruiz wins, no one will want him of course, including HBO. After Klitschko's victory over Thompson commentator Larry Merchant, a long-time critic of Ruiz, called him "the man who will not go away." What that means is that while Merchant and most fans hate the two-time world champion's style he is as likely to beat Valuev as the other way around because most people who saw the first fight in Berlin believed he deserved the decision.

Regardless, the winner must face injured champion in recess (would that they all were in recess) Ruslan Chagaev by next fall if Chagaev is healthy. He has twice postponed fights with Valuev due to injury and his body seems as suspect to creaking and cracking as the elder Klitschko's. This has caused some to suspect them both since they are products of the Eastern European sporting machine that had more athletes on steroids than the BALCO Lab back in the day.

In fairness, neither has ever tested positive for anything and so remain innocent until proven guilty but as their ligaments snap under the burden of age and hard training, people whisper. The positive way to look at that is at least someone is talking about them, which is more than can be said about heavyweight boxing in general.

In the midst of all this is the absence of a young American colossus to challenge any of these guys. Who is the U.S.'s hottest young heavyweight? Beats me, although California's Chris Arreola is the name most often mentioned. How has he risen to this high station? By defeating Chazz Witherspoon by disqualification after dropping him at the end of the third round of their recent fight.

It seems Witherspoon's concerned loyal lieges rushed into the ring illegally to aid their man after the bell sounded and thus got him DQd. Other than that Arreola has fought guys whose faces belong on a milk carton as missing persons. Who are those guys?

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The depth of the problem was evident by the ascension of Thompson to No. 1 status in the WBO rankings. Thompson is a sparring partner by trade and profession and he fought Klitschko like one, offering him no more resistance than necessary to fulfill his contractual obligations. That's not Klitschko's fault. Klitschko's fault was that it took him 11 rounds to get rid of the guy.

That he did earned Wlad a IBF mandatory against undefeated Alexander Povetkin, the 2004 Olympic gold medalist. Povetkin won the right to challenge Klitschko by being blond, being promoted by a German and having stopped former IBF champion Chris Byrd as well as decisioning underwhelming Eddie Chambers in his last outing. The Byrd knockout might have meant something had the former champion not been knocked out in three of his last four fights, including against light heavyweight Shaun George one fight after Povetkin laid him low.

So what we have here is an ever deepening recession in heavyweight boxing or a reason to rejoice over fights like Miguel Cotto vs. Antonio Margarito and just about any match involving guys who weigh 135 pounds or less. Those are the fights, and the fighters, who are keeping boxing afloat.

All the heavyweights keep doing is dragging things down. Following Klitschko's latest victory Lewis said of the champion, "All he needs to do is keeping beating everyone."

That might be true if everyone was anyone, or if any one of these challengers and champions was anyone. But in the public's mind they are all no one and so there is only one scenario that could alter that.

What heavyweight boxing needs is for Vitali Klitschko to survive a full training camp and then for Samuel Peter to knock him cold in spectacular fashion. Then he could call out his younger brother for a rematch that would have a neighborhood grudge feel to it if the younger Klitschko accepted the challenge.

The winner would at least be the recognized heavyweight champion at that point in an era where no such person has existed since Lewis' retirement. Whether that guy is a real one would be a different debate but in this day of lowered expectations we'd take it.