

Hard Cruise Through Heavy Waters

Written by Bernard Fernandez

Wednesday, 19 November 2008 19:00

I wasn't in London's O2 Arena last week for former cruiserweight champion David Haye's impressive debut as a heavyweight, in which he knocked down Monte Barrett five times en route to an fifth-round technical knockout. Then again, I didn't have to be.

I'd seen all this before.

History has a way of repeating itself, for better or worse, and "The Hayemaker's" move from cruiserweight to heavyweight looks and sounds very much like the one the finest cruiserweight of all time, Evander Holyfield, took in 1988 in pursuit of greater fame and considerably fatter purses.

Now, if Haye can come close to replicating the heavyweight success that Holyfield achieved, his leap of faith will be more than justified. And if he doesn't ... well, Al "Ice" Cole and other cruiserweight champions who crashed and burned attempting the same step up can welcome another member of a club where the only entrance requirement is the shattered belief that getting bigger means getting better.

"I'm the No. 1 cruiserweight in the world," Haye (22-1, 21 KOs) said after he emphatically disposed of Barrett (34-7, 20 KOs), but not without surviving a few anxious moments of his own. "Now I want to clean up the heavyweight division. To do that I need to beat one of the Klitschko brothers and then the other. Beat the Klitschko brothers next year, that's my plan."

Vitali Klitschko, the WBC heavyweight champion, was at ringside for Haye's wipeout of Barrett, a onetime contender who has devolved into a sort of gatekeeper of boxing's flagship division. The older of the Klitschko brothers (Wladimir holds the IBF, WBO and IBO titles) admitted to being impressed by what he'd seen of the 6'3" Haye, who weighed in at a thickly muscled 215 pounds.

"Next year, it will be a great fight in Britain or Germany, in a big stadium," Vitali said of the prospect of swapping punches with Haye.

Looking up at the 6'7" Vitali, Haye said, "I know he's a giant. I think I can slay the giant."

In 1988, the "giant" was maybe 5'11", but seemed much taller to a lengthening list of victims that had been laid out at his feet. Mike Tyson. The snarling bully from the Brownsville section of Brooklyn was in the process of cleaning out the heavyweight division, and the boxing world wondered if there was someone, anyone, capable of providing him with a worthy challenge.

Enter Holyfield, who had just unified the cruiserweight division with an eighth-round stoppage of Carlos "Sugar" DeLeon, adding the Puerto Rican's WBC 190-pound title to the WBA and IBF belts he already owned.

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For his night's work in becoming undisputed king of the cruisers on April 9, 1988, Holyfield was paid \$300,000. And no, it hadn't escaped his attention that Michael Spinks had already signed for a June 27, 1988, bout with Tyson, for which Spinks would be paid \$13.2 million and Tyson \$17 million.

"Money plays a big part in boxing," Holyfield admitted after he dominated DeLeon, a 9-1 underdog, at Caesars Palace. "Your career is only so long, and I want to make as much as I can while I'm in it. Besides, the heavyweight champion is king of the hill. That's a motivating factor for me because I want to be king of the hill."

Haye, probably the best cruiserweight since Holyfield, might have repeated those words verbatim after he scored a second-round TKO of fellow Briton Enzo Maccarinelli on March 8, also in the O2 Arena. In doing so, Haye, the WBC and WBA cruiser champ, added Maccarinelli's WBO belt to his collection.

"I'm ready to go up and start taking on the heavyweights now," Haye said after he turned Maccarinelli's legs to cooked spaghetti with two thunderous right hands. "I've achieved all I can in the cruiserweight division, and it's time to go up and fight the best possible opponents and to knock them out."

If there is a difference between Holyfield and Haye, it's that Holyfield made his move to heavyweight with no unfinished business at cruiser; by beating DeLeon, he held all three of the recognized titles at the time. IBF cruiserweight champ Steve "USS" Cunningham requested that Haye stick around long enough for a winner-take-all meeting at 200 pounds before Haye went after boxing's really big boys, but that request went ungranted, as he suspected it would.

"I understood," said Cunningham, who will defend his title against Poland's Tomasz Adamek on Dec. 11 in Newark, N.J. "You can't really blame Haye for going for the money."

Holyfield, an inveterate tinkerer who at various times employed a ballet teacher and a bodybuilder at part of his retinue, spent the first couple of months bulking up under the strict supervision of R. David Calvo, an orthopedic surgeon who ran a sports medicine clinic in Sugar Land, Texas, and Houston-based conditioning guru Tim Hallmark. Their joint efforts were called the "Omega Project," which suggested atomic scientists working on a top-secret plan to build a better bomb.

A little more than three months after he had blown through DeLeon, Holyfield pronounced himself fit and ready for his heavyweight debut against longtime fringe contender James "Quick" Tillis. That scheduled 10-rounder was to take place on July 16, 1988, at Caesars Tahoe.

As was the case with the 37-year-old Barrett, who had been in and out of the heavyweight ratings for a long time without ever making it all the way to the top, Tillis, then 31, had a nice resume, if not an especially imposing one. He'd shared the ring with six fighters -- Pinklon Thomas, Greg Page, Tim Witherspoon, Gerrie Coetzee, Frank Bruno, Mike Weaver and Tyson -- who at one point held some version of the heavyweight championship, but by the time he signed to meet Holyfield he was regarded as little more than a steppingstone. His primary claim

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to fame then was that he'd gone the 10-round distance with Tyson on May 3, 1986, before Tyson had won his first title.

"James has been the policeman of the heavyweight division for a long time," said Tillis' manager, Beau Williford. "If you wanted to move up, to enter the top echelon, he's the guy you had to get by."

Tillis, a regular Chatty Cathy who talked a better game than he fought, not unexpectedly dismissed Holyfield as a fraud who would be exposed when he found himself in the ring against a legitimate heavyweight.

"All my life I've beaten guys only to get stiffed on decisions," Tillis told me after he'd finished a sparring session a few days before he was to tangle with Holyfield. "The whole world knows I beat Tyson. I sent Coetzee to the hospital and they gave him the decision. And (Joe) Bugner? Man, I won every round and they still gave it to him.

"At this stage of my career, I got to knock these guys out instead of just beating them. And that's what I'm going to do against Holyfield. I'm going to kick his ass. I'm going to mess him up so bad he's going to wish he never left (the cruiserweights).

"The boy is a good fighter, but I don't see where he's all that special. Anyway, his legs are too skinny. He's got little bird's legs."

Tillis was rolling now, jabbing a finger at my tape recorder as if that would somehow further emphasize his point.

"You think some puffed-up cruiserweight is gonna scare me?" he declared. "Man, I been in there with the best. I fought a baldheaded guy named Earnie Shavers who was the baddest dude in the world. He hit so hard, he could turn goat milk into gasoline. But I beat him (on a 10-round decision in 1982), and I'm gonna beat Holyfield."

I could have sworn Barrett was channeling Tillis when the British media kept peppering him with inquiries about Haye.

"I have a heavyweight dream of my own. Do you want to hear it?" he said in response to still another question about his more celebrated opponent. "I want to fight Vitali Klitschko after I knock out David Haye. Haye is an ordinary fighter. Just like I said before I fought Dominick Guinn – even though Emanuel Steward said Guinn was the next great heavyweight. I said he was ordinary. David Haye's ordinary, too. He's an impostor."

Holyfield, as it turned out, was no impostor. He tuned up the not-so-Quick Tillis so convincingly that Williford had to come to his man's rescue, not allowing him to come out for the sixth round of the one-sided beatdown.

At the postfight press conference, Tillis professed to have newfound respect for the former cruiserweight he had verbally denigrated right up to the moment the opening bell rang.

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"If (Holyfield) moves like that, uses his legs and don't stand in front of him, he'll give 'The Gorilla' all he wants," said Tillis, comparing Tyson to a jungle primate. "Holyfield is a great fighter, stronger than I thought, and faster than Tyson."

Lou Duva, who worked Holyfield's corner along with George Benton, also had his say at that postfight press conference, and what he said turned out to be chillingly prophetic. He spoke of getting another one of his heavyweights, Tyrell Biggs, primed to upset Tyson, only to have Biggs submit to his own fears on fight night.

"George and I had Tyrell perfect," Duva said. "He just didn't bring it with him into the ring. For some reason he let himself be intimidated."

"Now, I've got to say that Evander can't be intimidated. Not even by Mike Tyson. When Tyson looks into Evander's eye, he isn't going to see one trace of fear."

Maybe Holyfield would have stared down Tyson at some earlier date, like, say, in 1992 when his big showdown with the human wrecking machine was first scheduled. But Tyson went to Indianapolis to judge the Miss Black America beauty pageant, putting him further down the road to ruin than Buster Douglas ever had. When Holyfield finally got around to going eyeball-to-eyeball with Tyson, that withering glare from Tyson no longer had strong men quaking in their shoes as it once had.

Vitali Klitschko doesn't really play the intimidation game the same way that Tyson did, but, despite his history of injuries, he might be a better fighter at this juncture of his professional life. Whether Haye is able to chop him down is a question that should be answered soon enough, provided the Ukrainian slugger stays out of hotel rooms with teenaged beauty queens at 3 a.m.

Until he gets his shot at a more prestigious, better-paying title, Haye's heavyweight experiment is off to a, um, quick start. And it seems like *déjà vu* for a lot of us who have been down this path before with another fighter whose surname begins with the letter H.