Such is the state of the heavyweight championship of the world today that it can be pre-empted by a possible conflict with an NCAA wrestling tournament.

ESPN's contractual obligation to televise such a tournament at 6:30 pm Saturday night created a conflict with its scheduled broadcast live of Saturday's fight in Stuttgart, Germany between reigning WBC title holder Vitali Klitschko and the former cruiserweight champion Juan Carlos Gomez, because the German promoters could not guarantee the two fighters would be in the ring in time for a distance fight to be over by the time the grapplers enter the circle at 6:30 p.m.

Since ESPN was paying little or nothing for the right to broadcast the fight in the US, it had no weight to throw around and simply had to make a programming change to broadcast the fight live on ESPN Classic at 6 pm with an instant replay at 7 pm on ESPN2.

Yet the fact that this fight is even on free cable television in the States is a step up from the alarming depths to which the heavyweight division has fallen since the long ago retirement of Lennox Lewis. If we're honest about it, heavyweight boxing wasn't in great shape even then but compared to today those seem like the glory years, while these have become the boring years.

There may be little Klitschko and Gomez will do to change the latter perceptions but just being able to see a heavyweight title fight of any ilk on a Saturday afternoon echoes back to a time when you could sit down on the sofa around 5 pm, turn on the tube (no cables necessary back then) and lo and behold there was Muhammad Ali or Larry Holmes trading punches with a viable opponent.

The fear with Klitschko-Gomez is that there may not be much trading going on. Gomez is a counter puncher by inclination and not a bold one and Klitschko is a plodder who overwhelms mostly by dint of being boringly resolute. Scintillating they are not.

There is also little doubt that the far bigger Klitschko will find a way to retain his portion of the title against a former cruiserweight champion who was never heavy handed even at 200 pounds.

Yet with analyst Teddy Atlas' often spicey commentary along with succinct and experienced blow-by-blow man Brian Kenny calling the fight off a television feed at ESPN's studios in Bristol, Conn., the broadcast figures to be both entertaining and enlightening.

The always candid Atlas predicted Friday that, "Gomez figures to be a better opponent than Samuel Peter was but what kind of statement is that? Gomez has to be a more live opponent than Peter because Peter was nothing more than an animated heavy bag.''

Klitschko (36-2, 35 KO) came off of a four-year layoff to become the first man to reclaim the heavyweight title in his first fight back from exile, but Peter offered so little resistance it was

difficult to recall after a few rounds exactly which of them was the one coming out of retirement. Gomez figures to at least be more mobile, although that doesn't necessarily make for a better fight.

In fact, in Atlas' opinion at least, it may make for a different sort of test for the 37-year-old Klitschko.

"Gomez's temperament is to counter and be careful,'' Atlas points out. "He's not a go-to-get-you guy. It's hard to fight that kind of fight against a long guy (nearly 6-8) like Klitschko.

"But there is a chance that this time Vitali finds out the reason he was able to come back after four years away and win so convincingly was because of what he had in front of him –which was nothing. He was able to pot shot Peter all night long without taking too much of a risk of anything coming back or of the target moving.

"That, at least, you know Gomez will do some. He'll move. He may not throw much on offense but he won't just stand in front of Klitschko and get hit.

"Gomez was a decent cruiserweight champion and a guy with a good amateur background in Cuba before he defected. I don't give him a shot to win but maybe he makes Klitschko show the residual effect of a four-year layoff.''

To do it, Gomez is going to have to do more than he promised at the final weigh-in Friday when he called Klitschko, "A robot with a punch'' and promised "Klitschko won't hit me.''

Actually he will, especially with hard right hands that are a perfect antidote for a southpaw counter puncher like Gomez. He will set them up with a long jab that can prove difficult to avoid, even though Gomez has some meritorious technical skills.

The problem for Gomez (44-1, 35 KO) is that he's too small, to light hitting, too far past his prime and too clearly not blessed with the strongest chin in the sport.

The fact he could be knocked cold in one round by journeyman heavyweight Yanqui Diaz cannot and should not be underestimated. If Klitschko can put a combination on him that ends with one of those long right hands landing flush, those college wrestlers better be warmed up.

While we know Klitschko is 37, who knows how old Gomez may really be? At his listed 35 that's bad enough but Cuba has been one of those places for years handing athletes fictitious birth certificates, so anything is possible. You ever look at El Duque's face? Orlando Hernandez looks older than Tony Orlando.

The one thing that isn't possible, it wouldn't seem, is for Juan Carlos Gomez to end up with his hand raised in Stuttgart Saturday afternoon but that's no reason not to watch either. You get a chance to see one of the top three or four heavyweights in the world without paying a nickel beyond your basic cable cost. You'd be a fool not to take it.