

For V, All's Well Which Ends Well Enough

Written by Phil Woolever
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STUTTGART - This funky city is an old school industrial automotive metropolis, with lots of working class characters and a modernized central area that seem ready to party all night long even though springtime is still frigid.

So, it seemed appropriate that WBC titlist Vitali Klitschko finally ground down inspired challenger Juan Carlos Gomez with a methodical, assembly-line type showing that may have been somewhat short on style but carried plenty of muscle and endurance.

The awkward contest was not the most stylish of encounters, but the bloody brawl featured numerous exciting exchanges that kept the assembled swarm happy.

Postfight fallout will probably consist of the typical transcontinental debate about Klitschko's merits, or lack thereof. Funny how alignments regarding whether or not boxing is dead seem to follow the same laced-up latitudes.

Whatever your opinion, it's a fact that Klitschko kept up his march toward another targeted belt, and announced that for his next act he hopes to meet the winner of the supposedly soon scheduled Nikolai Valuev - Ruslan Chagaev WBA tilt. Toward that end, Klitschko has already filed an appeal to European sports authorities to avoid a mandatory contest against Oleg Maskaev.

"I only want to be involved with really big fights that the fans will appreciate," said Klitschko. "To me, that is not a fight against Maskaev. I still feel very good about fighting and want to hold all the belts at the same time with my brother, so for that I want to fight Valuev or Chagaev next. I hope it's Valuev because I think the people would prefer that more."

Stuttgart is also the home for state of the art museums which pay tribute to local factory products Mercedes-Benz and Porsche automobiles, optimal high-priced performance machines that often require repeated fine tuning. Considering Klitschko's history of physical breakdowns and necessary unscheduled maintenance, Stuttgart was a good fit indeed.

Klitschko didn't look near as formidable against Gomez as he did against Samuel Peter last year, but that might say more about the opponents than it does about Klitschko, who once again found himself and brother Wladimir in the role of scapegoats for the often criticized heavyweight division.

Klitschko proved he remains one of the few men to beat for a legitimate spot atop the rankings, but he also looked vulnerable enough to allow those who squawk about his deficiencies to keep the anti-Klitschko bandwagon rolling along.

"Gomez presented me with exactly what I expected from him," said a slightly nicked but completely unfazed Klitschko afterward. "Maybe the problem for me was that I tried to knock

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him out too fast. He was very strong and determined, so that wasn't going to happen and I had to adjust my strategy."

To his credit, Gomez kept true to his word about taking the fight to Klitschko. The spirited underdog consistently drove his bigger opponent to the strands with reckless early charges that made it look like he might run Klitschko off what has been a smooth comeback road since last September. Klitschko looked confused early, and got stung more than just a few times.

Conversely, Klitschko did do a decent job of adjusting to southpaw Gomez's unorthodox angles of assault. Although his face was reddened and he huffed and puffed after the second round, when Klitschko found his openings he pounced with considerable power from both sides, up and down. Immediately after the fight, Klitschko looked relatively fresh, as if he was conserving energy all along and had plenty of reserves left in the tank.

A festive, sold out crowd of around 13,000 showed up at the Hans Martin Schleyer Halle. They had rumbling on their minds and Klitschko in their hearts. Rumbling and Klitschko is what they got, nothing much more or less.

Things weren't really for the artistic minded either inside or outside the ring.

World renowned violinist David Garrett and his refined accompanists offered some rare quality pre and postfight culture as the evening's musical entertainment, but it was almost a case of pearls before swine as he was virtually ignored.

Previous Klitschko promotions included more pop style acts like the Pussycat Dolls or Il Divo that were much better received. This was, after all, more of a blue-collar fight crowd than those who watched Klitschko outclass Peter in Berlin or brother Vitali whip Hasim Rahman in Mannheim.

A far more popular appetizer was the latest installment of Klitschko's pre-entrance video series. This one played out along snow covered, high-def training scenes so close to Rocky IV that Sly Stallone may have a case for copyright infringement. The fans loved it.

The undercard featured two of the Klitschko brothers' previous opponents and current training partners. Tony Thompson, who reportedly got his spot as part of a sparring agreement, looked effective as he took care of business against usually durable German Adnan Serin with a 5th round stoppage.

Chris Byrd, the only man beside Lennox Lewis to defeat Vitali, appeared with less conclusive results as he easily stopped completely overmatched Mathias Sandow, who had nothing but courage to offer. Many commissions in the USA probably wouldn't have sanctioned a former champion like Byrd against a near novice like Sandow, 4-4 (3).

The classy, spiritual Byrd was completely merciful throughout the match. Byrd appeared to be coasting, and was still obviously in a different league. Finally, in the 5th of a set 8 rounds, Sandow pushed Byrd into a corner and fired dozens of punches. The crowd went crazy, but the

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trouble was none of Sandow's shots connected as Byrd practiced his defense.

Then, in proof of the opposite reaction theory, Byrd put Sandow in a corner and connected with almost every one of the blurring gloves he threw until the scene was wisely waved off.

"Coming off sparring with Vitali it's like this wasn't even a fight," said Byrd, who probably knows better than anyone how little the victory proved. "But it was great to get back in action, and I think at the right weight (cruiser) I can compete with the best."

Byrd, who had more trouble getting past a throng of well wishers than he did in the ring, hopes for a shot at Tomasz Adamek.

As for the stars of the night, it seemed to me that both Klitschko and Gomez came through.

Gomez gave it a good shot, and smiled in the face of some huge punches. He got up when he was almost unconscious and kept throwing back. He was still smiling after the fight, and he gave true fans something to smile about themselves.

"I don't have any regrets," said Gomez. "I proved I belong with the best, and I want to fight another contender as soon as possible."

There's no guarantee David Haye, who appears to have finalized a deal to meet Wladimir in Berlin this June, could have beaten Gomez.

For his part, Vitali Klitschko didn't quite look like the savior of the game, but he was strong and conditioned enough to show that the game doesn't really need saving.

SS posters will protest, but I still say that on a good night, either Klitschko brother would be an interesting foe for any of the great fighters I've seen in person like Larry Holmes, George Foreman, Mike Tyson, or Evander Holyfield.

Come to think of it, Klitschko and Holyfield could still meet up. Hope not.

The main event wasn't "The Thrilla in Manilla", but it was an entertaining, hotly contested fight that went back and forth as both men showed at least a bit of the heart and slugging soul that makes boxing great.

I'd call it the "Good Card in Stuttgart".