

Povetkin And Estrada Look To Pick Up The Bashing Baton

Written by Phil Woolever

Tuesday, 31 March 2009 19:00

DUSSELDORF - After the two past weekends where high profile performers in Stuttgart and Los Angeles were unable to raise the battling bar in the mainstream public's perception of current heavyweight encounters, a pair of former Olympians will attempt to put together punches that could propel themselves to new heights and return some lost luster to the land of boxing's biggest boppers.

When 2004 Athens gold medalist Alexander Povetkin from Russia and Jason Estrada from that year's Team USA hook up Saturday evening at the Burg-Wachter Castello arena here, it won't be televised in North America, though the result should carry global repercussions for both the top international rankings and future mainland marketing.

When the pair appeared for abbreviated workout sessions at a prefight media gathering on Tuesday, the vibe indicated that Povetkin and Estrada may indeed provide the two way fireworks that Vitali Klitschko-Juan Carlos Gomez or Eddie Chambers-Samuel Peter couldn't ignite.

"I can assure everyone that I have trained to be in peak form for this fight," said a calm, ready looking Povetkin. "I prefer to meet a top opponent like Estrada to bring out my best, instead of having an easier assignment that proves nothing meaningful. I can assure my fans of an important victory."

"Povetkin is in for a bad surprise," said a psyched-up Estrada. "When I knock him out a lot more people will know about me, and I'll deserve a championship fight."

From the limited in-ring observations and few minutes of personal contact I had with each participant, the match seemed like a pick'em situation at four days away from the actual contest. In rumbling reality many of the factors that will determine Saturday's result have already taken effect beforehand, during many weeks of training.

The 29-year old Povetkin, 16-0 (12 KOs), ranked first by the IBF as a contender for Wladimir Klitschko, has to be considered the favorite going in.

The training injury to Povetkin's ankle that cost him an already scheduled title shot last year has been well documented. To me, unless you're doing midnight sprints for meditation without moonlight, tripping over a tree root while running through the woods says something about either intensity or carelessness.

Wish I knew which, because that could be the biggest clue available for the upcoming bout.

Povetkin's basic footwork seemed fine as he skipped rope. The very fit looking "White Lion" promised he had no worries about any lingering physical or psychological problems from the layoff.

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What could amount to a much more substantial intangible is whether or not Povetkin has looked past Estrada, with distracting visions of the as yet unrequited Klitschko payday. When the personable Povetkin looked me in the eye and told me he was completely focused on Estrada, I believed him, but I also think Klitschko's name has come up way too much for Povetkin to ignore.

"You know, it's not so easy to get a fight against the Klitschkos," mused Povetkin. "My job now is to win against Estrada. You have to take every fight very serious. If not you may lose. When I see the contract signed to fight Klitschko, that's when I'll think about him."

Estrada had his own views to share on the title-holding brothers. It seemed Estrada was so locked into focus for beating Povetkin that a subsequent showdown against Vitali or Wladimir was as natural to him as tomorrow's sunrise.

"I don't think the Klitschkos are any better than Povetkin," said Estrada with his game face already on. "They're pretty good big guys, but once somebody doesn't let them do what they want, they're going to get beaten. It's not like they haven't lost already. They're human like everybody else."

The 28-year old Estrada, 15-1-1NC (just 3 KOs), will have to raise his game to stay in the hunt. He has a 2006 8 round majority decision loss to Travis Walker and a one round "no contest" against Yanqui Diaz (previously the only man, before Vitali Klitschko, to beat Gomez).

On paper, the heights of 6'2 Povetkin and 6'1 Estrada are the only things that really seem close.

Estrada jumped rope while the German TV cameras rolled, showing decent footwork and agility. He looked stocky but coordinated, in the mold of a young Ray Mercer. Estrada showed a thick upper body and very good hand speed, but it's different working with a trainer than it is against a brick throwing machine.

Povetkin stayed in low gear, and looked fluidly flexible during warm-up calisthenics, with much smoother raw muscle. In 2007, Povetkin handled two top technicians in Chris Byrd and Larry Donald. Estrada has yet to demonstrate similar proficiency and seems to only have a puncher's chance. With only three knockouts, that isn't saying much.

In handicapping this affair, the most likely scenario involves punchstat pedigree that greatly favors the more polished Povetkin, who many of the European journalists I've spoken with gave a solid chance against Wladimir Klitschko last year. The promotional logo that adorned Povetkin's custom workout gear tells a lot of the story. The card looks very strong and the savvy Sauerland Event group does a great job of providing customers with plenty of bang for their euro-buck, but Estrada is not in Dusseldorf because matchmakers expect him to score a quick stoppage.

Povetkin has had a Klitschko in his sights for quite awhile now and maximum risk is not the name of these multi-million dollar ventures. Estrada's name isn't even on the fight posters. The

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4,000 person capacity hall will probably sell out on Povetkin's image alone.

Along these Rhineland shores, many an aspiring model or poet is forced to concede that natural gifts or born talent frequently trump paying extra dues at crunch time. When the fates ring the bell, hunger or desire can only carry you so far. Especially when a bigger, stronger man is thumping you with heavy lead jabs.

But never sell heart short.

On Tuesday, Povetkin and his team appeared to simply be going through the motions, which is understandable considering the nature of the primarily promotional, photo-op situation.

Still, to me, Estrada's constant intensity while he worked the pads and how he and his trainers eyed Povetkin spoke volumes about Estrada's preparation. Estrada looked like he wanted to get it on then and there. Despite a record that seems to guarantee otherwise, I think Estrada believes he can stop Povetkin somehow and will go for the KO.

"I'm not here to take in the sights," Estrada told me when I asked about his trip. "I've been to a local gym and done my roadwork, but I was in shape to win when I got here. To me, Povetkin is very simple, nothing special. All he has is this on his side, being in Germany. I know I can definitely stop him, if not a clean cut knockout, then on cuts. He cuts too easily."

For the record, one of the female fighters on the card took Povetkin sightseeing Tuesday after the press workout.

If I was setting the most realistic result odds I could based on each man's performance record, I'd put Povetkin at about a 2 1/2 to 1 favorite to win by a cold war decision that turns out to be less of a slugfest than Klitschko-Gomez was.

Yet, when I was talking to Povetkin I noticed he had what appeared to be a small, blood-blister type bruise on the lower lid underneath his right eye.

I'd be amazed if Estrada doesn't see a big target, and I'll be unpleasantly surprised if this doesn't turn out to be the best heavyweight fight I've seen since arriving in Europe.