

Fingers Are Crossed: Hays Just Might Lift Up The Heavyweight Division

Written by Michael Woods
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The Klitschko Brothers and their spokesmen can continue to make their case that the heavyweight division isn't a dead zone, a nearly lifeless division just about completely devoid of compelling matchups and scintillating scraps in the last five or so years, since Lennox Lewis abdicated his throne.

They could argue their point of view with the eloquence of Obama and the nostril-flairing mania of Rush Limbaugh, and cite packed arenas outside the US, but one only has to recall that the Klitschko's fights are never on pay per view, and that isn't because they love to show off their ample skills to the widest possible audience. It is because the audience simply hasn't been there. Most of the world's fight fans haven't taken to the K brand of pugilism, which is assess, dissect and much later destroy, rather than seek and destroy.

And is this all their fault, is it all because of their deficiencies as fighters?

No way.

The sub-stagnant state of the division has meant that there's been a profound absence of capable, charismatic men to demand that the Ks elevate their game, and leave their comfort zone, and give the fans what they ache for in a heavyweight: a hitter who has an insistent desire to separate his foe's head from his shoulders, and isn't obsessively preoccupied with not being hit.

That previously mentioned throne has been claimed, with a marked absence of buzz, by the Brothers K, big brother Vitali and little brother Wladimir. There have been periods of time when the K boys have provided fight fans some thrills, but with their highly technical style, which prizes protection of their chin over offensive forays, fights fans outside of Eastern and Central Europe haven't really taken to them. When was the last time, TSSers, that you were amped going into a Wlad match, or really fired up during a Wlad tussle? You have to go back to 2005, when the 6-6 1/2 hitter took on the Nigerian bomber Samuel Peter, while his star was still on the rise. There was some drama involved as viewers wondered if Wlad could stay on his feet long enough to snag a decision. He went to the canvas three times and just eked out the UD. Vitali, the 6-7 elder bro, provided fight fans with some adrenaline surges when he gave Lennox Lewis a handful in Lewis' last fight (June 2003) before being stopped due to a cut. There was some anticipation in the air when Vitali defended his WBC title against the man who starched his little brother in March 2003 (TKO2), Corrie Sanders. But Sanders was 37, and ten pounds heavier than when he took out Wlad, and he succumbed to Vitali with a meekness that has been characteristic of too many Klitschko foes. Vitali went on hiatus from 2004-2008, to deal with injuries and an unsuccessful entrance into the political arena in Kiev, Ukraine. He ran twice for mayor of Kiev, in 2006 and 2008, and came in second and third, respectively. (Second campaign's advisor Rudy Giuliani's 'noun, verb and 9/11' message didn't go over there either). When he healed up, and had his fill of the short end of the politics stick, he came back to boxing, and showed he lost little to none of his chops. He hammered Sam Peter, the second

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time he's torn up a boxer who gave his younger brother fits, and then dispatched Juan Carlos Gomez with ease last month.

In New York City on Thursday afternoon, I may have laid eyes on the man who could elevate Wladimir's sharp, but oh-so-methodical game, and return the heavyweight division, so dreary for so long, to a state of relevance. I spied David Haye (22-1, with 21 KOs), a Brit who showed more charisma during an hour and half at BB Kings than I've seen from other heavies since before TSS was born. I marveled at the enthusiasm of, and cracked up at, and found myself curious about, this 28-year-old who held some cruiserweight titles for six months, and then fancied a leap up to the XL division.

I admit that I write this article as a fan, as much as a journalist, because if I weren't entertained by what I cover, I'd find another outlet. And the fan part of me hopes that Haye is more than just a slick-talking hypemaster, a marvelously muscled specimen who has trash-talked his way to a multimillion dollar payday, and lightning fast trip to the canvas after crumpling from the effects of a right cross on a chin that is regarded in the industry as something between tissue paper and extra strength Bounty paper towel...

In the bluesman's club, Haye's t-shirt was semi shocking with its gore factor, but that was mellowed by his agreeable persona. The 6-3 cracker who has fought twice at heavyweight (gaining wins against Tomasz Bonin in 2007, and against B-lister Monte Barrett in his last outing, in November) was wearing a t-shirt that featured a graphic of himself holding the decapitated heads of each Klitschko, and then another that said "I Love Klit" in German. He wore the first as he sat down and chatted with the fightwriter fraternity.

The Brit admitted that his campaign to rattle the Klitschkos—he first drew their ire when he and the UK Men's Health unleashed a photo of Haye, in a natty shirt and tie combo, held the head of Wlad in front of him last year—was hatched to land the bout, get under their skin, and hype the bout once it was a go. "I've got to get Wladimir to go to war with me," Haye said. "I can verbally abuse him, call him Bitschko two hundred times, but I wore the shirt with the decapitated head, and you see the extent I'm willing to go."

Indeed I am. Ballsy move on the Brit's part. Might he be waking up a giant who too often slumbers in the early part of fights, as he painstakingly sees what his foe has, puts that man's attributes and armor chinks in his mental spread sheet, and decides what dosage of what punches will result in a win? Haye seems to legitimately believe in himself, to believe that his mercurial chin will not give out on him, and that he will be known as more than the t-shirt dude after June 20 in Germany: "Twenty years from now, you won't think of a t-shirt, you'll think of how I destroyed Wladimir."

His PR stunts could backfire on him; on June 20, Wlad (56-3, 46 KOs) might do what trainer Manny Steward is always trying to convince him to do. He might use his size and strength advantage from round one on, press the issue, fight like he owns the physical advantage, instead of as though he's David fighting Goliath, with a balky slingshot. Haye is willing to provoke the giant, and force him to fight in a style to which he's not accustomed, as the angry aggressor, instead of the clear-minded assassin from a block away, with a laser-site rifle. "I've

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got to force him to fight, do something he doesn't do naturally, that's fight," Haye said.

Haye gave his take on the division, which echoes so many of the readers who send in comments to TSS, and not Team Klitschko, which stubbornly tried to stay on message at BB's, and tell the US journalists that the heavyweight class is in fact flourishing. "The division has been s*** the last four or five years," Haye said. "It's in dire straits, and it's time for someone like myself to shake it up." Amen; the Klitschkos are the class of the division, and their merits can't be derided merely because they employ a fan-unfriendly methodology. But the rest of the XL wannabees will not be remembered in decades ahead as anything more than blips on the screen.

Haye gave some of us some backstory on his career, talking about going into enemy territory and winning over Jean-Marc Mormeck's fans in France (Haye won TKO7 in Nov. 2007), and insisting that his party-hearty days are over. His confidence overflowed, but didn't come off as excessively cocky or haughty, as the Ks can sometimes appear to those not used to the Germanic-style reserve, which can translate as imperiousness.

"Wladimir is universally recognized as the best on the planet," Haye said. "But I've never been impressed. Even at cruiserweight, I used to watch his fights and say, 'I can beat this guy, I will knock his a** out with ease.'" Haye insisted that at age two, when other diaper dandies were laboring to pair four words correctly, he knew he wanted to be heavyweight champion of the world.

Haye said that what worked for Wlad against relatively elderly heavies like Hasim Rahman, Tony Thompson, Ray Austin and Chris Byrd won't do the job against him. He said his only loss, to the vastly more experienced Carl Thompson in 2004, wasn't all that painful, as he was stopped while on his feet. "I have no wear and tear," Haye said, "and the freshest guy Wladimir fought was Ibragimov who was coming off a draw with Tim (sic) Austin. After so many years of fighting B level opponents, you become B level, fighting fat, out of shape over the hill fighters, guys with no real desire." The floor is yours, Messrs Rahman, Thompson, Austin etc...

Haye's confidence didn't veer into delusional territory. He admitted that Wlad is by far the best man he's faced, though he will not appear to be the best "when I destroy him."

Regarding that small point on his face which looms so large in this scrap, the chin. Haye was sent to the mat by Barrett, Mormeck and Thompson. He said that his chin won't betray him on June 20, because he'll be fighting at his natural weight, and he won't be weak from cutting.

Steward, it seems, isn't certain that chin will be dented irreparably. He wants Wlad to dispense with the reconnaissance, and get right to the hand to hand on June 20. "I've told Wladimir to put pressure on Haye," he said. "I want this fight over real quick. I want a win within six. We can't play safe this time." Steward is hoping his old charge Lennox Lewis might join Team Haye and be in the Brit's corner come June 20th, to spice up the stew that much more.

When Haye took to the dais, he didn't crack Wlad up with his "Ich Liebe Klit" t-shirt, though Wlad wore a hint of a half-grin. He busted on Wlad for being a less than potent ticket seller, and

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said he was most responsible for the sale of 47,000 tix in two days. "That's not because people want to see Wladimir throw jabs all night long," he joked.

Wlad, in his turn at the mike, couldn't hold a candle to Haye, though of course he managed quite well seeing as how English is not his native tongue. Some of his taunts, though, lose something in translation. He promised to give Haye a "pizza face" over the course of twelve rounds of punishment, which he said he'd prolong, despite Steward's wishes. How he'd infect Haye with a case of acne in Germany, I can't say...

To close, the combatants engaged in a staredown for the photogs. They stared at each other, no grins evident, and kept the gaze intact even as they turned towards the photog. Let the record show, for what it's worth, that Wladimir broke the eye contact first.

Hey, can you tell Haye has me jazzed? Almost 2,000 on a press conference for a heavyweight beef...

SPEEDBAG There was an interesting interplay on display at BBs, as emcee Michael Buffer was clearly miffed that Team Klitschko's Bernd Boente requested promoter Tom Loeffler whisper in Buffer's ear, and ask him to switch his pre-planned order, and introduce Wladimir before Haye. The smooth-talking Buffer shifted gears as he was into his Haye intro, and barely betrayed a hint of annoyance. He read his planning sheet after the Klitschko attempt at controlling the message, then made a crack about "get(ing) it right," and almost imperceptibly rolled his eyes. Boendt could've requested Haye do his interviews in the john, truth be told, and the Brit still would've had his hand raised if the winning criteria were charisma and salesmanship.