

Wlad Has Division Under His Thumb, But Now Haye Is Under His Skin

Written by Ron Borges
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NEW YORK – Wladimir Klitschko is both several forms of heavyweight champion and holder of a Ph.d in sports medicine and philosophy. These are two worlds apart - academia and assault and battery - but generally Klitschko sounds most often like a college professor rather than a professor of pugilism. Yet occasionally even he can get, shall we say, peeved.

Count every day he's around David Haye as among the most peevish.

This is significant on the one hand because the two of them will be together and stripped half naked on June 20 when Klitschko defends his WBO, IBF and (must we say it?) IBO titles from the challenge of the former undisputed cruiserweight champion. It is significant on the other because the voluble Haye has already succeeded where most men have not. He has irked Klitschko to the point where he's dropped the Ivan Drago programming and reacted to Haye's boisterous threats like, well, a fighter might.

For boxing this is a good thing. Whether that will prove to be true for Klitschko as well, only time and Haye will tell. Until they square off in 60,000-seat Veltins Arena, the soccer stadium where Schalke 04 plays its games in the German Bundesliga, what is evident is that the often outrageous antics of Haye have reached Klitschko the way no one else has ever gotten to him.

"You will get a good pizza face from these jabs," the hard-jabbing Klitschko said to Haye recently during a press conference at B.B. King's Blues' Club in Manhattan. "Then I will knock you out in the 12th round. Not earlier."

When Klitschko's trainer, Emanuel Steward, spoke up suggesting his fighter should get rid of Haye in six rounds or less because he would be at increasing risk after that, the champion snapped back, "Emanuel, please! Let me enjoy the process."

Dr. Steelhammer then turned toward Haye, who was wearing a T-shirt with an original design of his own creation in which both Klitschko and his brother, Vitali, had been decapitated and Haye was holding their heads aloft as their bodies leaked blood on the canvas, and stared a hole through him before making a statement laced with bruising promises.

"I will make you eat the words and the T-shirt," Klitschko said. "You think you're great promoter? I'll make you a loser!"

"You were trying to get under my skin? You got under my skin. Whatever it takes to make you lose, I'll do it! I promise!"

From most fighters this would be quite rightly seen as little more than good business, a bit of hype to sell a few more tickets to Klitschko's latest heavyweight venture. But the bulk of the 60,000 tickets sold out in two days and while there will be the required HBO sales pitch, the fight is on HBO World Championship Boxing's regular schedule--not pay-per-view--so there's no

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reason to create something that doesn't exist between these two fighters to drive \$50 buys.

What one has to conclude then, is that for once Klitschko is showing a pulse, something he often hasn't done even during methodical, lopsided beatdowns of second-tier challengers like Tony Thompson, Hasim Rahman, Sultan Ibragimov, Lamon Brewster, Ray Austin, Calvin Brock (can we stop now?), etc.

This became more apparent when Klitschko sat down with a small group of boxing writers prior to that press conference to discuss in more measured tones the challenge Haye (22-1, 21 KO) poses.

After conceding Haye's obvious attributes of speed, a good jab and a powerful right hand, Klitschko launched into a mounting verbal assault on Haye that made clear the champion did not appreciate the promotional style of the 28-year-old Brit.

"The way David Haye acts shows what kind of person he is," Klitschko (52-3, 46 KO) said. "If he was trying to get under my skin to get the fight, well he got the fight but he continues to do the same thing.

"I think it's not funny. Decapitations? That has nothing to do with sport. He went over the edge. He is immature as a fighter and as a person. This will be his last trash talking because I will do anything and everything to knock him out. I hope and I wish he will get up if he goes down early. I will make sure at the press conference after the fight that he will eat his words and his T-shirt."

Yet as irritated as he has become with Haye, Klitschko concedes the undisputed cruiserweight champion might never have gotten the fight had he not gone on a one-man campaign of blood, gore and hyperbole first. So what's a guy supposed to do? Be polite and not fight?

"He did get the fight because he was so loud," Klitschko admitted. "I'd never heard of David Haye before."

What Haye is hoping for is that his constant, ear-splitting insults will lure the oft chin challenged champion to rush in and thus open himself up for the kind of volley of punches Haye has used to knock out 21 of the 22 men he's beaten, including former title challenger Monte Barrett in his first real foray into the heavyweight division.

In that fight Haye was rocked himself, as has happened in the past even as a cruiserweight, before finally bombing out Barrett with a barrage of punches so fast and accurate they were nearly blinding. That is what Haye will bring to Germany with him come June 20.

He will bring unusual hand speed for a heavyweight, fitness to equal Klitschko's, a big man's power and the inclination to wade in and throw punches. Haye feels that the latter is really his greatest advantage. Although he fancies his speed and power as well, what he believes will decide the outcome is his willingness to do what few of Klitschko's recent opponents have been inclined to do – which is fight back.

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“He doesn’t engage in battle,” Haye says of Klitschko. “That’s why I call him Bitchko. We sold 47,000 tickets in a few days because of what I do, not what he does. I bring value for money.

“I’ve never been impressed by him. These heavyweights are so slow you see the shots coming and you see them earlier because they come from so far away. I’ll put myself in position to land bombs.

“He’s not fighting Hasim Rahman or Tony Thompson. I’m coming to win. When is the last time he fought someone fresh (young)? He’s in for a rude awakening when that first bell rings. He’s fought so many B level opponents he’s become a B level champion.”

In the next breath however, Haye concedes Klitschko will be “by far” the best opponent he’s ever faced. More importantly, he knows to finish off the job he’s undertaken he will have to first get the good Dr. to leave his college degrees at home and come to the arena with the intention of losing his mind and fighting the way he’s been talking which, frankly, is not likely.

“I got to make him do what he doesn’t do naturally - engage,” Haye admitted. “Most people, the first time they take some punishment (from Haye) are ready to taste the canvas.”

Klitschko has become the dominant fighter in a languishing division because he has not engaged until he was ready. He is by nature a safety first fighter who uses a long and punishing jab the same way a picador uses his lance to weaken the bull before the matador ever appears in the ring.

Often that creates a blood letting before the real fight begins. This has worked well for Klitschko over the years but if he fights the way he’s talking this time he will move away from that and closer toward the approach Steward admits he favors.

Emanuel Steward became a Hall of Fame trainer and creator of the KRONK Gym name by producing knockout artists like Thomas Hearns. His fighters were most often hard-punching, forward moving boxers who attacked. To use Haye’s words they “engaged.” Klitschko, on the other hand, has often seemed reticent to do that in part because his chin has failed him several times, including when he went down three times in a victory over Sam Peter several years ago.

Peter was so inept a boxer and so poor a finisher that despite being able to knock Klitschko down, he couldn’t win another minute of the 12 rounds they fought. Haye, on the other hand, has always been a grimly efficient finisher. If he gets you in trouble you generally stay there until the gendarmes show up.

So what is Klitschko willing to risk to inflict the kind of knockout he’s talking about? Will he be foolhardy or merely fearsome? Will he rush in, stay behind his jab or do enough of both to deliver on his public threats? You might need a Ph.d to figure that out.

Asked to elucidate Haye’s skill set however, Klitschko said, “I will not underestimate him. He has good fast hands.....(long, longer, longest pause)....and a pretty weak chin.”

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Then Dr. Steelhammer, the pugilistic PH.d, laughed. It was not an academic laugh. It was an assassin's laugh.

"It's a big mistake to go in and think you're just going to knock him out," Klitschko said. "Things happen in the ring without thinking. He was making fun of my style. Jab, hold. Jab, hold. It's funny to him now but the best man laughs who laughs at the end.

"If he wants to win that's great but he is not acting in a professional way. What he did with my family members' body (on the T-shirt and in photos) is not funny. I asked him, 'What are you going to do next? You going to cut the head off my mother? My father?'

"There's a certain way to act. A lot of kids look up to us. Honestly, that picture bothers me. I never heard of him. After the fight I'll forget about him. He is not my neighbor.

"I will knock him out and I will punish him before I do. I am just sharing with you my dream."

If things turn out to be academic for boxing's Ph.d. it will not be a dream for David Haye. It would be a nightmare.