

David Tua: What Could've Been Never Was

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 10 June 2009 19:00

David Tua -- remember him? Maybe you recall he was one of the top heavyweight contenders during the years 1996 through 2002. Perhaps you remember his great fight in June of 1997 with the fighter who was on a rocket pace to becoming the Sonny Liston of the 21st century, Ike Ibeabuchi. That was some fight matching two fighters who had the potential to really make a mark in the heavyweight division but never did.

As most know Ibeabuchi went off the deep end and two years later was out of boxing and getting fat sitting in a jail cell. Tua's self discipline was iffy and after weighing 226 for his fight with Ike, he weighed in under 230 pounds just three times over the next 10 years. If there ever was a fighter who never came close to reaching his full potential, it's David Tua. I remember sitting ringside in Atlantic City at the "Night Of The Young Heavyweights" card and watching him go through future champ John Ruiz in 19 seconds. Tua's devastation of Ruiz was actually scary. After getting over the initial shock of Tua's once in a lifetime power, I turned to the guy next to me and said there's a future heavyweight champion.

Oh, how wrong I was. Had someone said to me that night the loser would turn out to be the winner and the winner would turn out to be the loser -- I would've told them they were out of their mind. Which is exactly how it turned out. Ruiz went on to win a piece of the heavyweight title twice and fought for it umpteen times. Ironically, Ruiz turned out to be the complete opposite of Tua in that he squeezed everything he could out of less natural ability.

On the other hand Tua earned one title shot against Lennox Lewis three years later at a time when Lennox may have been fighting better than he ever had in his career. And on that fateful night Tua was methodically taken apart by Lennox en-route to losing a unanimous decision in a fight that he very well may have not have won three rounds.

Not only has Tua been the poster boy for unfulfilled potential, but think about the fighters he beat during his career along with Ruiz who did win a piece of the heavyweight title slightly before or after fighting him. For starters he knocked out Oleg Maskaev who has been in an out of title contention for a better part of the last decade. Then there's Hasim Rahman, who knocked Lennox Lewis out to win the title and is one of only two fighters to ever defeat Lewis. In his next to last fight against a former heavyweight title holder Tua knocked out Michael Moorer in 30 seconds in August of 2002.

For the last 12 years David Tua has been one of the most frustrating fighters, regardless of division, to follow. When you think about a heavyweight who was blessed at birth with a cast-iron chin, something that an upper-tier heavyweight must possess if he's to have any shot at winning a portion of the title, you think Tua. To compliment his chin, Tua was blessed with almost inhumane two handed punching power. In fact I think he's the biggest single shot puncher since George Foreman circa 1973-74. In that, I mean Tua is the last heavyweight you'd want to have with your back to the ropes and your feet planted with him in front of you with an open shot, with the exception of the Foreman who reigned as heavyweight champ during the

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early seventies.

One of the things that held Tua from progressing after he fought Ibeabuchi was his escalating weight, which slowed him down and reduced his work rate. Someone wrongly convinced him that being bigger meant added strength and more power. Which is a complete myth. Along with that Tua never learned how to cut off the ring from bell-to-bell while slipping a jab as he was trying to get inside. Basically, if Tua's opponent was a real fighter and fed him a steady diet of jabs while stepping to their left -- they would disrupt his timing and distance forcing him to have to reset.

Imagine what kind of fighter David Tua could've been had he fought with the tenacity and ability to force his opponent to fight and trade with him like former champ "Smokin" Joe Frazier did. Tua couldn't force Chris Byrd or Hasim Rahman to have to fight him off, instead he allowed them to pick their spots and out-box him. This is opposed to Frazier who forced the fastest and greatest escape artist in heavyweight history, Muhammad Ali, to fight every minute of nearly every round they fought.

Since being held to a draw by Hasim Rahman in an IBF title eliminator in March of 2003, Tua hasn't fought in what could be considered a noteworthy bout. Since then Tua has gone 7-0 (5 KOs) but hasn't fought anybody who closely resembles a legitimate contender. In 2007 he scored a first and second round knockout in his only two bouts. He was inactive in 2008. As of this writing he's scheduled to fight Shane Cameron 23-1 (20 KOs) this coming October. A quick glance at Cameron's record indicates that at age 31, he's attempting to step up the level of opposition that he's faced and that's giving Tua the benefit of the doubt.

By the time Tua fights Cameron he'll be a month shy of turning 37. Sadly it seems even at this late stage of his career Tua isn't taking his career seriously. Which is tragic considering the physical gifts he was blessed with. Some heavyweights would be willing to give up a few years of their life to acquire those tools, yet for Tua they were there long before he ever made a fist. Sadly, the things Tua needed to do to become a better fighter could be learned, at least to a high enough degree to where it may have pushed him through to the top, but he either didn't care to or didn't think he needed to.

When all is said and done David Tua will retire having only fought one time for the heavyweight title. What compounds the fact that he wasted his natural ability even more is that he did so during an era where a fighter didn't have to be anywhere close to great to win a piece of one of the alphabet titles. Not to mention he was bypassed by some middleweights and light heavyweights along the way who did.

David Tua was blessed at birth with physical gifts that couldn't be learned or taught. Regardless of what anyone says, legitimate punchers are born and under no circumstances can a fighter who is not a born life-taker be transformed into one. And the same thing applies to taking a punch. Wladimir Klitschko will never have the capacity to absorb a great punch like Tua could, regardless of the physical training program or mental conditioning he subjects himself to.

There's no way a fighter with dynamite in both hands and the durability and ability to take a

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punch that rivals that of George Chuvalo should've earned only one title shot. At least not in the era he fought in. Think of the different trajectories the careers of John Ruiz and David Tua took since that night back in March of 1996 when they crossed paths. Ruiz, the fighter with less talent and ability refused to be denied and wanted it more. Had Tua had the same mindset and tenacity of Ruiz, he could've been regarded as one of the best heavyweights since Larry Holmes was in his prime.

On the night Tua fought Ibeabuchi---I had Tua winning by a point---both he and Ike could've won the title from any heavyweight who has held it since Larry Holmes last reigned as champion. Tua could've been some fighter. one that would've been remembered long after he retired, as opposed to being a fighter who is still active who we've all but forgotten about!