

Thoughts On The Russian Heavyweights

Written by Frank Lotierzo
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For the better part of the last decade the heavyweight division has been pretty much held in check by Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko of the Ukraine. Minus the Klitschkos fighters from other countries broken apart from the former U.S.S.R. are at the top of the rankings in boxings flagship division currently, fighters going by the names Ruslan Chagaev, Nikolay Valuev, Alexander Povetkin, Alexander Dimitrenko and no doubt soon to be joined by Denis Boystov. Their American contemporaries go by the names John Ruiz, Eddie Chambers, Chris Arreola, James Toney, Ray Austin and like Boystov, Kevin Johnson is about to enter into the mix.

Before breaking down the heavyweights from the east and the west, Ruiz, Toney and Austin must be struck from the list of American heavyweights as far as what the future may look like. Ruiz is 37 and has already been hosed out of the decision in Germany in three fights, two against Valuev and one versus Chagaev. Toney is 40 and has lost to Samuel Peter twice. He's not only too old -- he's too small and struggled with Fres Oquendo in his last fight six months ago. Austin is five months from turning 39 and was pulverized by Wladimir Klitschko two years ago in his attempt at the IBF/IBO title. On the other side, Valuev must be struck too. He's 35 and nothing other than big.

There is a book's worth of ideas and thoughts as to why the Russian heavyweights have been surging. However, I think there are a few major factors influencing the trend. Some point to socioeconomics as the main reason the Eastern bloc fighters have excelled, but there's more to it than that. There's always been big money in professional boxing for the best of the best and borderline great fighters.

At one time the heavyweight division was dominated by American born fighters. Today in America boxing is dwarfed by the other major sports in the mainstream sports media while at the same time it's been getting more difficult to find boxing on the major networks as opposed to the way it was a decade ago. Less exposure to would-be future prospects has been a major contributing factor as to why America's heavyweights are almost an endangered species.

With potential heavyweight fighters growing up in America watching and wanting to emulate Kobe Bryant and Ray Lewis, the chances of the next Muhammad Ali emerging lessens. Outside of America, boxing is still a first tier sport and the top fighters in those countries are regarded as almost being royalty. Nor are they dismissed after one loss or a less than spectacular showing. In the United States most of the elite heavyweights are mocked for how they look or them not being the next Joe Louis or Mike Tyson.

Why is it that I'm much more confident in Povetkin, Dimitrenko and maybe even Boystov in making a mark in the next year and a half than I am Chambers, Arreola and Johnson? It's not like the Soviet bloc fighters are great or unbeatable. Yet, with the possible exception of Arreola because he can punch and isn't afraid to let his hands go, I'd have no reservation betting on the Soviet fighters to beat the Americans almost every time in a head-to-head match up.

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For starters -- the Russians come from a sophisticated amateur boxing program. They participate in a rigid training regimen where they're taught good basics and fundamentals from day one. By the time their upper-tier amateurs make it to the Olympic Trials they've engaged in more than 100 fights. On top of that, during the process of trying to make the Olympic team they've usually already fought against the best fighters that Cuba, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and America had to offer. In most cases amateur fighters who have fought against International competition several times are practically six-round pros by the time they make their debut.

The often referred to Russian heavyweights impress me in as far as winning really does mean something to them. It's easy to glean from them that they know the importance of training and going to the gym every day and don't look to shirk extra work and sparring. Something often overlooked by writers, fighters and fans is the only other thing besides the actual fight that a boxer has total control over is what he puts into preparing and getting ready for it.

It wouldn't surprise me a bit that they're more often than not willing to run the extra mile or two without having to be coaxed or pushed. It's almost as if the top ranked Russian heavyweights understand that the window to succeed isn't open long and they must get through while it's open. They seem to approach fighting with the mindset of 'I can't do this forever and there's only so long I'll be able to do it at the highest level -- so I better give it all I've got while I can. The better I am and the more success I have now, the better I'll be set in the next stage of my life after boxing.'

I don't see the somewhat natural cockiness in them that I do in a lot of their American counterparts. I'm not confident that the American heavyweights can be counted on every day to grow and get better. If recent history tells us anything it's that they can't. I wonder if we would we see a better American heavyweight fighter if they prepared like they weren't the more gifted physically? And adopted the mindset that it'll take more than just my ability to beat my opponent. In other words approaching it with a fear of losing mindset.

The Russian heavyweights aren't great -- but they're steady and posses good fundamentals and basics, something that's just not there when watching the upper-tier U.S. born heavyweights. They're much too complacent and miss the point that what your body looks like goes a long way in forming the perception fans get as to how serious they take their chosen profession.

If there's an active ranked Russian heavyweight out there who has an extra roll of flesh over his trunks, please let me know his name.

Again, the Russian heavyweights aren't close to being what you'd consider great fighters, but they exhibit pretty much everything else you'd want. Some may rebuke the above and suggest that some of the American heavyweights are more highly skilled, physically. And that's a fair point, but as we've seen that's just not enough. Eddie Chambers is a more gifted fighter than Alexander Povetkin, but it wasn't enough to overcome Povetkin's mental and physical desire. If somehow those two factors could've been inter-changed the night they fought -- is there a morsel of doubt that Chambers would still be undefeated instead of the opposite?

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This coming July the WBC's second ranked heavyweight contender -- Alexander Dimitrenko 29-0 (19 KOs) will fight the WBC's fifth ranked contender Eddie Chambers 34-1 (18 KOs). This is a big fight for both at the same stage in their careers. The winner is tentatively scheduled to fight the winner of the June 20th Wladimir Klitschko vs. Ruslan Chagaev WBO title bout in Germany. If my life depended on it, I'd bet that Dimitrenko will show up with a singlemindedness of purpose and will not be side-tracked or lose focus. As much as I like Chambers, I just can't say that about him. I don't think Chambers' conditioning is his obstacle, but focus and motivation have been in the past, and that alone could easily be the difference in the fight.