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Remember when Wladimir Klitschko was being touted by HBO as the heir apparent to Lennox Lewis after he neutralized Chris Byrd over 12 rounds in late 2000 to win the WBO heavyweight title? At that time we were also being told that Wladimir's first defeat, an 11th round TKO stoppage loss to Ross Purrity (24-13-1) in his 25th bout was a fluke and just a matter of him tiring. And despite the loss to Purrity, Wladimir represented the new super-heavyweight fighter of the 21st Century.

Statements to that effect were often repeated at the pre and post fight press conferences of his fights and during the network broadcast of them. For a time in the early 2000's Wladimir received tremendous press and if you didn't know better one would think he would dominate the heavyweight division until he chose to retire. Then after five successful title defenses, all won by stoppage, Klitschko was stopped by Corrie Sanders, who was known for his punching power, in two rounds and was considered an over-hyped talent with a porcelain chin.

After the loss to Sanders, Klitschko brought Emanuel Steward in to train him. Steward was known for developing and teaching tall fighters how to best utilize their height and reach. In other words, he taught them how to fight big, something he did for Lennox Lewis and it ended up improving him dramatically as a fighter. Steward knew the style he had to construct for Wladimir and knows what the other heavyweights in the division can't do. The first thing Steward taught Klitschko was how to hold and clinch and make his long reach and 6'6" size work to his advantage. Once Klitschko grasped that concept he became almost impossible to follow up with a second finishing punch.

Klitschko scored two stoppage wins under Steward and earned a fight with Lamon Brewster for the vacant WBO heavyweight title. Klitschko dominated Brewster from the onset and even managed to drop him with an overhand right late in the fourth round. In the fifth round Klitschko slowed down and Brewster hurt him with a sweeping left-hook that led to him taking a standing eight count. When the bell rang to end the round Klitschko was exhausted and collapsed and the fight was stopped.

After being stopped twice by two fighters known for their power in 13 months, Wladimir Klitschko's career as a big time heavyweight appeared to be over. Once again, however, he rededicated himself and vowed to comeback. After scoring two stoppage wins he agreed to fight undefeated Samuel Peter in a title elimination bout that would decide the fate of his career. Peter was considered the new terror in the division, but lacked polish and experience. Even at that his crude swing for the fence attack was thought to be all he needed to get by the fragile Klitschko. Only it wasn't so. Klitschko fought one of the best fights of his career and despite suffering three knockdowns he out thought and fought Peter in nine of 12 rounds and won a unanimous decision.

Since beating Peter, Wladimir Klitschko hasn't looked back nor has he been in trouble in any fight. He's gone 10-0 (8 KOs) since losing to Lamon Brewster and has won the IBF and WBO

heavyweight titles. He's also beaten four undefeated fighters with a combined record of 93-0-2 and defeated Brewster in a rematch. The only fighter he's faced since his last setback that sported more than three loses on their record was Hasim Rahman, and everyone knows Rahman has taken on the biggest names in the division over the past decade.

For the last five years Wladimir Klitschko hasn't lost a fight and has won seven title bouts, with only the undefeated Sultan Ibragimov going the distance with him. Even at that Ibragimov only won three rounds at the most. The fact is Klitschko has been dominant and has scored some impressive knockouts along the way. Say what you will about the era not being one that will be talked about in 10 years, at least Klitschko has done what he's suppossed to do when confronted by second tier opposition, and that's get rid of his opponent in an impressive fashion.

It's repeated by fans and writers continuously that his bouts aren't exciting and he fights with trepidation, two fair points that won't be disputed here. However, in all fairness, how many thrilling and exciting title defenses did Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali and Larry Holmes make? It's out right dishonest to say every one of their title defenses were action packed and exciting. Louis had the bum of the month club. Ali, at age 33 defended the title against Chuck Wepner and Joe Bugner, and Holmes was defending it against Scott Frank and Lucien Rodriguez at relatively the same age Klitschko is now.

It also can't be disputed that Wladimir Klitschko fights defensively and sometimes exhibits hesitation in the ring. Before addressing that, it must be noted that Klitschko has overcome a lot of psychological baggage just to get back in the ring and compete with the best heavyweights in the world. And like Lennox Lewis, Klitschko has shown that his heart can't be questioned. He knows he doesn't have a great chin and lives with that in the back of his head every time he gets in the ring. Knowing that obviously leads to him fighting cautiously. But what about his opponents? They surely know that's considered his Achilles. Isn't the onus on them to go after him and try to put the seed of doubt in his mind even more? He has the title, you'd think fighting a guy with self doubt would lead to his opponents going after him more than any single one of them has attempted to. Only Chris Byrd gets a pass since he really wasn't a true heavyweight nor did he carry a big enough punch to get Klitschko out. Yet, he tried harder during their rematch to get to him than any other opponent he's fought in the last five years.

A lot of Klitschko's opponents talked a good fight before confronting him in the ring, just as David Tua talked before he fought Lennox Lewis. Tua said he was going to throw a hundred punches a round and knock Lewis out, something that changed once he ate a couple Lewis right hands. Samuel Peter did the same thing before fighting Wladimir, and like Tua, once he was touched a few times he fought in a measured manner and with caution for most of the bout. What does that tell you? Perhaps Klitschko inflicts a little pain when he connects. Every fighter I've talked to that has either sparred or fought him says he can really punch. Obviously, they're more qualified to speak to that than any writers or fans. They've also reiterated that he forces his opponent by virtue of his size to fight from their weakness and he neutralizes their strength. Which is what he's supposed to do. Not stick his chin out and dare them to try and hurt him.

He's the fighter with the name and the title. Beating him leads to more paydays. Lamon Brewster parlayed his win over Klitschko into three successful title defenses. Corrie Sanders

didn't take advantage of him hitting the lottery when he beat Wladimir, and ended up losing the title to his older brother Vitali in his next fight a year later. The point is there's a lot of incentive for his opponents to go after him and try to take him down, yet when most of them get in the ring with him they look to survive more than to win. Why is that?

At the same time he can only fight the fighters of his era. It's not like he's avoided or ducked any particular fighter during his title reign. Neither Mike Tyson or Riddick Bowe can say that, at least with a straight face they can't. All Klitschko can do is fight who is in front of him. It can't be held against him that the fighters who are his size aren't nearly as skilled as he is, and the smaller heavyweights don't have anything physically to beat him with.

His showing over the last five years has been impressive. This time five years ago he was written off and most figured he'd be relegated to being his brother's most reliable sparring partner, instead of the fighter to beat in the heavyweight division. It's not easy to get wins at the top of the heavyweight division during any era, something Klitschko has made look pretty easy in doing. Yes, even in the current state of the heavyweight division, everybody looks like a world beater when you are fighting and managing fighters in it.

In the late 90s I helped a friend with a heavyweight he managed who was going to fight Terrence Lewis. No big deal, right, it's not like he was Sonny Liston, George Foreman or Lennox Lewis. Anyhow, we get to the weigh in and Terrence walks in a few minutes later. After seeing Lewis come in we turned and looked at each other and commented how he appeared to be much bigger than we remembered him to be. That night in the ring he looked even bigger. They all do when you or your fighter have to fight them.

Some of Klitschko's manager and trainer critics would jump at the chance to manage or train him. Why? One reason. They know how formidable he is and how much money he would've netted them fighting in the heavyweight division he's competed during the past five years.

Who knows how history will look back at Wladimir Klitschko when he retires. However, since Lennox Lewis retired, he's been the most dominant heavyweight with the possible exception of his brother. That's irrefutable. The Chagaev fight is something boxing fans seldom get -- a prime vs. prime match up between two different world title holders. Klitschko vs. Chagaev delivers that.

Then again if he beats the undefeated Ruslan Chagaev Saturday night, it will be said Chagaev was a nobody. If he loses to him, it'll be repeated endlessly that Wladimir Klitschko was never any good and it was just a matter of an unspecting fighter catching him with a good one on the chin.

Based on what Wladimir Klitschko has accomplished in the ring since his last defeat, he's earned a second look and career evaluation. A career record of 52-3 (46 KOs) versus the best of his era definitely merits at least that.

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