

Chagaev Has To Roll The Dice Versus Klitschko

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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For the better part of the last month former cruiserweight champ David Haye did his best Muhammad Ali imitation trying to get under WBO/IBF heavyweight title holder Wladimir Klitschko's skin. From the moment they signed to fight on June 20 in Germany, Haye had been relentlessly tossing verbal assaults at Klitschko. However, due to Haye injuring his back during training he had to withdraw from the fight and has been replaced by former WBA title holder Ruslan Chagaev 25-0 (17 KOs).

Haye's contrived remarks had boxing fans looking forward to seeing Wladimir Klitschko 52-3 (46 KOs) being challenged by a fighter who would be willing to go after him at his own peril. The only problem with that was Haye's chin may have also led to a very short fight with him getting stretched in the midst of going for the sensational knockout himself. Frankly, Haye would excite me a lot more if he had a little more of Evander Holyfield's chin instead of Muhammad Ali's tongue.

That's why Chagaev replacing Haye could turn out to be a good thing. The truth is if Chagaev attacks Klitschko like Haye presumably would have, he may stand a better shot at giving Wladimir a good scare, if not beating him. Chagaev is tough and has a rock-solid chin. He's also a smart fighter and always shows up in good condition. Chagaev is a southpaw, but Klitschko isn't bothered by that because he knows how to utilize his height and reach. Klitschko usually forces southpaws to lunge for him with their left cross. Chagaev throws straight punches and keeps his hands up when he's not punching. Unfortunately, one of his favorite punches is a left lead, a punch I don't think he'll attempt to land that often unless he has Wladimir shook. I know Corrie Sanders drilled Wladimir with his left cross when he stopped him, but Sanders is bigger and has longer arms than Chagaev, on top of being a much bigger puncher.

The problem Chagaev faces in fighting Wladimir Klitschko is one that everybody else who fights him has -- under Emanuel Steward he's learned how to use his size and body in a way that his opponents basically have to take chances in order to get to him. Klitschko uses his jab to dictate the distance at which he keeps his opponents off and away from him, more so than using it to score with. He keeps it in their face sort of like a catchers-mitt as a way to shield their view from him, thus enabling him to land cleanly on them. This sometimes can make his opponent guess where they think he is as they try to retaliate, which is what Wladimir Klitschko lives for. He does it repeatedly, then slips his right hand over his left and blind-sides his opponent.

Unlike the way Chagaev fought Nicolay Vakuev, he can't fight Klitschko on the outside while moving around the ring and feinting, looking to counter a Valuev lead. Klitschko also doesn't lean in with his head down the way Valuev tends to do, something that Chagaev was able to take advantage of because of the short and quick combinations he throws.

In handicapping Klitschko-Chagaev, I see Ruslan not having the ideal body or style to beat Wladimir, not that many other current heavyweights do. If Chagaev is to have any chance to

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upset Klitschko he has to get inside thus neutralizing Wladimir's reach and making the most of his short reach and compact combinations that he often throws.

Since he's not very cagey or creative he'll have to roll the dice and take his fair share of chances to get inside, which plays into exactly what Klitschko wants him to do. Compounding the task for Chagaev is the fact that he's not much of a puncher and he isn't very busy or aggressive other than in spurts. Wladimir Klitchko can handle fighters who attack sporadically. Usually when he's under that kind of assault he doesn't try to fight back and sticks to defense and not getting caught.

Chagaev is in the unenviable position of having to attack a big strong guy who can punch, who has made a career of laying in wait for his opponents to over-commit or reach for him. However, Ruslan has a very good chin and is tough as nails, two assets that he'll need in order to score the upset over Klitschko if it's to be.

Obviously, Klitschko is a significant favorite as he should be. That said he's nowhere near unbeatable and tends to fight with trepidation, especially against a willing opponent. As we saw in his title defense against Sultan Ibragimov, once he threw a couple of big shots at Klitschko early in the fight that missed, Wladimir backed off and didn't press the fight. He basically pawed with his left hand and feinted the right in trying to scare Ibragimov off and it worked. By just threatening to uncork his right hand a few times during the fight, he forced Ibragimov to fight complacently; Wladimir was happy going the distance and not trying to force the stoppage. Thus boxing fans were stuck enduring a lousy fight that was hard to watch.

It's been years since we've last seen an exciting and compelling title fight in the heavyweight division. It would be and overdue and a welcome change if the Klitschko-Chagaev bout turned out to be something special or memorable, but I wouldn't count on it. I'd be satisfied and respect Chagaev more if he was stopped trying to knock Klitschko out going for the win, as opposed to him fighting not to get knocked out in order to claim a moral victory in going the distance.

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