

Ultra Competent But Robotic Wlad Wins Another Borefest

Written by Michael Woods
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When Michael Buffer, or Jimmy Lennon Jr, or Jimmy Lennon Sr used to intone ...”for the heavyweight championship of the worrrrrrrrrrrld,” the average hardcore fight fan could be guaranteed to get a shot of goosebumps coursing through his body. But in this heavyweight era, dominated by the highly skilled but exceedingly cautious Klitschko boys, that call to arms by an emcee fails to generate much of a buzz factor. On Saturday evening in Germany, Wladimir Klitschko (53-3, 47 KOs) once again put on one of his patented displays of calculated pugilism, which any student of the sweet science must acknowledge is beyond competent. This time, for his eighth title defense, he confounded another shorter foe with a reach disadvantage, Ruslan Chagaev (25-1-1), and rendered him a hopeless heavy bag of a fighter within a couple of rounds. At Veltins Arena in Gelsenkirchen, Klitschko did it in that robotic fashion that earns him compliments from students of the game, but yawns from the multitude of boxing fans outside of Germany, who prefer to see less hedging of bets, less hyper-vigilance from their fight icons, especially heavyweights, who traditionally have been ideally counted on to live up to the tag the Baddest Man on the Planet by fighting as if their foe sneezed on them, and then boasted that they are carriers of the Swine Flu.

Fight fans not enamored of Klitschko’s tactics, which insure his tainted chin doesn’t have to pass any rigorous tests, had hoped that he’d be forced to exit his comfort zone against ex cruiserweight champion David Haye, who’d taunted Wlad and his brother Vitali with promises of gory dismemberments. But while Haye talked the talk with the best of them, his walking is still is up for debate; he pulled out of the tussle with Wlad, claiming injury, and instead fans had to hope Chagaev (age 30; 224 ³/₄ pounds) could force Wlad (age 33; 240 ¹/₄ pounds) to depart from his well-worn script.

Didn’t happen. That script is now dog eared, and is a tired cliché of a tale, begging for an overhaul by fresh body, be it Haye or some other boxer who will inject at least a hint of desperation, animation and danger into a Wladimir Klitschko fight. The IBF/WBO/IBO champion Klitschko scored a second round knockdown and forced Chagaev’s corner to shut their man down following the ninth round with a steady barrage of jabs and right hand follows. His showing, lest anyone out there protest that I am not giving the man due credit, was technically sound, and strategically wise, but almost totally devoid of zest.

The 6-1 lefty Chagaev, from Uzbekistan, showed off a middlin’ jab in round one, and was introduced to a jab of another level. He threw himself at the 6-6 Wlad some, but mostly was forced to stay at arm’s length, as Wlad mixed in sharp jabs with his pawing variety, meant to keep his foe out of punching range. The challenger conjured a brown acid flashback, of Sultan Ibragimov, another short-limbed lefty from Eastern Europe. Wlad’s face while he boxes features a look of intense concentration, broken up by wide-eyed displays of caution, set off when a foe unleashes a barrage with meaningful intent. Chagaev didn’t do much to make Wlad worried early, and instead ate a one-two that put him on his tush in the second. He exited the round, as the cautious one chose not to test the Uzbek, see if the knockdown severely compromised his senses.

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In the third, Wlad pawed with the jab, and occasionally took his right out of the holster, when he decided that beyond a shadow of a doubt, Chagaev wasn't in a position to counter him. Chagev appeared to have no discernible strategy to minimize the physical disparity. He tossed not more than a handful of punches of the non sparring-session type. In the fourth, Wlad mixed in a couple left hooks off the jab, but they weren't angry throws at all. An impatient viewer might have by this time yelled at his screen, at Chagaev, wondering why he'd fallen in to the same state of somnambulism that befell so many other Klitschko foes. Why not go for broke, a la Chris Byrd?

In the fifth, Chagaev fought passively, again. Maybe he was simply copying the crowd, which watched politely, their pulses rising a notch or two or three times a round. I resisted the temptation to skip ahead on the DVR, as Chagaev's stuck to his gameplan, which apparently was to act alternately befuddled, passive, and frustrated as Wlad chipped away at him. Full disclosure: I couldn't resist fast forwarding in the seventh, as there seemed to be not a sliver of possibility that Chagaev would stop channeling Ibragimov. Thirty seconds later, Wlad was still his competent, cautious self, still dictating the distance between the men, still refusing to press the issue, toss caution to the wind, and give us heathen s some red meat. Chagaev at the end of the round landed a left on a break, his best of the night, but Wlad didn't crumble.

In the eighth, Wlad caused a cut over Chagaev's left eye. He stepped it up, and danced more, perhaps looking for some different angles. Why not sit down on your punches, put together a gaggle of combos? Because Wlad fights smart, 24-7, and is loathe to do anything that might let his foe get an unimpeded shot at his chin. In round nine, the ever calculating Ukrainian kept using that pesky jab, and still treated Chagaev with a deference you'd expect if he were fighting Sonny Liston, circa 1962. He jammed home six one-tuos, with the rights blasting through Chagaev's guard. After the round, Team Chagaev looked at the slice on the left eyebrow, saw the crimson writing on the wall, and called it a night for their guy.

The crowd erupted—OK, they went from politely engaged to mildly animated—as the referee Eddie Cotton signaled the stoppage. Klitschko then spent several minutes soaking up adulation from the crowd, and I spent several minutes cursing the state of the division, and wishing for someone, anyone, to appear who can take this man out of his comfort zone, so all of us fans of the supersized sluggers can once again get those goose bumps that should appear when we hear ...”for the heavyweight championship of the wooorrrrrld!”

SPEEDBAG HBO was going to show Wlad/Haye, but let ESPN Classic air this bout, deciding that Chagaev wouldn't stand a chance. Thanks to ESPN for at least letting us tune in, in case the unexpected happened.