

The Man With The Golden Thumb

Written by Phil Woolever

Saturday, 20 June 2009 19:00

GELSENKIRCHEN - Once again consensus heavyweight champion Wladimir Klitschko did what he was supposed to do, in the manner most predicted, as he completely controlled and stopped previously undefeated Ruslan Chagaev with a strong but unspectacular performance.

Once again, many observers who watched the contest on USA TV clucked about how Klitschko, now 53-3 (47 KOs), failed to impress in the style they felt befitted a truly special boxer.

Once again, a German arena was overflowing with faithful, enthusiastic Klitschko fans who didn't care a bit about what critics cried.

This time the assembled swarm was even bigger than usual, as Veltins Arena was indeed packed to the Rheinland gills with a crowd of approximately 61,000 people.

It was not an unhappy crowd that departed after Klitschko ground the brave, durable, but generally ineffective Chagaev, 25-1-1 (17 KOs), down into slugged-out submission after nine mostly one-sided frames.

For the gloved up garden of professional boxing, at least in these well- heeled environs, the padded mitts Klitschko used to powder Chagaev's mug held special symbolism with bright, gold colored thumb areas. In current Klitschkoville, growth remains the operative definition whether you're looking at blossoming live gate sales or tagging technique.

From the looks and comments of the ticket buying throngs as they exited into a rain-misted early morning, most consumers here will gladly continue to patronize Klitschko fights. The crowd here would be happy to return, and probably willing to pay more the next time.

After the fight, Klitschko was more animated than ever before as he screamed with delight at his masses.

"I want to thank every single man, woman, and child that came here tonight!" Klitschko yelled as the grandstands responded with a roar.

"The fight was as I planned," added the relatively untouched Klitschko. "I expected pressure, he wouldn't box with me. Ruslan was pushing. I just had to move my feet and punch from a different position. My jab was working well and I knew that was a key."

"I felt I could have fought more rounds but my corner said no and it's his decision," said Chagaev, who kept moving forward with his hands up but didn't let them go nearly enough to be a threat.

You can count team members of the Klitschko brothers' widely successful promotional enterprises, K2 and Klitschko Management Group, among those who don't seem to hear or pay

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attention to the negative yapping that accompanies either Wladimir or Vitali's professional appearances.

It would be pretty hard for the Klitschkos to let naysayers get to them anyway, amidst their throngs of European admirers.

German boxing cards seem to have less of a "blood sport" mentality than many arenas I've seen on the American continent.

I've never heard the "kill him" type barking you get at many US venues, and never heard a card girl insulted here. I'm not claiming one fan set philosophy is better or more conducive in terms of resulting boxing quality. Both scenarios are usually a blast.

By my observation, German boxing matches are more of a high end date night than a down and dirty evening out with the boys.

Just how civilized should a boxing card be, anyway?

The Klitschko-Chagaev card, billed as "Knockout Auf Schalke (named for the very popular football team that plays in Veltins arena) was a big night out. The packed "VIP" (read expensive as in well over five hundred euros a minimum pop) floor area featured an amazing buffet spread, and popular, offbeat entertainment.

After US heavyweight Cedric Boswell, 30-1 (24 KOs), made his pitch for a title opportunity and halted overmatched local Serdar Uysal, 9-7-2 (4 KOs), and Kronk teammate and Irish middleweight Andy Lee, 18-1 (13 KOs), had a tougher time than expected with willing Olegs Fedotovs, 10-6 (6 KOs), there was a break in the bouts as a top German comedian did twenty minutes of roaming stand-up.

Audience reaction was mixed, but at least it was something new. Nothing wrong with adding a bit of intermission culture to the conking.

I'll admit succumbing to personal, Father's Day fiesta bias. It's hard to be critical of a situation when you're stuffing your face with Remoulade truffle cream sirloin or red curry mango catfish, puffing cubans between primo Dortmund area brews or shots of cranberry Nemiroff vodka while you listen to "The Boss Hoss", a speed-metal cowboy band that sounded like a thrash version of Big and Rich.

Speed metal country western from Berlin? Live comedy? Add all the punching puns you want, but it wasn't your typical fight scene. Purists may take the position that such additions are merely smoke and mirrors for the Klitschkos' lack of fistic prowess or stirring slugfests.

Maybe it's a matter of different tastes. I never thought I'd see performance poetry or a violin virtuoso before a boxing match, like those at previous Klitschko affairs.

The main event is still the primary attraction, but does it have to be the only priority?

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Maybe the opponent who brings out the best in Klitschko isn't out there. Maybe it will still be David Haye. One can expect to hear Haye squawk the same way he did after other Klitschko fights, once again making his case as an opponent, but now Haye will find less of an audience.

Chagaev is probably willing to fight Haye in the time frame Haye professed he'd be ready, but for Klitschko it's on to bigger and better things even though this latest performance and the surrounding hoopla may be hard to top.

"I'm very upset about Haye," said Klitschko dismissively. "Because of him I missed three to four months of fighting time. I don't want to blame him, but he could not deliver, he was always asking for two or three more weeks, then four or five or six more. I've never gotten a statement about his injury or information from his doctor. Haye has a big, dirty mouth and that's all. He can get in the back of the freaking line.

"I can't wait for him, he's immature as a fighter and as a person. I was ready to fight and I'll give him another chance, but first Haye needs to get some fights and we'll see who emerges."

Haye is probably the preferred option for US and UK fans and TV networks as Klitschko's next opponent but it seems unlikely now Haye will get a shot without beating another name heavyweight first.

In Germany, Klitschko doesn't need any name on the marquee besides his own. Fans aren't disappointed if they don't get a George Foreman-Ron Lyle replay.

Remember, the Chagaev fight was put on in a football/soccer stadium, where single goal games or strategy-based ties are often a vastly popular standard.

Perhaps there is indeed a transcontinental difference in preferred mode of duke-out action. I think much of the preference here puts a premium on the Klitschkos conducting themselves as professionals who show up in good shape and get the job done.

For the most part, Wladimir did exactly that. Chagaev is a sturdy, aggressive fighter who tried to stay busy but simply couldn't handle Klitschko's size and style. As Klitschko continued to peck away with a big jab that served as both offense and defense, it would be unfair to howl about the lack of two-way action.

Klitschko has a formula for success that is still being fine-tuned by Emanuel Steward, and it may still be a while before we see the best of Klitschko.

Or, perhaps we've already seen everything Klitschko has to offer. The debate over those merits continues, but there is no debate over Klitschko's results.

Many people say Klitschko still hasn't proven himself. Even Steward admitted that Klitschko hasn't had the "defining" fight that will endear him to the US public, and likened Klitschko's situation to what Lennox Lewis used to face.

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Maybe Klitschko's defining fight actually was here at Schalke. It's looking more and more like Klitschko will never engage in a toe-to-toe survival, multiple two way knockdown brawl.

Maybe Klitschko will either simply dominate like he did against Chagaev or Hasim Rahman and Tony Thompson before that, or get iced himself like he did versus Lamon Brewster or Corrie Sanders.

Perhaps it isn't just the endings of Klitschko's contests that seem anti-climactic, but the fights themselves.

"I'm getting a little bit lost with all this 'disputed' or 'undisputed' talk," reflected Klitschko in the third language he used at the postfight conference. "The Klitschko brothers have most of the titles now and I just enjoy the process. I'm not thinking about my legacy or my place in history. I just want to enjoy each fight. I definitely want to return to New York City and Madison Square Garden."

"You get criticized when you're dominating, but the controversy starts when you're on the floor or bleeding. I'm not looking forward to proving my chin, because it's made from glass, so I hope I can always dominate my fights." (Editor Note: I wonder, was his "glass" comment a sarcastic one or was he acknowledging a deficiency?)

How many more "boring" title defenses or one sided thumpings will we see before Klitschko runs into another hook that puts him down and out on that old street with its questionable que?

The answer to that issue may become an example of eventually compiling Hall of Fame numbers. Judging from how Klitschko looked against Chagaev, it certainly seems another loss for Wladimir will be coming later, not sooner, if at all.