Maybe it's time to stop blaming the winner for all the boring tugfests we've seen in heavyweight boxing the last few years. Maybe it's time to blame Michael Buffer.

How was a Uzbekistan-born German resident named Ruslan Chagaev to know his fight with master chessman Wladimir Klitschko was about to begin if no one translated Buffer's signature "Let's get READY TO RUMMMBBLLEE!!! pre-fight call to war into Russian or Uzbekistani or whatever his first language may be? There he is, calmly standing in his corner without a care in the world thinking this guy Buffer must be announcing who's singing the anthem or selling some Weiner schnitzel for the local fight card sponsors and, bingo, somebody rings a bell and a fight breaks out? Who knew?

Well, to be fair, not really a fight. Rather another chess match with matching leather gloves, the kind the cerebral Klitschko seems to favor. It is difficult to imagine that today we think of the "golden era'' of Lennox Lewis but such has been the result of too many years watching the Klitschko brothers turn heavyweight boxing into fencing that Lewis is now thought of as Joe Louis by comparison.

This has worked well enough for the brothers Klitschko that big brother Vitali is again the WBC champion while Wladimir holds the WBO and IBF belts as well as the one RING magazine found a lame excuse to bestow upon him after his dissertation on the manly art of self defense was completed following nine rounds with Chagaev sitting on his stool, his left eyebrow sliced open and his interest in throwing punches, which was never high, having waned considerably enough that his corner told referee Eddie Cotton it was time for everyone to go back to the beer gardens in downtown Gelsenkirchen.

The RING claimed this was a fight for its "vacant'' title because it was No. 1 vs. No. 3. Well, if Ruslan Chagaev is the third best heavyweight in the world boxing would be well advised to simply close down the division until such time as big fellows show some interest in actually fighting. But then why get worked up about it? The RING MAGAZINE belt is about as significant as People magazine naming someone the world's sexiest man. It doesn't really mean you're a man or all that sexy.

Saturday afternoon was the latest in what has become an alarming series of heavyweight fights in which the fighting part seemed almost to be an afterthought. There was more defense being played by Chagaev and Klitschko than you see in a football game between the Baltimore Ravens and the Chicago Bears. Chagaev fought like he'd been installed for defensive purposes, his hands so firmly up around his ears they appeared to have been glued there by Klitschko's promoters.

Yet it is becoming unseemly to continue blaming Klitschko (54-2, 47 KO) because he faces opponents who won't fight back. How much his pawing jab and occasional right hand behind it have to do with that is hard to fathom since he throws the latter only when he is well assured he

is on safe ground, but why blame him any longer if guys like Chagaev (25-1-1, 17 KO) decide to prove Willie Pep isn't the only fighter who can win a round without throwing a punch?

Chagaev not only didn't come to Veltins Arena with bad intentions he came with no intentions. At least no intentions of fighting over a silly belt, be it a magazine's version or an alphabet soup one.

That seemed fine with Klitschko, who was free to use his sometimes useful jab to keep himself a fair distance away from peril while pot-shotting Chagaev whenever he felt so inclined. As the rounds went by and it became clear nothing was coming back from Chagaev, Klitschko grew bolder. Not bolder in the sense of Smokin' Joe Frazier but bolder than Chagaev. Of course, Oprah Winfrey would have seemed bolder than Chagaev on Saturday.

Still, Klitschko's trainer, Emanuel Steward, argued during Hall of Fame weekend in Canastota, N.Y. that, "We had the same criticism with Lennox. You're only as good as the guys in front of you let you be.''

In other words, Ali-Frazier was only what it was because both of them came to fight. Same with Bowe-Holyfield or Foreman-Lyle. If only one guy wants to bang he ends up banging the bum slowly. What else can a fellow do?

So, for the moment at least, no more criticism of Wladimir Klitschko from this corner. If his opponents don't want to fight it's not his fault. It's hard to keep marking down someone who keeps marking up the guys in front of him.

Of course, it's not as hard as trying to prove he's a great heavyweight. That will not be done until he finds a fervent foil, an opponent whose only desire is to win the heavyweight championship. When that night comes we'll see how he fights then, but until it does we'll simply look upon him as the owner of many unattractive belts and an equal number of unattractive opponents.