

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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The Cold War presumably ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, but another Berlin Wall of sorts has been erected in Germany, the nation where a raft of heavyweights from the onetime USSR are holding hostage all widely recognized versions of what used to be boxing's most cherished title.

Ukraine's Wladimir Klitschko retained his IBF and WBO straps last weekend in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, with a perfunctorily efficient 10th-round stoppage of Uzbekistan's Ruslan Chagaev, the WBA champion "in recess," whatever that means.

Those not disposed to pay homage to the younger of boxing's two Klitschko brothers as the one, true king of the heavyweights probably give their allegiance to older bro Vitali, the WBC titlist. And for those who really like to march to the beat of a different drummer, there's (no longer interim) WBA champ Nikolay Valuev, the 7-foot, 320-pound Russian bear who moves as ponderously as Frankenstein's monster and has enough hair on his very broad back to qualify as one of his homeland's national forests.

Consider this: Of the last 26 title bouts in which the aforementioned champions appeared (some as challengers), 15 were on German soil. Two others were in Switzerland, leaving only nine to be fought in these United States.

So what happened to that conga line of dominant American heavyweights, stretching back to the Marquess of Queensbury and San Francisco's James J. Corbett as the first recognized champion of the gloved era?

Until recently, the only non-Americans to be globally recognized as the real heavyweight champion were England's Bob Fitzsimmons, Italy's Primo Carnera, Sweden's Ingemar Johansson and England's Lennox Lewis, although splintered versions of the title went to Nigeria's Samuel Peter, England's Frank Bruno, South Africa's Gerrie Coetzee and Francois Botha and, if you perceive a more recent party-crasher, the WBO, to be on an equal footing with the WBC, WBA and IBF, Italy's Francesco Damiani, Nigeria's Henry Akinwande, South Africa's Corrie Sanders and England's Michael Bentt and Herbie Hide.

But with inexorable shift toward the German-based Eastern Europeans who now rule the roost, American heavyweights have been as devalued as cars from Chrysler or General Motors are in comparison to their pricier counterparts from Mercedes-Benz, BMW and even Volkswagen.

All of which makes "Fast" Eddie Chambers, the Pittsburgh-born, Philadelphia-based heavyweight, a man on a mission as he and his team of U.S. dissidents head off on a quasi-secret mission behind enemy lines. Chambers (34-1, 18 KOs) takes on Russia's Alexander Dimitrenko (29-0, 19 KOs) in a WBO elimination bout in Hamburg, Germany, on -- oh, the irony -- the Fourth of July. Should he emerge victorious (and he's an underdog to do so), Chambers, a veteran of 18 appearances at that venerated mausoleum of a Philly fight club,

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Philadelphia's Blue Horizon, becomes the mandatory challenger to the 6-6½, 240-pound Wladimir Klitschko.

Most consider Chambers to be on another suicide mission. (In his only other bout in Germany, on Jan. 26, 2008, in Berlin, he lost a 12-round, unanimous decision to Russia's Alexander Povetkin.) But the undersized American with the quick hands and pedestrian power has a legacy to uphold, or at least to re-establish.

Maybe that's why his trunks will bear the names of such legendary American heavyweight champions as Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield. The same guy who fought with a curious lack of urgency against Povetkin has been in the Pocono mountains preparing with patriotic fervor for his date with Dimitrenko, stoked by the history lessons imparted by his manager-trainer, Rob Murray Sr.

The objective, according to Murray, is for a smallish American with a relatively thin club-fighting resume to rise to previously unattained heights and take back a prize that rightfully has belonged in the USA for lengthy stretches of the past 100-plus years.

"We want to be heavyweight champion of the world, not just the heavyweight champion of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, the state of Pennsylvania or even the United States," Murray said with revival-tent enthusiasm. "To do that, we can't just knock on the door. We have to kick it down."

When Chambers knocked on that door against Povetkin, he did so without a palpable sense of urgency. Oh, sure, the American had his moments in the early going, but he seemed to ease up on the gas pedal in the middle and later rounds as Povetkin won a unanimous decision in an IBF eliminator that supposedly was to lead to a mandatory matchup with Wladimir Klitschko. As of yet, Klitschko and Povetkin have yet to square off.

To Murray, who learned cheesesteak-flavored tricks of the trade by observing such legendary Philadelphia trainers as Yank Durham and Sam Solomon, Chambers' unhurried approach to the Povetkin fight was inexcusable.

A change in the corner clearly was called for, and Murray took over as Chambers' trainer from Eddie Chambers Sr., who acquiesced to the request to step aside if it was in the best interests of his son.

With Murray as the chief second, the post-Povetkin Chambers has reeled off four consecutive victories, including, in his most recent outing, his most important win as a pro, a 10-round majority decision over former WBC heavyweight champ Samuel Peter.

Murray is, by nature, a dice-roller and risk-taker, which is why he agreed to put Chambers in against Peter for short money. "Fast Eddie" needed to take the EZ Pass route back to prime contention, not a leisurely Sunday drive down boxing's back roads, and the only way to do that was to knock off one of the bigger names in the division.

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The 6'1" Chambers, who some have speculated would be better off campaigning as a cruiserweight, weighed a career-high 223 pounds against Peter, who apparently trained at Dunkin' Donuts and came in at an excessively fleshy 265.

But Chambers, 27, has decided that less is more in this potential breakthrough bout against the 6-7, 256-pound Dimitrenko, a pairing that was deemed unworthy of being shown on American television.

Murray used that alleged slight as a motivational tool to convince Chambers that it not only was a personal affront, but a figurative slap to the face of all of his boxing-loving countrymen.

Cue up the Star-Spangled Banner as we salute Old Glory.

"Do you think it's right that this fight is just being shown on German TV?" Murray asks rhetorically, sounding like a Hatfield whose new shoes had been spat upon by a trans-Atlantic McCoy.

Chambers was down to 205 pounds last week, which, if he maintained that up to the official weigh-in, would be the lowest he's been since he turned professional in 2000, although he expects to inch up into the 210-pound range as he tapers off in training.

"I have the ability to beat any heavyweight in the world, and this fight will prove it," he said with the conviction of a man who had glimpsed into a crystal ball and liked what he saw.

Murray said the biggest problem Chambers encountered in his failed attempt to take down Povetkin was an inability to recognize the moment for what it was.

"He was prepared for a fight, but not the fight," Murray said. "Nobody (in the corner) knew what buttons to push. If I had been there for the Povetkin fight, I would have pushed the right buttons."

The buttons Murray is pushing now accentuate Chambers' need for speed – getting in and out, greased-lightning combinations, making Dimitrenko feel as if he were being buzzed by a swarm of angry hornets – and the premise that American heavyweights get no-respect from these hulking Eastern Europeans with Bela Lugosi accents.

Chambers seems amenable to the sales pitch.

"I'm going over there to take the bull by the horns," he vowed. "It won't be like the Povetkin fight. I'm going to start strong and finish strong. I'm going to be strong in the middle, too.

"There's no question of what I'm capable of doing. But talk doesn't count for much. It's all about getting it done. I have a lot to prove, not only to my doubters, but to the world."

And the way to do that, Murray said, is to journey across the pond and make a statement that will oblige the suits at HBO and Showtime to recognize that there is a new sheriff in town, a

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relatively compact one outfitted in red, white and blue.

"No American heavyweight wants to fight in Germany," Chambers said. "Hey, the Eastern Europeans apparently don't want to fight Americans in the United States, for that matter. So somebody has to take a chance, and I guess I'm elected.

"A lot of people say the best U.S. hope is Chris Arreola. I disagree. I say it's me."

Murray likes what he's hearing from Chambers, because it sends out the sort of positive vibe that, hopefully, will make skeptics forget that 51.4 percent of Fast Eddie's bouts were in the Blue Horizon before small, albeit knowledgeable, audiences. If there is such a thing as sparring-partner syndrome above which would-be champions must rise, so, too, is there a stigma that must be erased after having mostly fought in a club venue more familiar to the ham-and-egg set than the caviar-and-filet mignon elite.

Never let it be said that Murray eases up in his attempts to keep Chambers' confidence in good repair.

"Eddie Chambers is the most talented athlete I have been involved with, and I was involved with Bernard Hopkins earlier in his career," Murray said. "Now, Bernard Hopkins was a great student. He soaked up instruction like a sponge. But as far as raw talent, Eddie is even ahead of Bernard."

We shall see. Maybe Chambers has the goods to reveal himself as the best of the American heavyweights. Maybe it's the harder-punching Arreola, another member of the Goossen Tutor promotional stable who has a disturbing propensity for coming in, if not exactly fat, then at least pudgy. Maybe it's Kevin "Kingpin" Johnson or Brian Minto or Jason Estrada or Chazz Witherspoon. Maybe it's retreads like Ray Austin or Lamon Brewster or James Toney or John Ruiz or Hasim Rahman or even Holyfield, who's been around long enough to have had a ringside seat for Cain vs. Abel.

More likely, it's none of the above.

But while you're waiting for America's next pugilistic prophet to wander in from the desert, you can do this on the Fourth of July: grill some hamburgers and hot dogs, hit the beach, take in a ballgame, set off firecrackers and, if it's in your video library, watch Rocky IV and again thrill to the sight of another scaled-down Philadelphia heavyweight chop down massive Russian Ivan Drago.

Who knows? Maybe on the USA's 233rd birthday, Eddie Chambers can do in real-life what Rocky did in reel-life.