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One of the most frustrating mindsets regarding fans and writers today surrounding professional boxing, especially in the heavyweight division, is the one that subconsciously implies that a fighter is not worthy of much coverage if he's suffered a defeat on the way up or before he's fought for a portion of the world title. Regardless of what anyone says -- a fighter who has already lost before challenging for the title is not taken as seriously as an undefeated one. The only reason for that is fight observers must think to themselves if the fighter has already tasted defeat before fighting the best how good could can he really be?

Later this week WBC heavyweight title holder Vitali Klitschko 37-2 (36) will defend his title against Chris Arreola 27-0 (24). As per what's becoming business as usual Arreola is undefeated. And because of that and the fact that Arreola can punch, there's more than casual interest in the fight, which certainly wouldn't be the case if Arreola sported a 26-1 record.

Jim Jeffries and Rocky Marciano between 1899 and 1952 are the only heavyweight champions who were undefeated when they challenged Bob Fitzsimmons and Jersey Joe Walcott for the heavyweight title. I don't know when the marketing strategy changed. However, during those years it was assumed that, in order to fight for a world championship regardless of weight division, you had to have gained experience, which means that you had to lose a fight or two on the way up. Below are the records of some of the more well known lineal heavyweight title holders between 1899 and 1952 as the challenger going into their title winning bouts.

James Jeffries (16-0-2)
Jack Johnson (44-5-7)
Jess Willard (22-4-1)
Jack Dempsey (58-4-11)
Gene Tunney (72-1-4)
Joe Louis (31-1)
Ezzard Charles (60-5-1)
Jersey Joe Walcott (49-16-2)
Rocky Marciano (42-0)

After Marciano and starting with Floyd Patterson, who knocked out Archie Moore for the undisputed heavyweight title which was vacated due to Rocky's retirement in 1955, only Sonny Liston and Wladimir Klitschko had tasted defeat before challenging for the title. And neither Liston or Klitschko suffered their first set-back fighting a real life-taker. Liston laughed at something Marty Marshall said during their bout and got caught with a big shot while his mouth was open. The punch broke Sonny's jaw. Liston went the distance but lost an eight round split decision to Marshall. However, Liston went on to beat Marshall twice after that, once by stoppage.

In regards to Wladimir Klitschko, he was charted and managed with the purpose of going into his initial title challenge as being undefeated. When he was stopped by Ross Puritty two years

after his pro-debut it was a monumental upset. Prior to the fight most fight observers thought Wladimir would blast Puritty out. That thought took a sudden turn when Puritty survived the early onslaught and Wladimir ran out of gas and was stopped in the 11th round. Below are the records of some of lineal heavyweight champs post Marciano when they challenged for the title.

Floyd Patterson (30-1)
Ingemar Johansson (21-0)
Sonny Liston (33-1)
Cassius Clay (19-0)
Joe Frazier (24-0)
George Foreman (37-0)
Larry Holmes (27-0)
Mike Tyson (27-0)
Evander Holyfield (24-0)
Riddick Bowe (31-0)
Lennox Lewis (22-0)
Vitali Klitschko (37-0)
Wladimir Klitschko (34-1)

I'm not sure when it came into real prominence for a heavyweight title challenger to almost be mandated to be undefeated when challenging for the title, but it very well could've started with Cassius Clay aka Muhammad Ali.

It's not a reach to assume that the Louisville Sponsoring group, which was formed to protect and guide their commodity Cassius Clay, laid the blueprint for how to bring a fighter along on the way up. And it's no coincidence that the Cloverlay Corporation was formed by a group of prominent investors to do the same for their only commodity, Joe Frazier. Looking back it's obvious to see that both Clay/Ali and Frazier were thought of as being fighters who could not only win the title but also hold it. To maximize the money and insure a big return on the risk both The Louisville Sponsoring Group and The Cloverlay Corporation took, it was imperative to manage Muhammad and Joe the best they could. Doing that meant keeping them undefeated if possible, and they did.

In and ironic twist of fate it could be said that the two fighters who gave heavyweight boxing two of the greatest fights in its history also showed and stressed how important it was to keep a fighter undefeated before challenging for the championship. But there's a big difference between the way fighters were protected in the 1960s and are protected now. Although astutely managed, both Ali and Frazier fought respectable opposition on their way to title shots. That's no longer a prerequisite to getting a title shot.

There was a time when any serious boxing fan could look over a fighter's record and have an idea of how good the fighter was (and losses helped complete the picture.) It's now commonplace to look at the record of a guy fighting for the heavyweight championship of the world and still have no idea what kind of fighter he really is.

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