

Former Heavyweight Contenders Make Noise on the Comeback Trail

Written by Ronan Keenan

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While being ridiculed as possibly the weakest period in heavyweight boxing, the majority of this decade's contenders can claim to possess a superior physical skill set to their 20th century predecessors. Yet for all their size, strength and punching power, too many of the current crop have resembled gifted athletes rather than rough-edged fighters.

The lack of attractive contenders to the Klitschko brothers' dominance and temptation of handsome paydays has resulted in a continued recycling of familiar names that initially made their mark earlier this decade. Three such entities were in action last weekend in desperate attempts to become relevant factors in the heavyweight title chase.

In London, Audley Harrison and Danny Williams partook in a one-night tournament dubbed Prizefighter by the promoter Barry Hearn. Eight fighters competed in the event, with the winner pocketing £32,000.

"We are trying to combine The Contender and UFC television series into something for professional boxing," said Hearn. "This is a new adventure which will revolutionise the sport in one night."

Hearn's endeavour may not have had such a dramatic impact, but it attracted a capacity crowd of 5,000 to the ExCel Arena to watch a series of frantic three round fights involving underachievers such as Harrison and Williams and a variety of neophyte brawlers.

Yet despite the weakness of the field, Williams made an early exit from the tournament. The 36-year-old once again demonstrated the mental frailties that prevented him from reproducing the blitzing combinations that felled a jaded Mike Tyson five years ago. Whenever Williams has been expected to produce his talents on the big stage he has physiologically lost the contest long before fight time.

After recording the upset over Tyson, the Briton was awarded a shot at Vitali Klitschko's championship in 2004. But Williams crumbled under the weight of an expectant nation, entering the ring at a flabby career high 270 pounds, which effectively nullified his expected speed advantage and resulted in a damaging eight round beatdown. Underperformance had previously blighted Williams's career in previous tests, as evidenced in losses to the likes of Sinan Samil Sam and Julius Francis.

On Saturday, Williams, who still holds the British title, succumbed to a points defeat against the 287-pound Carl Barker, who registered the ninth victory of his 12 fight career. A sluggish Williams was floored twice and seemed to struggle with his footing throughout the nine minute contest.

"I do think that has to be the end for Danny now," reflected Sky Sports broadcaster and former cruiserweight titlist Glenn McCrory. "For the British champion to be humbled like that is a bit

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embarrassing and I do feel sorry for Danny. He has given us so many memories over the years, but it really is hard to see where he goes from here.”

Unlike Williams, Harrison has routinely underperformed in most of the outings in his 26-4 (19 KO) career. The only notable triumph on his slate is a three round knockout of Williams back in 2006, which avenged a defeat from the previous year.

The 2000 Olympic super heavyweight gold medallist has enjoyed size and skill advantages over all of his professional opposition, yet has shown a frustrating reluctance to punch in anything resembling a combination. After turning professional to much fanfare and securing a £1 million ten-fight deal with the BBC, the self-managed Harrison guided himself to the position as Britain’s most vilified sportsman.

Following a series of high profile plodding victories over club fighters, the national broadcasting network was roundly criticized for spending taxpayers’ money on an apparently lackadaisical boxer whose brashness seemed disproportionate to his performances.

“When I get to the top, all I’ll be saying is ‘I told you so’,” retorted Harrison in 2003. “Those people who have written off Audley Harrison will be silenced.”

Yet the BBC decided not to renew their investment in Harrison and the fighter eventually relocated to the US.

Harrison claims external forces never allowed him to succeed in his homeland.

“There has been a campaign against me in this country from day one,” he said. “People have wanted to stitch me up and deny me any chance of getting my career going, either as a promoter or a fighter. From a professional point of view it became untenable being [in Britain]. My race has definitely been an issue, particularly in regards to me being a self-promoter.”

But politics didn’t force Harrison to belie his sharp boxing skills in favor of a lethargic work rate.

“He’s a lazy bugger, he doesn’t want to work too hard,” assessed former world title challenger Joe Bugner of his 260-pound compatriot. “It’s all very well being 6’6” with an enormous reach if you don’t use it.”

But Harrison didn’t heed Bugner’s counsel and his tentative nature saw him get out-hustled by the habitually sedate Dominick Guinn over ten rounds three years ago. The following year Harrison was poleaxed by journeyman Michael Sprott and later suffered a points defeat to Irish brawler Martin Rogan.

Such setbacks led Harrison to the circus environs of Prizefighter on Saturday. While the event isn’t the most dignified way for a 37-year-old to make a living, Harrison held his composure and used a sharp left cross to overcome the trio of Scott Belshaw (10-3), Danny Hughes (6-1-1) and Coleman Barrett (8-1).

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Harrison, who now trains in California, showed little that would suggest he may finally realize his potential, but he dealt with the novice opposition in a proficient manner that will undoubtedly replenish his weathered ego.

“The door was closed on me here,” claimed Harrison after his tournament victory that may propel him to a higher-profile shot at redemption. “I've had a long tough road. I'm grateful to Barry Hearn for the opportunity. Every time I come back to England it feels like a personal redemption.

“I always said I'd be back. I know there's people who want me to shut up and quit but to them I say 'tough, I won't'. I will keep going until I am a heavyweight champion. Once I've done that, then I'll walk away.”

On the other side of the world in New Zealand, David Tua walked through the punches of Shane Cameron on route to a second round knockout. It was Tua's first appearance in two years and his sixth outing since 2006. Managerial problems were offered as the reason for the former title challenger's inactivity, but Tua hasn't shown much urgency to further his career since he became the IBF's mandatory challenger in 1998.

After stopping Hasim Rahman that year to garner the sanctioning body's high ranking, Tua sat on his number one status, brushing aside tune-up opponents while piling on twenty pounds before he was given a shot at Lennox Lewis' crown in 2000. Tua, who scaled 245, gave an understandably flat effort as his rotund 5'10" frame struggled through the twelve round distance.

The wide points loss didn't do much to persuade Tua to reclaim the energy he once displayed in high-tempo scraps with Ike Ibeabuchi and John Ruiz. Yet a scaled-down 237-pound version of Tua re-emerged on Saturday and genuinely seemed eager to obliterate the undefeated Cameron, who proved to have a strong will but feeble punching power.

After catching Cameron with a thudding left hook, Tua berated his foe with heavy volleys, leading noted writer Graham Houston to write: “[Tua] looked back to his very best in Saturday's second-round demolition... This was the fast-starting, fast-punching and powerful Tua that had been missing in a few of his bouts before a two-year hiatus.”

Tua, 50-3-1 (43 KOs), attributed his impressive performance and physique to an intensive training regime that began last June. But will the 36-year-old be so eager to train hard when faced with the prospect of a daunting opponent? It's easier to get motivated and throw bombs when the fighter in the other corner poses little threat.

Harrison, Williams and Tua were listless and under-trained for their big opportunities in the past. Williams can now relax, safe in the knowledge that he will never again have to go through the façade of preparing for a big fight. Harrison and Tua will trawl through the boxing backwaters and secure another night in the limelight. But they are gifted athletes who were once suffocated by the expectations of a testing fight, and the same fate will strike again.

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