

David Haye: A Freak Doing It His Own Way

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Nikolay Valuev is routinely labelled a “freak of nature.” Standing 7ft 2in and weighing over 310 pounds, the WBA beltholder owns distinction as the largest heavyweight titlist in history. The Russian’s bulky cranium, jutting jaw line and matted body hair add to his striking appearance.

“He is the ugliest thing I have ever seen. I have watched Lord of the Rings and films with strange-looking people but for a human being to look like him — it’s pretty shocking,” observed David Haye, who will challenge Valuev on November 7 in Nuremberg. “All you’ve got to do is look at a picture of the guy and that speaks volumes. I consider him more of a freak that happens to be in boxing.”

Yet while Valuev has an abnormal body that was designed by nature, Haye has become a powerfully built physical specimen thanks to a form of corporeal engineering.

Having started his professional career as a 190-pound cruiserweight, Haye will enter the ring in Germany weighing thirty pounds heavier, but maintaining a finely chiselled physique that figures to preserve his celebrated punching power. The well-groomed Londoner, who formerly modelled for Abercrombie & Fitch, seems to be as meticulous about training as he is about his appearance.

Haye has changed his diet and fitness regimes to ensure his campaign in the heavyweight division will be carried out with the same bloodthirsty approach that has seen him tally a pro record of 22-1 (21 KO). And the 29-year-old isn’t afraid to upset established customs.

After defending his cruiserweight crown against Enzo Maccarinelli in a \$1 million payday last year, Haye immediately began chasing the leading heavyweight titlist, Wladimir Klitschko. Even though his most significant heavyweight achievement is a scrappy knockout of journeyman Monte Barrett, Haye has nonetheless had the temerity to launch a high-profile campaign for a title opportunity.

Moreover, he has mocked Klitschko and Valuev with unwavering arrogance, interrupted opponents’ press conferences, and sported a shirt with decapitated images of Wladimir and his brother Vitali. And despite withdrawing from bouts with both Klitschko brothers, Haye maintains a blustery rhetoric against the Ukrainians.

“I don’t give respect to someone just because he’s a boxer,” he said. “Respect has got to be earned.”

Haye’s disdain for uniform behaviour has translated to his training camp on the island of Cyprus where, with the aid of trainer Adam Booth, he has adopted unusual techniques that buck the traditional methods prizefighters have sworn by for decades.

A diet that includes 1½ pounds of steak per day, intensive weight-lifting sessions, and sprinting instead of long distance roadwork are all hallmarks of Haye’s routine, and he doesn’t care what

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purists think.

“The old-school trainers would pass out if they saw all of these weights, but I do a lot of weight training because it builds up strength and endurance if done in the right way,” Haye told Brian Doogan.

“We’ve had people look over and say, ‘What the f*** are they doing? All this new age crap.’ They are the guys who have stayed at British level while I have moved on to the undisputed world cruiserweight championship and now I’m stepping up to challenge the heavyweights.”

Haye is no undersized heavyweight. At his new weight and 6’3” frame, he is similar in build to one of his dearest inspirations, Evander Holyfield, arguably the finest fighter of the 1990s. Size is not Haye’s sole common trait with the four-time heavyweight titlist.

Holyfield, once an outstanding cruiserweight champion, was among the first practitioners of technological training techniques such as weight-lifting machines and nutritional science. But whereas Holyfield was lauded for unwavering punch resistance and everlasting energy, questions have been raised about Haye’s staying power.

In an amateur contest he was shockingly stopped by an unheralded opponent called Jim Twite, then in 2003 he was floored by the obscure Lolenga Mock and the following year, in his sole pro loss, Haye was halted while on the verge of exhaustion against a 40-year-old Carl Thompson. Critics will suggest that Haye can’t absorb punishment, but the fighter himself dismisses the setbacks as lessons against complacency.

“This guy [Twite] wasn’t that good so I thought, ‘I’ll do him in two rounds’. So I go out and bounce around and he slings a really big shot and hits me on the chin,” explained Haye to The Times.

He has similar reasoning for the Thompson loss: “I had a game plan to break him down slowly because he’s a tough customer but I got out there and heard the roar of the crowd and thought, ‘I’ll knock him out quick.’ It was the wrong mindset and I paid the price. I ran out of steam completely, punched myself out in four rounds.”

While a more mature attitude would ostensibly rectify such frailties, there are concerns that Haye has been caught up in too many distractions in recent weeks. With the fight being broadcast on Sky pay-per-view in the UK, Haye has frequently appeared in promotional interviews and two weeks ago he broke training camp to travel from Cyprus to England for a press conference, much to the bemusement of the Guardian’s boxing writer Kevin Mitchell.

“What is Haye doing in wintry London when he should be back at his warm Cyprus hideaway getting in the shape of his life for a world-title fight against a giant?” asked Mitchell. “If Haye doesn’t stop performing for Sky and start concentrating on his preparation, he will literally talk himself out of a world title.”

Conversely, Valuev has kept a low profile in his woodland camp near Berlin, perhaps safe in the knowledge that his purse is secured by an up-front guarantee with a German television network.

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But the spotlight has always been Haye's domain, and unlike most other athletes, he seems secure in the scrutiny that headline-grabbing antics attract. Even as a three-year-old, he was accustomed to being the center of attention.

"My dad's party piece was telling his pals to put their hand out so his son could punch it," Haye recalled. "They couldn't believe how much power I had."

When Haye connects with Valuev's enormous jaw next weekend, his raw punching power will be the only freakish commodity that matters.

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