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If John Ruiz finds a way to upset WBA heavyweight champion David Haye next spring in London it will not be the biggest upset in boxing history. The biggest upset in boxing history might be that such a victory would make him a most unlikely three-time heavyweight champion.

John Ruiz? Muhammad Ali? Who would have ever thought?

Asked to ponder that reality for a moment last weekend in Las Vegas, the newly crowned WBA champion seemed to see the absurdity in what that says about the heavyweight division these days but then shrugged his ample shoulders and said diplomatically, “He’s not brilliant at any one thing but he’s good at everything.

“He’s a lot better than people think. Because of his awkward style people look at him not as a threat but as an annoyance but he won the heavyweight championship twice so he must be doing something right.

“He has a good chin. He takes a good punch. He’s awkward in a way that you can’t get good shots off at him. I won’t look by Ruiz. I made that mistake early in my career (when he was stopped by aging Carl Thompson five years ago before later winning the cruiserweight title). The toughest fight of my life will be John Ruiz. If I don’t think that I’ll under-perform.’’

Many have argued Haye (23-1, 21 KO) already did that two weeks ago when he won the WBA version of the title in appallingly lackluster fashion from 7-foot Nikolai Valuev. Haye did his best (or worst) Ruiz imitation that night in Germany, hugging and holding Valuev much of the time and throwing so few punches the bout was compared unfavorably with the night five years ago when Chris Byrd and DaVarryl Williamson fought a heavyweight title fight that brought pacifism to boxing.

Haye’s athleticism was such that he negated what little ability Valuev possesses but he did it with more caution than a bank loan officer. His lack of interest in exchanging fire with Valuev was clear even though he did stun the stumbling Russian giant in the final round of what would become a majority decision for Haye.

He had promised much more after successfully avoiding fire in a different way earlier this year against both of the Klitschko brothers and his failure to deliver was not easily excused, even after he said he broke his right hand in the second round on the top of Valuev’s head.

Haye has always talked a great fight, which is how he got himself into position to fight the Klitschkos in the first place after moving up from the mostly ignored cruiserweight division, but he still has to prove he’s willingly to fight as loudly as he speaks against the sport’s hardest punching opponents, especially considering his recent heavyweight history.

Haye was scheduled to fight Wladimir Klitschko in June for the IBF title but pulled out claiming

a back injury. Soon after it came to light that the British cable television company that was guaranteeing Haye's purse, Setanta, had gone bankrupt. Haye insisted the two were not related. Certainly not.

Then he somehow landed a shot at Klitschko's big brother, WBC champion Vitali, several months later only to pull out of that bout after it had been announced, claiming he'd never signed a contract and hence was going to accept a better deal to step in with Valuev. Perhaps so but the Klitschko's believe he used them both to maneuver himself into an easier title shot and there seems to be some circumstantial evidence to support their opinion.

Whatever the truth of that, from a business standpoint both moves were sound if unappealing to fight fans. Haye was facing the possibility of being paid only a fraction of what he thought he was worth to face either Klitschko because it appeared he lacked any real power in the marketplace. Conversely, he agreed to at least one of those fights and then claimed a questionable injury.

Now that he holds the last remaining portion of the title not controlled by the Klitschkos, Haye believes his financial as well as fistic time has come. All he has to do is get by Ruiz, who has proven to the likes of Evander Holyfield, Hasim Rahman, Kirk Johnson, Fres Oquendo, Andrew Golota and others that that is not as easy as it might seem. Haye concedes this but then quickly dismissed the idea of an upset.

"I'll knock John Ruiz out,'' he said between lengthy dissertations on why he fought so cautiously against Valuev and what he will do to the Klitschkos if and when he gets his hands on them.

The latter was really the point of Haye traveling to Las Vegas last weekend in the first place. He was there to be handed his WBA title belt by his new promoter, Oscar De La Hoya, and to meet and greet HBO executives, with whom he hopes to forge a multi-fight deal and earn millions of dollars in the near future.

That will not come from a Ruiz fight however because HBO's suits and on-air talent have long disparaged the only Latino in history to win the heavyweight title. The fight may do big numbers in England but finding an American television outlet for it willing to spend real money will be difficult, although no longer impossible because of HBO's cozy relationship with De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions.

But the larger issue for the talkative Haye remains the Klitschkos and the likelihood that if he dispatches Ruiz he will be able to broker a multi-million dollar unification fight with one of them. In an ideal world for Haye, he would win that fight and then make even more for the ultimate unification with the last Klitschko standing, adding the promotional twist of having beaten up one of the brothers on the road to the other.

None of this is lost on Haye, who is a clever fellow both in the ring and out. He knows how to promote himself and as a cruiserweight he knew how to fight well enough to unify the title in spectacular fashion before moving up to the heavyweight division.

Despite having had only one real heavyweight fight - a quick dispatchment of trial horse Monte Barrett - Haye has in a year landed deals to fight for all four versions of the title with all three of the champions, a remarkable feat he was quick to acknowledge last week.

“They say no one knows who I am so they get most of the money,’’ Haye said. “If nobody knows who I am how did I get offered title fights with all three champions in less than six months?’’

Good question for which the only answer is well, John Ruiz has won the heavyweight title twice and fought for it 11 times. To say there is a paucity of talent in the division is to overrate the talent and under rate the meaning of the word paucity, so these days in the division all things are possible.

Still, Haye knows where he stands. At the moment he is one fight away from not necessarily negotiating parity with the Klitschkos but to being on a far more level playing field than they hoped for when this all began a year ago because he now wears the one thing they most want – the last remaining semi-legitimate heavyweight title belt.

“The Klitschkos are my target,’’ he admitted. “That’s the biggest fights, the biggest paydays, the biggest everything. Those are fights a lot of people want to see not only in the UK (where Haye was born and bred) but over here (in the US), in Germany, all over the world.

“When they check their bank accounts after this guy Vitali is fighting (Kevin Johnson) next, they’ll realize how much they could have got with me.’’

Asked if he was confident a deal could be made with either Klitschko now that there is a good deal of bad blood between them after his disappearing act, Haye smiled the knowing smile of someone who understands what leverage means in the boxing business.

“If they’re willing to come to the table with some respect (it can),’’ Haye said. “Last time I came to the table with nothing. Now I’ve got something. I’ll get four or five times what I would have done with the Wladimir fight.

“If they’ll sit down and talk seriously we’ll see who brings what to the table and who gets what cut. They felt I didn’t bring anything to the table but Wladimir went and fought (Ruslan) Chagaev and UK and US TV pulled out. He fought Chagaev for peanuts.

“I don’t mind going to Germany to fight them. I won both my world titles abroad (France against Jean Marc Mormeck and Germany with Valuev). I don’t need home comforts to win a title. I won a decision in Germany, where nobody wins a decision.’’

To get to the Klitschkos however, he first must beat the 37-year-old Ruiz, who is 5-4-1 with a no contest (against James Toney after Toney tested positive for steroids after winning a decision from Ruiz) in heavyweight title fights and will be fighting for the WBA title for a remarkable fourth time.

Haye said all the things he should have said about his next opponent, who took step-aside money to allow Haye to fight Valuev yet there didn't seem to be any real conviction in his cautionary tone. The reason he was in Las Vegas last weekend, he knew, was not to talk much about a mandatory defense against John Ruiz but rather to drum up interest in a showdown with the brothers Klitschko by next fall.

"They're about the same,'' Haye said when asked to evaluate the Klitschko's abilities. "Both have their own assets. Wladimir is a lot faster, a lot looser. He's a lot more gunshy, too.

"Vitali holds his ground more. He can take a better shot. He's a lot older and not as mobile as his younger brother. I know I won't be breaking my hand on their heads. I'll be breaking their heads on my hands. That's a difference.''

It's also another way to sell a fight he hasn't gotten to yet. For it to happen, he better worry about John Ruiz's head – and his hands – first.