

Kevin Johnson Promises To Stop Vitali Cold

Written by Phil Woolever

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SWISS MOVEMENTS - The typical seasonal weather predicted for Berne, Switzerland this weekend should be around minus 3 degrees centigrade (approximately 26 fahrenheit), or well below freezing whatever type thermometer you carry.

American challenger Kevin "Kingpin" Johnson still plans on a very hot night none the less, and promises to come out blazing against WBC titlist Vitali Klitschko at the Postfinance Arena, before a capacity crowd. The assembled swarm figures to be the type of European homeboys who make the Klitschko brothers far bigger attractions, either as live or televised acts, than they are in the United States.

In this part of the civilized world, it's a pretty safe bet that most people watching television Saturday evening will be watching the contest live. The arena, with a capacity around 12,000, sold out in a matter of hours and almost all of those seats will be holding Klitschko fans.

Klitschko is around a 5-1 favorite, with a knockout expected.

Even in the face of such realistic imposing odds in "hostile", or should we say hostel territory, Johnson has managed to appear unfazed, even quite relaxed, and he promises to tip the Alpine applectart.

"I'll shock the whole world in nine rounds," Johnson said at Monday's press conference. "The only people who could have beat me are Muhammad Ali or Larry Holmes."

The scenario in which a smaller, unheralded US challenger confronts a formidable, far more rigid Eastern Bloc hulk conjures obvious "Rocky" based cliches, but Johnson's engaging personality has added some fresh hype.

"All I've been thinking about in training is winning," Johnson told TSS through an email exchange. "That's it. My job is to win the fight no matter what. I have not considered the possibility of any other outcome. I will win this fight and you can take that to the bank. I've trained in Europe several times over the years so I'm pretty comfortable over here. Other than the cold weather nothing is really different. Besides, when I'm training I never really pay attention to my surroundings. Everything else is irrelevant to me."

It would be one of the upsets of the year if Johnson could match the type of surprise Eddie Chambers pulled off against Alexander Dimitrenko last July, but the foundational components of slick boxer versus much larger, stiffer opponent are much the same although Klitschko has demonstrated strengths Dimitrenko never did, while Johnson has yet to perform on a level near Chambers'.

Klitschko has been on quite a roll since stopping Samuel Peter for the belt last year, staying relatively busy this season with respectable stoppages of Juan Carlos Gomez in Stuttgart and

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Cristobal Arreola in Los Angeles.

Johnson swears he sees success where those others met failure.

"I have respect for all of those guys but none of them have the skill set that I have, that will propose a problem for Vitali. I'm a boxer. Those guys stood there and took beatings. Vitali is going to have a hard time getting a clean shot on me. I have a better jab than all those guys and definitely a better jab than Vitali. Plus, I'm versatile. If plan A doesn't work, I got plan B,C, and D. Those guys just didn't know how to deal with adversity."

Everyone in the boxing game currently stands in Manny Pacquiao's shadow as a candidate for 2009's Fighter of the Year, but if Klitschko wins without hitches Saturday, he's a very respectable runner-up.

"Johnson should give me ten percent of his purse so I can pay his medical bills for him," deadpanned Klitschko.

There appeared to be a bit of bad blood brewing as the bout drew near, though Johnson was diplomatic regarding his treatment by the Klitschko promotional team.

"I won't comment on that," said Johnson. "I'll wait until I have the title in my gym bag before I respond to that. I was actually hoping to secure the opportunity before Arreola did, however it didn't happen that way. So I sat patiently and waited for things to clarify themselves. After the Klitschko-Arreola fight my team was approached again by team Klitschko and I told them to make the deal no matter. I was not going to let this opportunity slip by again."

Johnson seems happy with the fight location.

"Switzerland and Berne in general is great, the people, the food, and the atmosphere. I will definitely be coming back. I've been shocked by the number of fans who recognized me in public. Everyone has been so nice and respectful. I just hate the fact that I'm going to disappoint them by beating up on Vitali."

Should Johnson make good on his gloved-up goal, he'll consider himself the top heavyweight on the planet, despite many observers who rate Wladimir as the better boxing Klitschko.

"Vitali is head and shoulders above his brother in terms of talent. Wladimir is not in the same class, but it doesn't matter because after I take Vitali's title, Wlad is next on my list. I want to beat both of them then I'll be undisputed champ."

All Klitschko's recent foes have talked a good game until Vitali's massive mitts started slamming into their kissers. Whether Johnson can keep the pounding promise that Peter, Gomez, and Arreola reneged on once the thuds got heavy is indeed a longshot.

Numbers wise, based on recent form it's probably around an 80% probability that if fight is over by Johnson's predicted ninth round, it's Johnson who gets counted out. Still, he

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looks like at least a fairly live underdog. Johnson's demeanor indicates though he's probably outgunned, he won't go gently.

Berne is said to be named after a bear killed by the Duke of Zahringer in approximately 1191. The town was also known for a tourist attraction bear pit, a brick structure that once held some of the area's namesake beasts until the last of which were recently euthanized for health reasons. Those cold confines were scheduled to be replaced this winter by a more natural type setting.

Any symbolic similarities between the bear pit and Saturday night's ringpost confines remain to be seen. Either way, the majority of folks paid to see somebody get mauled.

Let's just hope the resulting action isn't unbearable.