

The Heavyweight Division Would Benefit From Johnson Beating Vitali

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Wednesday, 09 December 2009 18:00

Saturday night WBC heavyweight title holder Vitali Klitschko 38-2 (37) will make the third defense of his title this year when he takes on American Kevin Johnson 22-0-1 (9) in Berne, Switzerland. Since taking almost four years off starting in December of 2004, the 38-year old Klitschko has been an active champion. In March of this year he stopped the once beaten Juan Carlos Gomez in nine rounds and six months later stopped the then undefeated Cris Arreola after the 10th round.

Vitali Klitschko is another one of those active fighters that when discussing him there's no middle ground. On one side of the debate there's the faction out there who contends he's nothing more than a big stiff and is fortunate that he fights in one of the more pedestrian heavyweight generations of the modern era. The other side insist that he's one of the greatest heavyweight champs of all time.

As is the case with most boxing/sports debates both sides are over-stated. I'll weigh in and say Vitali Klitschko is definitely not a stiff and can in fact fight. No, he's not the greatest heavyweight champ ever, but he'd be a handful for many past greats from John L. Sullivan up through Lennox Lewis. And if you think any of the greats between Sullivan and Lewis could've just shown up on fight night and walked right through him, you're wrong.

Vitali Klitschko is great at using his size to manipulate his opponents, but he's also smart. He can go to his left just as good as he can to his right, he's strong with more than adequate power in both hands. Vitali has a great sense of timing and distance and is difficult to hit cleanly. And he knows what punch to throw and when to let it go, and like his younger brother Wladimir he takes boxing seriously and always shows up in top shape and never cheats himself or boxing fans. Unlike Cris Arreola, you can count on Vitali not weighing in for his upcoming fight with Kevin Johnson 12 pounds heavier than he was for their bout three months ago.

With that said, the heavyweight division would get an infusion of excitement if somehow Kevin Johnson were able to score the upset and win the WBC heavyweight title from Vitali Klitschko on December 12th. Despite Vitali and Wladimir always putting forth their best effort and having shown they're capable of rebounding from a disappointing loss or setback, they've had the division locked down since Vitali fought Lennox Lewis back in June of 2003. Ever since Vitali returned to the ring last year and recaptured a piece of the title, the biggest and only fight in the division that anyone would go out of their way to see is Vitali Klitschko versus Wladimir Klitschko.

Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko are currently the two best heavyweights in the world. A fight between the brothers would be huge because of the fact that they're brothers, and since Riddick Bowe and Lennox Lewis they're the only heavyweights who stood 6'5' and over who had clue one about how to fight. But a fight between them is never gonna happen, no way no how regardless of how much money they could be offered. And since that's the reality of it, the heavyweight division would be best served if one of them, preferably Vitali, was defeated

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conclusively and lost their title.

The reason I say Vitali is because he's viewed by most boxing observers as being the tougher and more durable of the brothers. Whereas Wladimir, despite his shut-the-other-guy-down-and-keep-a-fight-from-breaking-out style, projects a fighter who worries about getting nailed with a big shot and coming undone. Then again in all fairness to Wladimir, he hasn't been in that position since he got off the canvas three times against Samuel Peter to win a one-sided decision more than four years ago.

If Kevin Johnson were to upset Vitali Klitschko in a fight that wasn't perceived as ending in a controversial manner, it would set up a rematch between them along with opening up the division a little more for future competitive bouts. As of this writing the division is thought of as being Wladimir and Vitali Klitschko and a bunch of either undersized or overweight journeymen. And it'll remain that way until the next once-in-a-generation heavyweight comes along or one of the K-brothers is knocked off.

Vitali Klitschko has put together an outstanding body of work since turning pro a little over 13 years ago. Sure, his record indicates that he lost to the two best fighters he's been in the ring with, (Chris Byrd and Lennox Lewis) but in his defense he was leading in both fights nor was he out fought or punched around the ring one-sidedly.

To beat him it'll take a fighter who can confront him physically with a game plan to disrupt him enough to take him out of his comfort zone. This fighter will have to possess good power or the ability to hit him repeatedly enough to where at the least he's concerned to the point where he can't execute what he wants to do with total impunity. His conquerer will also have to possess a strong will and chin along with the stamina to fight at their optimum for 12 hard rounds. If a fighter currently exist in the heavyweight division, I don't know his name.

Therefore it would be good for the division if Kevin Johnson were that heavyweight. And if he happens to be, a rematch between them would spark more interest than the monotone interest there is leading up to the upcoming fight between them this weekend. Right now there are heavyweights like Denis Boystov, Alexander Povetkin, Eddie Chambers, David Haye, Cris Arreola and Tomasz Adamek who could make for some half way decent fights. Not to mention that with the exception of Chambers, the rest of the group would have at least a puncher's chance against Wladimir Klitschko.

The problem in the division is the Klitschko's don't really make for must see or compelling fights. But that's not their fault nor is it their responsibility to do so. They're just supposed to keep winning and that's what they've done since Lennox Lewis retired. The onus is on their opponents to make them fight with a sense of urgency and need, but none of those who make up the current crop are good enough to do that.

I could care less about the nationality or ethnicity of any fighter; I just want to see good fights between two pros fighting at the highest level in professional boxing who show up in top shape. I've accepted the fact that Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko are the two top heavyweights since the end of the Holyfield, Lewis, Tyson and Bowe era. And one of the brothers will be remembered

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as the heavyweight of the decade circa 2000-2009.

It would be a shot in the arm for the division if one of the up and coming younger heavyweights like Kevin Johnson could legitimately dethrone one of the Klitschkos while they are at or near the top of their game instead of having them walk away with the titles. The only stipulation with that is - the fighter who takes the title from either brother is for real and doesn't win on a technicality or a fluke. It would wake up a division that's been in the doldrums for awhile.

This way the heavyweight who took one of them down could be viewed as the fighter to beat in the division and would make for some decent matchups down the road where it would be hard to say for sure who was the favorite. Today when it's announced that either Wladimir or Vitali Klitschko are fighting the biggest intrigue is not if they'll win the fight, but it's more along the line of how long will the opponent last and will he even manage to win a single round?

I'll say this about Kevin Johnson, I don't think he's the type fighter who'll come unhinged at the first sign of things not going his way. He's probably a little better than he looks and I sense that he fights to the level of his opposition in some ways. If he loses the fight it will be for no other reason than Vitali was just better. However, Johnson does strike me as being an opportunist. If some deficiency shows up in Vitali during the bout, Johnson may spot it.

Maybe Kevin Johnson is the fighter who can disrupt the reign of Vitali Klitschko, but the betting man that I am says he's probably not.

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