

Springtime For Heavyweights

Written by Phil Woolever
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DRIZZLEDORF - The rain that earned this traditional, glittering riverside mini-metropolis it's soggy nickname has returned to wash the slush away, just as the Wladimir Klitschko - Eddie Chambers contest set for March 20 could apparently restore some shine to boxing's big boy division.

Coupled with the David Haye - John Ruiz match set for April 3, if both fights come off without a hitch, there could be some seriously intriguing developments in a springtime for heavyweights.

Whether a mauling May sees slugging showers isn't guaranteed, but even cynics about the 200 plus pound ranks should concede that news has been relatively good lately in regard to sorting out a much maligned, lumbering log jam where the sport's largest practitioners are coming into play.

At this rate of improvement, it's not inconceivable at all to envision a scenario where a respected titlist has more than just one or two viable contenders lurking in the wings, and formidable gatekeepers have numerous options to take on among the young brawling bucks.

Which Klitschko brother remains highest on the heap and who might hit the gate first is an interesting sidebar. Right now, little bro is still in the driver's seat.

Granted, it will take a lot more than compelling action here and in Manchester UK over the approaching months to make a majority of mainstream fans think of comparing the scene to glory days of the past. Still, if Haye continues on his well hyped rise and Klitschko turns back what should be a very strong challenge from Chambers, anticipation for that battle could easily equal the build-up so far about Floyd Mayweather Jr and Shane Mosley in terms of global interest.

There are already plenty of anxious patrons along the Rhineland waiting for Klitschko's next defense, hoping the scene turns out as entertaining as it did nine months ago, around 80 kilometers up the autobahn where Klitschko stopped Ruslan Chagaev. Ticket sales looked to get off to a strong start Thursday, and there was heavy hype heaped around the opening press conference at Espirit Arena, the bout's stadium location.

Klitschko and his one time, limited action sparring partner Chambers were quite cordial. If you want to make an early call on initial body language, Chambers looked ripe to spring the upset while Klitschko appeared to have a bit of the old "been there done that" going on.

Along those lines though, remember that Klitschko recently returned to open training under winter time skies after lounging poolside, catching rays and tabloid titters while poolside in Florida with "Heroes" TV starlet Hayden Panettiere.

"After 56 fights and 13 years as a professional, I have enjoyed the break," mused Klitschko, not

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looking too hungry. "It felt good."

Meanwhile, Chambers broke out the underdog's usual, no longer valid, Muhammad Ali cliché.

"I'll shock the world and win this fight," promised Chambers. "Wladimir is a great champion, but when I sparred with him I didn't completely know what I needed to do. I'm ready now."

If an early vibe counts for anything, Chambers is a very live underdog. There was definitely fire in his eyes when he watched Klitschko holding four belts of varying significance. Chambers looked amused as they posed in various positions around the soccer stadium and Klitschko kicked for photographers, but there was a sense he was currently ahead of Klitschko in the ready for business department.

Still, besides his chiseled physique, Klitschko rarely looks pumped up before a fight, and he stood a full head above his challenger.

"Chambers is an excellent challenger who has developed greatly since we sparred," acknowledged Klitschko with his typical diplomatic class. "He should not be underestimated. I am used to concentrating on what I have to do."

While the contest still hasn't been scheduled for a live broadcast in the States, it will almost certainly be on live US cable. It's a big world, and remember, Manny Pacquiao versus Joshua Clottey isn't scheduled for live TV over here. The main good news for boxing is that within a week of each other, there are stadium fights on two continents that will both draw gigantic TV numbers and live crowds that will probably be over 40,000 strong. Boxing isn't near as dead as the brains of fools who will profess that these days.

Pacquiao-Clottey may shape up as a more exciting fight, but not really by that much, and not for sure. I can tell you right now where the most potent beer will be quaffed though.

It's been quite a while since a heavyweight bout measures up respectably with a fight involving the most popular boxer on the planet.

Pacman's wonderful Filipino fans still rule, but if Haye wins big, the Brits will start making a big move toward that demographic. In Klitschko territory like Germany and Switzerland, most people with a TV still tune in to boxing on a Saturday night.

Beside that, some of the large punching prospects could be ready to break out. If Robert Helenius impresses against faded one time Klitschko conqueror Lamon Brewster this weekend, Helenius leapfrogs other undefeated German hopefuls like far more experienced but also more cautious types Denis Boytsov and Alexander Ustinov.

The state of the heavyweight division is undoubtedly improving, both in terms of talent and mass perception. Consider this: while neither fight will be made without plenty more contract negotiation drama, outside Las Vegas or the USA Pacquiao- Mayweather would not vastly overshadow Klitschko - Haye, especially if the latter was set for London. Like it or not

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heavyweight haters, that's global perspective.

For now though, staying focused on the immediate future like Klitschko promised to do against Chambers is reason enough to stay optimistic.

"I like Chambers," said Klitschko. "He focuses on how he'll perform, not like many of his predecessors who only opened their mouths before the fight then didn't do anything once they got in the ring."

Ides of March aside, if Klitschko-Chambers achieves its potential as a quality rumble, no matter who wins, the heavyweight division will reach the highest point of this young century.

As the wise guys and haters would say, it can only get better after that.