

If Vitali Klitschko Retires 40-2, Where Would He Rank?

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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Last week WBC heavyweight title holder Vitali Klitschko 39-2 (37) said while visiting a Kiev hydro-electric plant:

“I have to win only one belt (the WBA title). Therefore, this year I will hang up my boxing gloves. I will stop going to different cities in order to beat someone.”

Often times when fighters who've reached the top like Vitali Klitschko has aren't taken seriously when they announce they're retiring. But I'd bet on Vitali holding true to his word if he does announce his retirement after his next fight. Klitschko, 38, returned to the ring in October of 2008 in which he ended a 46-month self imposed exile. Since his return Klitschko has gone 4-0, having beaten Samuel Peter, Juan Carlos Gomez, Cris Arreola and Kevin Johnson, who were a combined 123-2-1. Johnson was the only one who went the distance with him.

Recently it was conveyed to me that Kevin Johnson said Vitali wasn't a big puncher, but his arms were so sore from being hit on so much they were bruised and that he almost couldn't go on, let alone mount his own offense. As of this writing Vitali isn't scheduled to fight and it's looking more and more like he's going to face the winner of the upcoming David Haye vs. John Ruiz WBA title clash this coming April 3rd.

If Vitali Klitschko beats the Haye/Ruiz winner, which he'll surely be an overwhelming favorite to do, he'll probably retire because he seems to have more interest outside of boxing than many other past former champions. That makes it a pretty safe bet that when he hangs'em up it'll be for good. In all probability he'll walk away from boxing with a final career record of 40-2 and a .952 winning percentage. This is better than every past heavyweight champ in history except Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Gene Tunney and Riddick Bowe. So then the obvious question is-- where does Vitali Klitschko rank among the pantheon of outstanding/all-time heavyweight greats? It's a question that's not easy to answer.

His career accomplishments are spectacular. He's never been off his feet nor has he ever trailed in any fight during his career. He also mounted one of the best comebacks in heavyweight and maybe even perhaps boxing history, returning to the ring at age 36 after not fighting in 46 months to capture a piece of the title. Regardless of how one feels about him, it cannot be disputed that he's been a very dominant heavyweight champ in the ring. With the exception of a few fights the outcome was never much in doubt after the first couple rounds.

On the other side, Vitali has officially lost to the two best name fighters he's faced, Chris Byrd and Lennox Lewis. And the fact that he was winning on the scorecards in both fights when the fights concluded doesn't absolve him. Boxing is a sport where durability is paramount, and the fact is his body didn't hold up during those bouts. He injured his shoulder punching at Byrd, and his eye was damaged and cut via a punch landed by Lewis.

Over the years it's become a common theme that the heavyweight division stinks, and that's not

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a reach. However, there's never been a heavyweight era that was proclaimed outstanding during its time. Joe Louis had the bum of the month club. Marciano's era was littered with over-fed light heavyweights fighting as heavyweights. Even the golden-era of the seventies was admonished. There was a time when boxing writers were saying Muhammad Ali didn't fight nearly as many good fighters as Joe Louis did while Muhammad was champ. How ridiculous does that look today? In looking back and comparing today's heavyweight elite, how good does the Tyson, Holyfield, Lewis and Bowe era look now?

The point is, it gets old and tiresome hearing everybody stinks and nobody is worth seeing. Great fighters don't come along that often. If they did, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali wouldn't be so special and unique, would they? Looking back, Ali benefited by fighting every top heavyweight in what is now considered the best heavyweight generation of the modern era. Like Marciano, Vitali Klitschko could only fight who's out there. Is it plausible to believe that Vitali would've gone 49-0 had he fought every fighter Marciano did on the night he fought them? I think so.

Having said that, Vitali's biggest threat was his brother Wladimir, and we can't even say for 100% certain that he was even the best Klitschko fighting during his era. He also doesn't have that signature win as most past all-time greats do. It's just not there for him. But as stated earlier - that's not his fault.

It can be argued that Vitali Klitschko will go down as one of the division's biggest question marks. What can't be argued is he would've been a handful for some past greats. He was more than just big. He had a good boxing intuition and was hard to hit. His chin never failed him fighting some other big heavyweight who could punch. He also knew how to use his massive size and could fight and use his legs whether he was moving to the left or right. And although he wasn't what I'd consider a life-taker as a puncher, he could punch.

It's impossible to get an accurate gauge on where fighters rank until we've had time to evaluate their careers. Which is why most HOF balloting comes years after an athlete has retired. I remember leaving the Pittsburgh Civic arena the night Renaldo Snipes almost knocked Larry Holmes into Howard Cosell's lap. On that night I thought it was a joke to consider Holmes one of the all-time greats. Yet when I had to vote for the top-20 greatest heavyweights in history in March of 2005 for the International Boxing Research Organization, I ranked Holmes fourth.

So I'll wait a while before passing judgment on Vitali Klitschko and where he ranks among the greatest of the greats. I'll just say that he's probably the best heavyweight since Lennox Lewis retired. Also, I don't see any way Vitali cannot be ranked among the top 15-18 heavyweights in history. But wherever it is he falls, it's in the vicinity of Lewis, Holyfield and Tyson, all of whom I have in my top-15. Just not ahead of them.

Frank Lotierzo can be contacted at GlovedFist@Gmail.com