Written by Frank Lotierzo
Saturday, 20 March 2010 17:00

Sometimes a change takes place and people don't realize until much later that it has. A pattern establishes itself; things go a certain way for a period of time and then they shift. So it is with today's top heavyweights. They are still being thought of as lazy and unwilling to engage, but that presumption may be lagging six months or even a year behind the reality.

There's been a definite switch in attitude among the division's best. Eddie Chambers, Cris Arreola, Tomasz Adamek, John Ruiz, James Toney, Alexander Povetkin, and probably a few other guys will fight anyone, anytime, anywhere. Admittedly, with the exception of Toney, none of the group is a standout fighter (and I realize that Toney isn't nearly what he once was.) But the heavyweight division has fallen way behind every other division for nearly thirty years, so its mediocrity isn't a new perception. What's new is how, after a decade or more of the big guys cautiously being moved into title contention and then being placed in a holding pattern to insure their spot in the ratings, they're actually willing to risk something in order to establish themselves as worthy challengers. And that mindset was a staple of the seventies and is why it's often referred to as being the Golden-era amongst the modern heavyweights.

Without having to make claims of greatness for either of them, doesn't everyone look forward to seeing Cris Arreola and Tomasz Adamek lock horns next month? And didn't those of us in the US all feel cheated that we weren't able to see how Eddie Chambers (who earned his title shot by traveling to Germany to take on undefeated Alexander Dimitrenko) would do this Saturday night against Wladimir Klitschko, except on a webcast? Come to think of it, the previously undefeated Dimitrenko himself showed a lot of guts by fighting the crafty and vastly improved Chambers. Even Samuel Peter has to be given some credit for risking everything by fighting Chambers right after his disastrous knockout loss to Vitali Klitschko for the WBC title. Johnathon Banks (who looked very impressive in his losing effort to Adamek) fought Travis Walker, 34-3, on the undercard of Klitschko-Chambers—another somewhat risky venture for a recent cruiserweight. It paid off, in a KO6 win.

Meanwhile, with only nineteen pro fights on his resume, Alexander Povetkin has already beaten Chambers, and taken on opponents whose combined records read 392-86, with only one of them (the tough trial horse Willie Chapman, whom Alexander defeated in his fifth pro fight) having a losing record. That hardly constitutes babying a prospect. If David Tua ever decides that he wants to throw his hat into the ring too, that would make things even more combustible (and I think that it's probable that it's something he'll be forced to do at some point.)

It's not only the challengers who are willing to fight. I don't think that either Wladimir or Vitali Klitschko, though both very vulnerable in different ways, has a problem defending his title against the best available competition. It's easy to ask why Vitali is fighting a stiff like Albert Sosnowski. But you have to bear in mind that he fought someone who appeared to be a legitimate challenger in Kevin Johnson only three months ago; it wasn't Vitali's fault that Johnson proved to be a dud. Although I still think that David Haye is a better businessman than he is a fighter, if he actually defends his WBA title against John Ruiz next month, I'll happily add

him to list of heavyweights willing to put themselves on the line in risky fights.

The heavyweights are in danger of being eclipsed by the other weight divisions. It’s as simple as that. Although there’s still a healthy interest in the division in both Germany and Russia , American fans, long accustomed to seeing the belt held by someone from the US, are shifting their allegiance away from the heavyweights. Aside from Haye, it’s hard to regard any of the heavyweights as charismatic. And clearly there’s no single savior who’ll be able to resurrect the division by himself. There’s no Ali or Tyson to capture the non-hardcore fan’s imagination. The match-ups themselves will have to be the gimmick. The pragmatic thing for heavyweights to do - the only genuinely viable option - is to get into the ring and fight. And the message apparently is getting through to the fighters.

Those of us old enough to have been spoiled by what may have been the greatest ever era of heavyweights in the 1970s have to reconcile ourselves to the fact that those golden days are never going to come again. To expect to see an Ali, a Frazier, and a Foreman all simultaneously occupying a place at the top of the heap (with a second line of killers just below them) is a hopelessly optimistic dream. Be glad there’s You Tube.

If the current heavyweights are willing to battle it out among themselves in order to establish supremacy, that’s good enough. You don’t necessarily need great fighters to have great fights, and I can imagine a lot of match-ups between the guys in the top ten that would almost surely provide fireworks.

Frank Lotierzo can be contacted at GlovedFist@Gmail.com