

If Haye Tries To Make A Statement, Ruiz Might Make Off With His Belt

Written by Ron Borges
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MANCHESTER, ENGLAND – Haye Fever is in the air despite gloomy skies and rain-spattered streets in England's second largest city this weekend. The reason is that the first British heavyweight champion to fight in the British Isles in nearly 10 years is coming to the MEN Arena Saturday night to do more than defend the WBA title he won four months ago. He's here to make a statement about himself and about British boxing.

The trajectory of British heavyweights prior to Lennox Lewis was far more horizontal than vertical. Once they ventured from their island home the majority of them quickly found themselves outgunned and out cold. Lewis changed that during his time as one of the two dominant heavyweights of his era but he's been retired for seven years and since then there has been a thirst here to find a British successor.

Olympic gold medalist Audley Harrison was not that man. Neither was Danny Williams, who faded into oblivion not long after he conquered a faded Mike Tyson. Whether David Haye is remains to be seen, but he won the WBA version of the title four months ago by taking a decidedly careful approach to seven-foot champion Nikolai Valuev and now will make his first defense against two-time WBA title holder John Ruiz.

Many would argue it is Haye's first real exposure to a true heavyweight, Valuev being more of a circus act than a boxer and Haye's previous two heavyweight opponents since abandoning the undisputed cruiserweight title (Monte Barrett and Tomasz Bonin) were one step below journeyman status.

Ruiz, on the other hand, has fought 322 rounds as a heavyweight, including 162 championship rounds. He's twice won the WBA title and this will be his 11th title fight (5-4-1, 1 no contest). To say he is Joe Louis would be wrong. To say he knows his way around heavyweight boxing would be correct. Whether Haye does remains a mystery unsolved.

Haye is nine years younger than the 38-year-old former champion. He is faster of hand and foot and a more powerful puncher, having knocked out 21 of his 23 victims. But whether or not he's truly a heavyweight remains a point open to discussion because his chin is suspect and his stamina debatable.

Haye (23-1, 21 KO) was dropped by Barrett but got up and stopped him. He was dropped by Jean-Marc Mormeck and Carl Thompson and wobbled by Giacobbe Fragomeni during his time as a cruiserweight as well. He rose to knock out Mormeck and Giacobbe but was stopped by Thompson and so, when taken in totality, those fights raise a question about his fitness to survive for long among the redwoods of boxing. That is why Haye is looking at the Ruiz fight as more than a way to get at the Klitschko brothers on an even promotional plain.

"I'm looking to make a statement in this fight," Haye said this week. "I'm looking to do something dramatic. Ruiz looks good. He looks as good as I've ever seen him but I am prepared for that."

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"I'm expecting a hard fight. He was stopped 14 years ago (by David Tua) when he got caught cold early but since then he's never shown any signs of a weak punch defense so if I stop him it will be a great indication of how hard I can punch."

The British press have called Haye "the flag-bearer of British boxing" and claimed he needs to do more than simply win, insisting this needs to be a spectacular declaration of divisional domination. Although he has tried to downplay all that, which is not his normal way of handling such matters, in the end he conceded winning is not enough if he is to make the kind of statement about himself he believes needs to be made.

"Nothing matters unless I win this fight," Haye said. "I feel like the challenger, not the champion. I feel like I have to take something from Ruiz.

"He'll be rendered unconscious at some point. Maybe late. I don't believe he can take my power for 12 rounds. I know he'll try to smother my punches but the longer the fight goes the better the chance I've got (of stopping Ruiz).

"By the end of the fight he will have taken a lot of punishment. He'll have to take a hell of a shellacking to get there (the 12th round)."

Haye is a 7-1 betting favorite for a reason. He has superior quickness, athleticism and hand speed. Even Ruiz conceded, "My talent is just so-so. I make up for what I don't have in determination," which is far from a ringing endorsement of himself.

Yet nothing could be worse for a young champion with a sometimes disloyal chin than to seek a spectacular victory. Haye's obligation is not to produce drama, for if he pursues that he could produce disaster instead, a moment he experienced six years ago in a similar situation with Thompson.

At that time Haye was considered the future of the cruiserweight division while the 40-year-old Thompson was yesterday's news. The issue was not whether Haye would defeat him but rather how fashionably he would do it. Five rounds into his night's work, Haye was a beaten young man, knocked into submission by a fighter who understood his craft and, more importantly, understood that the boxing ring is a place where a script can be re-written with one fist.

Haye's problem in this regard is that he already took the conservative approach when he won the title by staying away from the hulking Valuev and pot-shotting his way to a championship. It worked beautifully but it seemed to raise the hackles of British fight fans, who this time are demanding much more of him.

Perhaps Haye will be wise enough to screen out their demands and focus on his job by using his quickness to create the right punching distance, winning the territorial battle first with judicious use of pressure, wearing Ruiz down with a relentless pounding before trying anything bolder. That would be the wise course but young fighters are often unwise.

"I have half his experience," Haye said. "He is a seasoned, successful heavyweight. I have to

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respect him. But I have the skill set to deal with him. I believe I'm the hardest puncher, pound-for-pound, in the world. I look to make a statement, to do something dramatic with him.

"Others didn't study and they underestimated him. I won't fall into that trap. I don't underestimate John Ruiz. A few people think he'll come over here and upset me. I can't allow that."

To avoid it, David Haye will have to avoid being sucked into the kind of mauling wrestling match Ruiz sometimes looks to create. He does it to use his 230 pounds as a battering ram that wears you down, breaking your spirit and unsettling your plans. Once done, he then forces you to submit, which is what he did particularly to Hasim Rahman, Kirk Johnson and Andrew Golota.

To avoid their fate, David Haye has to avoid the trap of trying to make a statement instead of trying to win a fight.