

By Eric Raskin

Alexander Povetkin lives and trains in the city of Chekhov, Russia, which is appropriate because his boxing career is in danger of violating the principle of “Chekhov’s gun.” Named after playwright and short-story writer Anton Chekhov, this rule states that any object introduced into a piece of fiction must be used later on; otherwise, it shouldn’t have appeared in the first place. To paraphrase Chekhov, if the audience sees a gun in Act One, it should be fired by Act Three.

Teddy Atlas is not a gun. (Though he is a threat to go off at any time.) The veteran trainer was introduced to the Povetkin narrative in June 2009, when the Russian was already a top-rated heavyweight contender (ranked number two by *The Ring* magazine, behind only champion Wladimir Klitschko and his big brother Vitali) and a mandatory challenger in one alphabet group’s rankings. Two years later, Povetkin has gone absolutely nowhere. Atlas entered the picture, Povetkin fought Leo Nolan, Javier Mora, Teke Oruh, and Nicolai Firtha—collectively known as *The Four (Trial)Horsemen*—Atlas and Povetkin passed on a seven-figure payday against Wladimir for the legit championship, and here we stand, some 26 months after the Atlas-Povetkin union began, still waiting for someone to pull the trigger.

This Saturday, it will get squeezed. Sort of. It depends if you consider winning a fight that returns you to the status you held two years ago to be a form of progress.

Povetkin is facing Ruslan Chagaev, also a top-five contender under today’s depressing heavyweight standards, and the bout has meaning: Assuming Vitali Klitschko beats Tomasz Adamek in September; the Povetkin-Chagaev winner will stand out as the most deserving of the next shot at a Klitschko. Maybe 10 years ago, a fight between heavyweights of this pedigree wouldn’t have meant much. (In *The Ring* ratings for August 2001, Chris Byrd was the number-10 contender; are either Povetkin or Chagaev better and/or more worthy of a high ranking than 2001-vintage Chris Byrd?) But it’s not 2001. It’s 2011. And revolting though it may be, this fight elevates the winner to a position of importance.

There’s a lot on the line for Povetkin. There’s a lot on the line for Chagaev.

Povetkin-Chagaev: Atlas Bears The Weight Of The World...Raskin

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But it just might be that Atlas has more on the line than either of them.

This is Povetkin's first real fight since teaming up with Atlas, and if he doesn't win it, then Atlas will be guilty of giving some of the worst career advice in boxing history.

In the summer of 2010, after two fights with Atlas in his corner, Povetkin's mandatory shot at Wladimir was due. On Atlas' urging, and against the advice of other members of his management team, Povetkin pushed the opportunity off. Atlas explained that his goal wasn't just to have Povetkin fight Klitschko, but to have Povetkin ready to defeat Klitschko, and he needed more time with his 2004 Olympic gold medalist to do that. It was a risky but rather admirable approach. Here's what Atlas told me in July 2010:

"As a trainer, as a teacher who's involved in developing somebody at a certain stage in their career—and this stage has been about a year now—you get involved and there's work to be done and there's development to be done and you see the development. And you see the work being done. And you see what you've envisioned, some growth in certain directions and in the fighter as a whole. And you have a good pupil, you have a kid that's a great, great kid. What do you want as a teacher? You want more time. As honest as I can be, you want more time, and if you don't say that, you're not being cognizant of the things that you should be cognizant of, you're not being real, you're not being responsible, and then you're not being honest. But as a trainer, as a teacher, that's all I'm looking at. I'm not looking at it as a promoter. I'm not looking at it in those other dimensions. And I understand those other dimensions. But I'm just looking at it in my dimension. And to me, time is an asset. It's valuable. It's a commodity that's not always available in the degrees that you want it to be available. So right now, I see what we're going to do and what it is that we need to do and I will act accordingly."

Sure, it took Teddy 235 words to say what could have been said in about 25. But the point he was making was valid. And his motivation was unique in a business in which almost everybody else focuses on the fastest way to make a buck.

But now, after a second year of making no publicly visible, professional progress, Povetkin must show that he has made a leap under Atlas' tutelage and become a better, more dangerous fighter. If he beats Chagaev impressively and positions himself for that massive payday against a Klitschko—perhaps even convincing some observers that he'll be a live underdog—then the Atlas way is redeemed. If he wins unimpressively, looking no better than he did prior to hooking up with Atlas, then these will feel like two wasted years in his physical prime.

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And if he loses to Chagaev, then Povetkin will hear comparisons to Tommy Morrison blowing it all in a needless tune-up against Michael Bentt, the classic example of releasing the bird in the hand and ending up with an eyeful of bird droppings.

Atlas doesn't rely on training fighters to pay his bills these days. Since 1998, he's been the color analyst for ESPN2's *Friday Night Fights*, a steady gig if not one that allows him to buy yachts and Maybachs. Training is something he does on the side, if at all. So maybe he's reached a point where he's okay with the training business drying up.

If Povetkin loses, he'd better be okay with it. Atlas' days as a sought-after coach for established fighters will end instantly if the only project in which he's seriously involved himself over the last several years turns out to be not just a bust, but a bust where the blood is on Atlas' hands.

That's a lot of pressure on Teddy Atlas. And maybe he wants that pressure. Maybe that pressure will inspire greatness from both Povetkin and his trainer and something spectacular will happen on Saturday night that leaves fans clamoring for Klitschko-Povetkin in early 2012.

All we know for sure heading into Saturday's fight is that we've reached the scene in which Chekhov's gun stops being a lifeless prop and plays a role in the conflict. If Atlas is the gun, Povetkin is the man firing it. And Atlas had better hope his man can aim straight.

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