

Vitali Klitschko: Heavyweight Boxing has a Good Champion

Written by Matthew Aguilar

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Vitali Klitschko proved once again Saturday that he is literally and figuratively head-and-shoulders above a dismal heavyweight division.

Klitschko's methodical, workmanlike destruction of Danny Williams was an exhibit of how superior the Ukrainian is over the rest of the big-man heap. Klitschko, regarded as mechanical and one-dimensional as recently as a year ago, has transformed into a skilled practitioner. He bombed Williams with right hands, left hooks and body work, all of which flowed from an ever-improving jab and delivered in impressive combination.

If you were wondering why Williams wasn't throwing back, it probably had something to do with the bombs that were being hurled at him from a guy five inches taller.

Certainly, Williams wasn't in Klitschko's league. Before July, he was unknown outside of his native England. A knockout of over-the-hill Mike Tyson propelled the journeyman into a world title shot. But even though Williams was outclassed, his heart managed to push Klitschko. Shot after shot bounced off of Williams' skull, testing Klitschko's patience and stamina. But the champion refused to become discouraged – even as his chest started to heave from fatigue. And, though he weighed in at 250 pounds and stands 6-foot-7, Klitschko continued to show a solid workrate.

Williams, it should be noted, put on one of the more courageous performances in heavyweight history – one that would make gutsy 1982 title challenger Randall "Tex" Cobb proud. Through all the punches and knockdowns and cuts and bruises, Williams continued to march forward. It appeared as though he was uncertain as to how to deal with Klitschko – perhaps a result of his inexperience at the top level – but he nevertheless walked fearlessly into the line of fire. And it made what was otherwise a horrible mismatch something of an entertaining battle.

Now that Williams is out of the way, who's next for Klitschko? James Toney would probably be his most compelling opponent, but the injury-riddled three-time champ is on the sidelines again with a torn biceps.

Next interesting would be former conqueror Chris Byrd. So look for Klitschko-Byrd 2 negotiations to start in 2005.

It may not provide Gatti-Ward-brand excitement, but Klitschko-Byrd 2 is interesting for a pair of reasons. First, Byrd is becoming more aggressive, whether that's a conscious effort to please the fans or an inevitable sign of aging. The newfound aggressiveness would probably make for a decent scrap. Second, it would serve as a definitive gauge as to how far Klitschko has developed from the 2000 loss to Byrd. The southpaw from Michigan is still the ultimate defensive specialist, and he will test Klitschko's peaking skills and newfound confidence.

Byrd tends to make fools of big, heavy-limbed heavyweights.

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Toney and Byrd would be Klitschko's most serious tests. After that, "The Ring" heavyweight king would be a solid favorite in every other fight.

Klitschko-Andrew Golota would be something people would watch, but the controversial Chicago-based heavyweight lost his last fight to John Ruiz (whom nobody wants to see). And though Golota is fighting better, he tends to freeze up against bigger, stronger opponents.

Hasim Rahman looked sharp in dethroning Kali Meehan, but probably needs one more legitimate win to make a Klitschko fight compelling.

Beyond that, Klitschko, 35-2 (34 knockouts), will wait for undefeated Samuel Peter to progress, or for Lennox Lewis – who was ringside Saturday for the Williams fight – to come out of retirement.

So if boxing can't have a good heavyweight division, at least it can have a good heavyweight champion. It will be a matter of time before a suitable challenge comes along to make the big men interesting again.