

Attaching The G-Word To Klitschko

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 December 2004 18:00

This past weekend WBC heavyweight Champ Vitali Klitschko made the first defense of the title he won eight months ago when he stopped Corrie Sanders in the eighth round. In a methodical and dominant performance, Klitschko dropped Mike Tyson conqueror Danny Williams four times before stopping him in the eighth round.

Last summer Williams scored one of the biggest upsets of the year in boxing when he toppled former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson in the fourth round. Against Klitschko, Williams was never in the fight and took a one-sided beating for eight rounds. During the fight Klitschko completely out-fought and out-thought Williams. And like Lennox Lewis learned to do later in his career, Klitschko is utilizing his size and reach more effectively in each fight. In his last two fights against Corrie Sanders and Danny Williams, Klitschko was in control whether he was moving forward attacking, or stepping back and countering.

Vitali Klitschko has emerged as the fighter to beat in today's pedestrian heavyweight division. Right now I think he is the most formidable heavyweight in boxing. I'm sure for many of his fans and loyal followers that's not high enough praise. Probably anything short of referring to him as an all-time great would be seen as a slight. But in reality, Klitschko has not achieved greatness, nor is he a great fighter, yet. And I would vehemently question the boxing intellect or agenda of anyone who thinks he is.

However, that is exactly what is being said among some boxing writers and fans. And unfortunately it's not the first time a champion in the infancy of his title tenure will prematurely be validated an all-time great. The last fighter anointed great before he achieved it was Mike Tyson. And Tyson looked more unbeatable than Klitschko on the way up. Sure, Tyson was a great fighter, but the greatness he actually attained isn't close to what it was talked about at one time.

Had Mike Tyson retired after beating Michael Spinks at 21, he would've wrongly gone down as one of the three or four greatest heavyweight champs in history. And that's a perfect example why it's best to wait until a fighter's career has heard its last bell before attempting to place him historically. In the NFL, players have to be retired for five years before they're eligible to be inducted into the Hall-of-Fame. Not a bad policy, in my opinion.

I was amazed at the time when some actually fathomed Tyson the greatest heavyweight ever after he defeated Michael Spinks. Twenty months after fighting Spinks, Tyson became the youngest ex-heavyweight champ in history when at age 23, and in his prime, he was knocked out by James "Buster" Douglas. Of course many afford Tyson every excuse in the world after a loss, but that's just what they are, excuses

As his career progressed, Tyson's lack of character, never coming back to win a single fight he was losing, identified him as much as his hand speed and power. He was also convincingly defeated by the two great heavyweights of his era. And he can't even use age as an excuse

Attaching The G-Word To Klitschko

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 December 2004 18:00

since he's four years younger than Evander Holyfield, and one year younger than Lennox Lewis. Not to mention he was better protected than both Holyfield and Lewis, who fought every top fighter in the division, something that cannot be said about Tyson.

Now Vitali Klitschko is having expectations placed on him that he will probably never meet. Who could? What I can't figure out is why a meaningful segment of the boxing community have to start attaching the G-word to his name? The word great is thrown around way too much today, and it's starting to lose some of its meaning.

Vitali Klitschko is an outstanding fighter and is starting to ignite a little interest in the heavyweight division. And maybe when he retires he'll be remembered as one of the greats. However, he's not there yet! And it is conveniently forgotten by some that two fighters have already defeated him. That's not saying they were better, just that they beat him. Sometimes the truth can be construed as harsh, but the truth is the two best fighters he's been in the ring with, IBF heavyweight champ Chris Byrd and former champ Lennox Lewis, both appear in the loss column of his record.

It's also true that he was leading in the fight against Chris Byrd when he injured his rotator cuff. He was also ahead in the scoring against Lennox Lewis when the fight was stopped due to a severely cut left eye – which was the result of a punch landed by Lewis. The fact is, Klitschko went into the ring with two fighters and he wasn't able to finish the fight. That's boxing.

The problem with rating Klitschko an all-time great after just one title defense is twofold. What if he happens to lose, or is stopped in one of his upcoming title defenses in the next couple years? Sure, it doesn't look very likely now, but it's not a given that he'll go undefeated either. To me, Klitschko doesn't look as unbeatable as Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier, George Foreman or Mike Tyson did before they fought Cassius Clay, George Foreman, Muhammad Ali, and Buster Douglas.

Would the assessment that Vitali Klitschko of 2004 could have defeated George Foreman and Larry Holmes go up in smoke if he was upset by Hasim Rahman in 2005? Another problem with prematurely rating Klitschko historically is no one can say for certain when he was in his prime or at his best. Again, a fighter should be retired or close to retirement in order to accurately rank him historically.

Arguing who was greater or who would've won between two great fighters in the same division from different eras is a boxing tradition. Over the last three or four years I've written about 9 or 10 What IF articles. However, I have a rule that I adhere to before writing the article. That is I must know for a fact when both fighters were at their best so I can evaluate them fairly. Recently I was asked to write a What IF Marvin Hagler versus Bernard Hopkins for a boxing magazine. Although Hopkins is still active, he's past his prime and on the down side. And I know when and what he fought like at his best, just as I know what Hagler looked and fought like during his peak.

Here it is less than a week after Klitschko's first title defense, a title he won just eight months ago, and far too many writers have started writing about hypothetical match ups between

Attaching The G-Word To Klitschko

Written by Frank Lotierzo

Thursday, 16 December 2004 18:00

Klitschko and other past heavyweight greats? Not only is that absurd, it's not fair to place those type expectations on Vitali, and it's insulting to the past greats he's being measured against.

How could anyone, even as joke, try to historically rank a fighter who has been a title holder for eight months and 2-1 in world title fights. Does beating Kirk Johnson, Corrie Sanders, and Danny Williams justify him being matched against Jim Jefferies, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Larry Holmes, Evander Holyfield, and Lennox Lewis?

What amazes me is that a majority of those who have already seen enough from Vitali Klitschko to anoint him among the greatest of the great heavyweight champions, couldn't have been more wrong about the last fighter they viewed as a future great. For the better part of the last eight years, the most astute and knowledgeable Klitschko followers have been telling anyone who would listen that Wladimir Klitschko was the better fighter and had the better future? And this wasn't speculation, it was an opinion derived by adamantly chronicling both fighters for eight years. And despite having a 50/50 shot to be right, they were wrong. Now they say in absolute terms that the likes of Louis, Ali, Foreman, and Holmes, just to name a few, wouldn't have been able to handle Vitali? I find tremendous fault with that.

At this time WBC heavyweight champ Vitali Klitschko would be favored over any other heavyweight in the world. But just as it doesn't mean the fighters who defeated him are necessarily better than he is, it's likewise not a given that he would defeat every other heavyweight in the world because he would be favored to.

The old saying is, of course, "as goes the heavyweight division so goes boxing." Maybe the heavyweight division now has a fighter who can carry the baton, transcending the Tyson, Holyfield, Bowe, Lewis eras and who will usher in the Klitschko era. And maybe in the year 2014 he'll be mentioned among the greatest of the greats. But that's not the case at this time. Klitschko is providing a good reason to watch and follow the heavyweight division. And if he does go onto be one of the greats, I'll be the first one starting the fights, arguments, and debates regarding who he could or couldn't have beat.

It was just a little over 10 years ago that Lennox Lewis was knocked out by Oliver McCall and lost his title. If someone said to me the next day Lennox Lewis would not only be remembered as an all-time great, but he would retire from boxing winning more heavyweight title bouts than any other heavyweight champion in history, other than Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Larry Holmes, I no doubt would've turned to them and said, "you're out of your mind!"

This past February Lennox Lewis retired as heavyweight champion. And today he is regarded as an all-time great. On top of that, Lewis ranks fourth all-time in number of heavyweight title bouts won. Only Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and Larry Holmes have won more.

Is Vitali Klitschko an all-time great at this time? No. Can he retire and be remembered as an all-time great? Only a fool would say no, and I'm not a fool. Just as a majority of the great fighters before him had to wait before they were lauded great, I'll hold Vitali to the same standard.