In the down-home, country-fried words of promoter Cedric Kushner, “Merciless” Ray Mercer is “one tough cookie.’’

Kushner meant that in the sense that Mercer has a tendency to finish everything he starts.

The only time he leaves a fight early is when there’s no one left standing he can take a swing at.

The tough cookie is expected to have a tough fight Saturday night in Atlantic City.

“This is going to be a very, very good fight,’’ Kushner said Wednesday on a conference call promoting the fight between Mercer (30-4-1, 22 KO’s) and Wladimir Klitschko (38-1, 35 KO’s) for Klitschko’s WBO heavyweight title.

“This fight could make Wladimir a better fighter and bring him more respect around the world.’’

That shouldn’t be tough.

The only respect Klitschko has been getting so far has come from the guys he’s knocked silly. But that’s because he’s not from here and that makes him different.

He’s from the Ukraine and lives in Germany and if you speak with a strange accent and you have to catch a boat or a plane to get here, we don’t pay too much attention to you.

That’s why - until he beat Mike Tyson - half the country didn’t know who Lennox Lewis was and the other half didn’t care. But you might want to pay attention to Klitschko.

“Everything is going well,’’ he said of his training. “It was very tough preparation for eight weeks.

The preparation is the proper thing. The fight will be much lighter. But about my opponent Ray Mercer, he is a famous guy and everybody knows he is very tough with a strong chin.

He was in very good shape for his last fight. I saw him (Wednesday) at the press conference and he was very quiet.

He must be concentrated on the fight because he lost weight and he’s in real good shape and good form now. I think you’ll see a really good and very interesting fight.’’

That's it? No trash talk? No jive? No family threats?

Wladimir, this is America. You can bad-mouth anyone you want. It's expected, almost mandatory.

"I'm very happy it's the last week before the fight,'' he went on. "It's so boring preparing for a fight for eight weeks and it's very difficult. I'm glad my preparation is behind me and I'm getting a chance to fight.''

C'mon, Wladimir, let 'em have it.

Don't hold it in. It's not healthy.

This is the fight game. Spit it out.

Tell Ray how you hate the way he walks and talks, how you can't stand the name Ray, how the only thing that will be "Merciless'' in the ring Saturday night is your right hand hammering out a swan song on his ugly, 41-year-old face.

C'mon, Wladimir. We're waiting.

"It will be difficult to stop this guy because he says it is his last chance and he will give it everything. It has nothing to do with him being older because he is in really good shape for his age.''

His age? Yeah, that's it, Wlad. Attack Mercer's age. That's got to tick him off.

"I have to be 100 percent concentrated on Ray Mercer. I don't want to give him a chance to beat me.''

Well, there it is. Straight from the shoulder. That's about all the bad-mouthing you're going to hear from one of the more well-mannered, intelligent fighters ever to stroll the Boardwalk.

Trainer Tommy Brooks, who is working with both Wladimir and his older brother Vitali, put it in perspective.

"By far, these guys are the brightest stars I've ever had the opportunity to work with,'' said Brooks, who has trained some of the best fighters in the world, including Tyson. "It's like a breath of fresh air.

Tyson is the kind of guy who does what he wants to, when he wants to do it. These guys beat me to the gym. Sometimes with Tyson, you didn't know if he was going to show up or not. But these guys want to learn.''

Finally, some trash talk.