Written by JE Grant
Friday, 16 December 2005 19:00

The fight between on-again-off-again WBA heavyweight titlist John Ruiz and Russian Nicolay Valuev was considered a non-US televised sideshow. It was, that is, until a knee injury suffered by Vitali Klitschko canceled his scheduled Nov. 13 WBC title defense against Hasim Rahman, and eventually led to his retirement.

Kltischko's retirement, however, casts a new light on the Ruiz-Valuev fight, which is set for Dec. 17 in Berlin. Ruiz, you see, is now not only one of the four belt-wearers known by at least some of the public, he is promoted by Don King – the promoter of all of the other belt wearers.

That of course means that should he prevail against the towering Valuev, he will almost undoubtedly cash in as a participant in an eventual title unification series.

The imposing figure of the 7-foot, 320-pound Valuev presents a seemingly mountainous obstacle to riches that Ruiz was ready to give up on just months ago, when he lost to James Toney. The fight was of course later ruled a no-contest due to the discovery of steroids in Toney's blood, and presto, Ruiz was given back his title without a fight. His original talk of retirement was immediately rescinded.

Ruiz will enter the ring in Berlin as a decided outsider. Despite Valuev's Russian citizenship, his last 10 fights have been in Germany and his manager is the German Wilfried Sauerland .

Ruiz is hardly on a hot streak. He lost his only fight of 2005 to Toney. The self-nicknamed "Quietman" was out-speeded and out-slugged by the former middleweight and cruiserweight champion.

In the Toney bout, Ruiz abandoned his infamous stab-and-grab style and threw punches with more bad intentions than in many of his other recent fights. In the end, whether it was skills supplemented by steroids or not – the debate is endless – Ruiz simply could not match the talent level of Toney.

Before that fight Ruiz engaged walking enigma Andrew Golota, and it was an ugly sight. Not just for the fans, but for Ruiz. He was decked twice and had a point deducted, yet managed to capture a controversial (to say the least) decision over the Pole. No one was pleased except Ruiz.

Of course many boxing insiders jump right from that series of less-than-stellar performances to his loss to Roy Jones Jr. Such is the animus against his painful-to-watch, clutch-and-mauling approach, that many are quick to overlook a substantial win over new WBC titlist Rahman.

Add in a real knockout over Fres Oquendo – in a fight that was incredibly dreadful until the moment of the knockout – and it is clear that painting Ruiz as an incompetent is not only unfair it is plainly inaccurate.

However, the Chelsea, Massachusetts, native's career has been full of ups and downs. There's a 19-second knockout loss to David Tua; a win, a loss and a draw against Evander Holyfield; a knockout of a depleted Tony Tucker; and losses to Sergei Kobozev and Danell Nicholson.

Despite the mix of results, Ruiz (41-5-1, 1 NC) remains an experienced battler who usually finds a way to win.

Finding a way to win is something none of Nicolay Valuev's opponents have found a way to do. Only his record exceeds his mammoth height and reach. At 42-0 and 1 NC (31 KOs) one would expect the world to be standing still as he rumbles past.

Of course the details are necessary when evaluating his relative stature in the division and that's where he runs into problems.

The 32-year-old built his record largely in Europe and Asia (with two fights in the U.S) against a group of opponents that could charitably be labeled as modest in ability.

His most recent win, a 12-round majority decision over the 38-year-old American Larry Donald in Germany, is by far his most important victory to date.

However, Donald, and many others in attendance, would differ sharply as to calling it a win. Indeed, a review of the highlights provided on Boxen.com, by Valuev's promoter, presents a picture that is less than favorable to the big man.

What the tape shows is a man who is fairly skilled, though slow. He's also extremely easy to hit as Donald, who is an inch taller than the 6-foot-2 Ruiz, demonstrated repeatedly. Most of Valuev's punches are thrown from the shoulder and rarely does he get his weight behind his shots. Perhaps Valuev poked enough with his long punches to win, but it was not impressive.

His other notable victories include knockouts of former fringe contender Cliff Etienne, Attila Levin, and current EBU titlist Paolo Vidoz. Nothing in any of the victories gave particular insight into his ability at the highest level, but in each case he won handily.

Other than his 10-inch height advantage and the likelihood that he will enter the ring almost 100 pounds heavier than Ruiz, Valuev will enjoy a hometown crowd that is free of criticism of anything he may do against Ruiz. If Valuev looked somewhat dispirited at the end of the Donald bout, he almost undoubtedly has revised the history of that fight and will enter the ring against Ruiz with the confidence of an undefeated boxer.

Ruiz will have the confidence that comes from experience against top competition and perhaps the contempt he held for Valuev's fellow European (and formerly Germany-based) contemporary Klitschko.

As Ruiz indicated in a recent rambling statement denigrating the then-soon-to-be retired Klitschko, it comes down to character.

"He doesn't have the heart and soul of a world champ," said Ruiz of Klitschko. "It's not what's on the outside, it's what's inside that counts."

Against Valuev that test may be applied to him.