

The Future of the Heavyweight Division

Written by Rick Folstad

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Take a long, careful look. The future of the heavyweight division might suddenly show up on HBO Saturday night.

It will probably speak with a thick accent, stand about 6-foot-7 and have a certain resolve to it, a stubborn commitment born of tough breaks, bad press and sad endings. It will be polite, honest and candid and will show an intelligence usually associated with ivy-covered walls, Ph.Ds and dissertations on great philosophers.

It will also have a left jab that can stop a Buick.

Vitali Klitschko (32-2, 31 KOs) could be the future of the heavyweight division, though it's hard to say what will happen when he faces Kirk Johnson (34-1, 25 KOs) in one of those "eliminator" fights at Madison Square Garden.

That's because Klitschko - like his brother Vladimir - remains one of boxing's great mysteries, a sure thing with a few minor flaws, a gifted giant with all sorts of promise but no guarantees.

A flight risk with sincerity.

Just when you think one of the Klitschkos is about to move in and close the deal that will bring him a legitimate heavyweight title, along comes a torn rotator cuff or an improbable Corrie Sanders or a gash over his eye the size of a golf divot.

These guys don't have bad luck, they have major calamities. The indestructible Klitschkos are suddenly hard-luck Ukrainians with bad karma, soft chins and no chance for a title. They don't lose fights as much as they somehow seem to let them get away, slip out of their grasp like a squirming fish.

The future of the heavyweight division might also rest on the shoulders of Johnson, a Canadian fighter who recently retired former heavyweight contender Lou Savarese. Johnson is a better fighter than most people think he is, but he's not as good as you'd like him to be if he was going to be the heavyweight champion of the world.

As far as his popularity in this country, he's probably more well-known than your friendly, neighborhood barber, but not as popular as your county clerk.

Besides, a guy who goes by the nickname "Bubba" can't be heavyweight champion of the world. That's like the president going by the nickname, "Spanky."

But either way - Klitschko or Johnson - the future of the heavyweight division will still be in the hands of some guy who is only visiting and can't vote here.

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If you think back a few years, you might remember when the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world used to be an American. He was a guy who grew up in places like Louisville or Philadelphia or New York or in a small town in Texas. He knew who the Dodgers and the Yankees were and if he grew up to be an ex-con or a thug, at least he was our ex-con and our thug.

The heavyweight champion of the world also used to be an easy guy to find. When he was champ, he attended grand openings, kissed babies, supported politicians, led parades down main street and opened a bar or a restaurant when he retired.

When he lost his title, it was always to someone who knew who played in that year's Super Bowl.

That's why you should watch the fights Saturday night. The future of the heavyweight division just might show up on HBO.

If we're lucky, his name will be "Baby" Joe Mesi from Buffalo.