

Oleg Maskaev Hits Moscow with a Bang

Written by Robert Ecksel

Saturday, 02 December 2006 19:00

Although not the heavyweight title fight everyone was expecting (which was supposed to be the winner of the first Sam Peter/ James Toney), WBC heavyweight champion Oleg Maskaev (33-5, 26 KOs), with his dramatic stoppage of former titleholder Hasim Rahman still fresh in mind, is in Moscow, Russia, for the first defense of his title against Japan-based Ugandan Peter Okhello (18-4, 16 KOs).

Okhello, who is ranked #10 by the WBC, will challenge Maskaev on Dec. 10 in Moscow's Olympiysky Sports Arena, in a show promoted by Yuri Fedorov Sports Lab in association with Vladimir Hrunov.

The Maskaev press tour last month created a big buzz in Moscow media circles. Maskaev, surrounded by the lights, cameras and action of an adoring hometown press, told those crowding in to get a closer look at the champ, "It's a great honor for me and my camp to defend this prestigious WBC heavyweight belt in the very heart of my Motherhood, and I'm very proud to be the first Russian to make his title defense at home. There's nothing compared to that. Moscow is my hometown. Here I have spent my youth, and here I have lots of relatives. There are talks that Peter Okhello is no way a serious fighter. I can ensure you that he is a dangerous opponent and a great puncher. I will not take him lightly."

Maskaev's promoter, Dennis Rappaport, said about Big O's Ugandan opponent, "Okhello is a tremendous puncher. I have seen his fight with Sinan Samil Sam and he had been close to knocking Sam out in the last round. I was told that we were making a big mistake choosing to fight with him and that he would knock Oleg out. But we are sure, that Oleg will do the same to him!"

Oleg Maskaev's manager Fred Kesch telephoned TSS from his suite at the Peter the First Hotel in the New Moscow last week to give us an update on Oleg's trip and fight in Russia. When I asked Kesch how it was in Russia's capitol these days, he said, "Oh, it fabulous, really fabulous. It's an unbelievable city that's exploding in all areas, anywhere from designer clothes to theater and arts and media. It's beautiful to see the architecture when you see the buildings of the old USSR next to these glass and steel structures of today that are showing up all over. It's just magnificent."

From my vantage point in third world New York City, I imagine early stage capitalism Moscow-style must be like planet Cowboys and Indians, like the Sharks and the Jets in Armani drunk on vodka and wielding Kalashnikovs, but Fred Kesch assured me it was not.

"Everything was fine, everyone was cooperative, everyone was very gracious," Kesch said. "Oleg was treated like a movie star here." Although Maskaev was born in Kazakhstan, "he lived in Russia, was in the Russian army, was on the Russian boxing team," so Maskaev in Russia has been a homecoming of sorts.

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I told Kesch I heard of Okhello, but hadn't seen tapes of his fights. "He's big and has power and boxing ability. He's not a pushover by any means," said Kesch. "He's a rugged fighter, he moves, he throws hooks, uppercuts, and he's powerful. He dropped some significant guys in his fights."

If Maskaev gets by Okhello as planned in Moscow on the 10th, I wonder who's next on Big O's dance card. Everyone's heard talk of Hopkins bulking up to challenge for Maskaev's WBC heavyweight strap, but Kesch wanted to douse those rumors with a spit bucket full of cold water.

"I was reading something and I think they quoted Bernard, but I can't be accurate about it, that he said if he can't fight Maskaev, he'd consider fighting Calzaghe. There's a big spread of weight there," said Kesch about the disparity in weight between Maskaev and Hopkins, "and I think Bernard is starting to come to his senses and realizing that getting hit by a champion heavyweight is a lot different than he's used to. But you know how it is in the sport. People can say what they want to say and then find every reason in the world not to make it happen. But Bernard's a fantastic fighter. He's a credit to the sport. He's a wonderful motivator and he likes to get things going and he's been a champion so many years, people look up to him, as we do, but not as a heavyweight."

So, if Okhello goes down fighting and Hopkins is out of the running because of failure to make weight, who might Maskaev rumble with in the near to immediate future?

"The next biggest fight will be with Wladimir Klitschko," Kesch said. "They have been calling us at various times. That's the unification fight where the public would recognize the winner as the true heavyweight champion."

Let's first see what Maskaev does with Okhello in Moscow before we starting talking about Klitschko.