

Has Ibragimov Got A Chance Against Klitschko?

Written by Michael Woods

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There was a press conference in New York City on Tuesday afternoon to herald the Feb. 23 heavyweight title consolidation match between Wladimir Klitschko and Sultan Ibragimov, and it took place at the Hard Rock Café in Times Square. In the theater where the gathering took place, there is a large framed photo of AC/DC guitarist Angus Young, on his back, in the throes of artistic passion, banging out a solo.

The photo was referenced by Bernd Boendt, Klitschko's manager, and forgive me Sultan, for I mean no disrespect, but the photo of Young on his back made me think of you.

I think there's a strong possibility that the 6-6 Ukrainian will leave the Russian southpaw, about a head shorter and more than 25 pounds lighter than him, on his back in center ring at Madison Square Garden in February.

I could be wrong, and part of me hopes I'm wrong, as there's no rush I enjoy more as a watcher of sport than seeing a significant underdog flip the script, and emerge victorious. I just don't see how Ibragimov, can do it; he is quite solid technically, but without the necessary finisher's instinct to do what must be done, and advance fast and furious on Wlad, and test his chin.

The blueprint to best the gigantic hitter was set by Corrie Sanders in 2003, and Lamon Brewster in 2004. Get in the big man's grill, make him smell the garlic you had for lunch, and aim your blasts at the point of the chin.

We saw the 219-pound Ibragimov, age 32, treat 45-year-old Evander Holyfield, who weighed 211 pounds, in almost deferential fashion in their Oct. 13 scrap in Moscow.

If he does that against Klitschko, who figures to weigh around 245 pounds, it's a recipe for disaster, for a loss, for an Angus Young pose.

WBO champion Ibragimov will bring a 22-0-1 mark, with 17 KOs, into NY, but he's been skillfully managed, by Boris Grinberg, to this career-best payday. No one has stopped him, but he's fought no one near Klitschko in terms of talent and breadth of arsenal.

I asked Sultan how he'd fight Wlad, who owns the IBF, IBO and WBO straps, during a Q and A after the dais dance, and he wouldn't show his hand.

"I have to watch tapes, of his last fight, and my fights...it's my secret, I will show on February 23," he said in halting English.

Seminole Warriors executive Leon Margules did give me his insight on a theoretically successful strategy for the shorter, smaller man, who turned pro in 2002.

"Sultan has to show a lot of movement, get inside Klitschko's jab, give angles, break him down,

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outquick him,” he said. “He’s got to go to the body, give angles, he can’t stand in front of him and let him fire away. He’s got the right style to do it. I’m not comparing Shannon Briggs and Holyfield to Klitschko, but the style he showed is the style to beat him. I don’t think he’s too small. I think he has a big speed advantage. He’s proven he can fight big guys.”

Warriors matchmaker Sampson Lewkowicz points to Ibragimov’s trainer Jeff Mayweather as being a key to his advancement and his chances of beating Wlad.

“Sultan is a small giant, like Dustin Hoffman,” he said. “Jeff changed him, to be a good boxer to an excellent boxer. But he will fight him differently than he fought Briggs, differently than he fought Holyfield. He’ll definitely surprise him. He will knock him out. It will be a war.”

So, Sultan’s not saying how he’ll target Wlad, his promoter and the matchmaker see the fight going down in a dissimilar fashion.

I see Angus Young...but anyway.

The conference itself featured the usual I’ll pat your back, you pat mine chatter.

We were reminded that this is the first “unification” bout since the 1999 tussle between Holyfield, who was wearing the IBF’s and WBA’s straps, and Lennox Lewis, who owned the WBC’s trinket. Do you recall how that fight went down? It was also in Madison Square Garden. Remember the name Eugenia Williams? She took major heat, along with Stanley Christodoulou, for calling that bout even, and ganging up to give Evander a gift draw.

We can only hope that the judges on Feb. 23 will all be armed with eyes that can see, instead of Lyin’ Eyes.

Most everyone in attendance on the dais seemed to be pumped that Don King had nothing to do with this, so there was definitely unity on that front.

Manny Steward spoke up, and talked up Wlad, saying Lennox Lewis would have a hard time with him. “I think it’ll be a good technical fight, but I don’t think it’ll go the distance,” he said. He also slapped Ring magazine, for saying Klitschko needs to fight Sam Peter to be their top heavyweight.

Klitschko, an underappreciated gem in the sport, because there is such a dearth of capable challengers to provide mouth-watering matchups, showed oodles of charisma during his time at the mike.

He wore the very robe he will be wearing at MSG and announced a promotion that will raise money through the Laureus Sport For Good Foundation, which raises funds through sporting events. For \$199, you can log on to the Klitschko’s website, and sign up to get your name stitched onto the robe. The proceeds will be given to a Laureus/Klitschko charitable endeavor in the Bronx.

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It may have been a case of something getting lost in translation, but I chuckled when Wlad thanked the media for coming. "It's the most powerful media in the world, and making the fight bigger than it is," he said.

I think he meant thanks for writing about it, not hyping it more than it deserves to be hyped.

Wlad said he expects 10,000 fans to pay the stitching fee. "You don't need to be a Klitschko fan," he said, to laughter. "Sport is the only thing with one language, one skin color, one religion," he said. "I'm looking forward to delivering a great performance in the ring."

The Q and A after the dais dance was amusing, as the NY Daily News' institution, Bill Gallo, objected to the use of the word "unification." Klitschko tried to assuage him, as did Margules, to no avail.

This semantic hullabaloo has been a pet peeve of mine, as well. Gallo is right—Sam Peter and Oleg Maskaev co-own the WBC title, and Ruslan Chagaev is holding the WBA version. Thus, unless ALL the available belts are on the line, there is no unification, no coming together to be a single unit. Thus, the correct word choice is "consolidation." But I guess that sounds too business-y, not sport-y.

SPEEDBAG Boris Grinberg provided one of those "Um, did he just say what I thought he said" moments during his time at the mike. He described Sultan and Klitschko as "two white gentleman," and it was unclear why skin color was specified. Did he just say what I thought he said, I asked a colleague? Yup, he did indeed.

---A Seminole tribe spokeswoman urged people to buy tickets to the fight as holiday gifts. Two, four, even six, she said. Yes, she acknowledged that the fight occurs two months after Christmas, but the recipient will have something to look forward to. She also said that her tribe is willing to buy back NY, one hamburger at a time. They own the Hard Rock chain.

--Steward said Wlad will train in sunny Florida for the midwinter appointment. He invited Sultan to come watch him. A Sultan-ite offered to have them spar each other. The implication was lost on them, that they just offered their man's services as a sparring partner. Hope that doesn't forbode the sort of contest we get come February.

--An MSG exec spoke too, and thanked the man who runs MSG, James Dolan, for being a fan of boxing. I'm still reeling from the disclosure that the NY Knicks didn't think it right to inform Stephon Marbury that his dad had died during a game on Monday night. Un-frickin-fathomable. And that they have a member of their PR staff eavesdrop on any and all interviews between the media and the press, and report what is said to a PR bigshot. These morons just don't get it, do they? The media is writing stories about the team, and basically giving you free advertising, you fools. And you treat them with a level of contempt that shows that you are completely clueless about human nature, and shouldn't be running a NYC street hotdog stand, let alone one of best know sports franchises on the planet. Wake up, morons.