

Horgan's Heroes: 10 Best Heavies

Written by Dan Horgan

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For boxing as a whole, 2008 was a great year that saw the sport grow exponentially thanks to dynamic matchmaking and accompanying fistic fireworks. But for the heavyweight division, the past twelve months have been as abysmal as ever.

It seems that with every passing year, the state of boxing's big men gets worse and worse. Just when the fight world thinks they've found a ray of heavyweight hope – be it in the form of champion clarity or an exciting prospect – something bizarre happens to put out the light.

In 2008, we saw any chance of Wladimir Klitschko, arguably the world's best heavyweight, unifying the division go out the window when his brother Vitali came out of a four-year retirement to batter Sam Peter and take the 28 year old's WBC belt in the process.

In the past twelve months, we saw the world's most fascinating heavyweight, seven-foot Nikolay Valuev, struggle to beat – and even get off against – a 46-year-old Evander Holyfield.

In the past year, we saw perhaps America's most exciting heavyweight prospect, Chris Arreola, admit in his post-fight interview that he hadn't been in optimal shape after a life-and-death battle with Travis Walker.

Yes, today's heavyweights are awful, and it wouldn't be crazy to say that the state of the division is the worst it's ever been. Despite the emergence of David Haye, the hard-hitting former cruiserweight champion who burst onto the scene this September with a fifth-round thrashing of Monte Barrett, the future of the division looks bleak, as there are few prospects with any legitimate chance of making noise in 2009.

But we as fight fans hope for the best, and thinking optimally means praising the big men who throw bones for our entertainment. So to kick off 2009, I've compiled a top-ten list of today's heavyweights. Consider it the "best-of-the-worst" rankings (cough, cough, I mean, "best of the best").

1. Wladimir Klitschko (52-3, 46 KOs): Watching him fight is as boring as sitting through an episode of TLC's "John and Kate Plus Eight," but after ten straight wins and six straight title defenses, there is no doubt that Wladimir Klitschko is the world's top heavyweight. In 2008, Klitschko went 3-0, unifying part of the division against Sultan Ibragimov in February, and then demolishing two of America's top heavyweights in Tony Thompson and Hasim Rahman in the latter half of the year. Hopefully Klitschko will swap leather with David Haye in 2008.

2. Vitali Klitschko (36-2, 35 KOs): He's only fought once in the past four years, but Vitali earns this spot based on his dominant win over Sam Peter in October.

In 2003, Klitschko gave then champion Lennox Lewis all he could handle over a six-round bout that was stopped due to a nasty punch-induced cut on Klitschko's head. Klitschko, who was

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winning the fight before it was stopped, begged Lewis for a rematch, but never got a chance to exact revenge. He did, however, get an open division to wipe out when Lewis retired.

After capitalizing with several wins in 2003 and 2004, Klitschko struggled with injuries that led to on-and-off training camps and an eventual retirement. But in 2007, he announced his return to the ring, and because the WBC had dubbed him "Champion Emeritus," or champion in recess, he was granted a shot at Peter, who held then held the belt.

Klitschko looked great against Peter, but until he gets active again, Vitali's brother Wladimir will remain in the top spot.

3. David Haye (22-1, 21 KOs): What has Haye, who has only fought twice on a world-class level as a heavyweight, done to earn this position? He's yet to mess his career up with an embarrassing performance like so many of the other "top" heavyweights of today.

Haye was an electric cruiserweight, and if his first-round beat down of Barrett is any indication, he may be just as good at heavyweight. But he'll have to do more than beat Barrett to prove that. Hopefully, he'll get a shot at one of the Klitschko brothers in 2009.

4. Alexander Povetkin (16-0, 12 KOs): Povetkin, much like Haye, only gets this spot based on his lack of failure. Although he's fought decent competition, Povetkin has yet to show that he in some way stands out amongst the current crop of big men. If he can continue to beat top-ten contenders, he'll eventually land a title shot; that's when we'll see what he's really made of.

5. Ruslan Chagaev (24-0-1, 17 KOs): Injuries have kept Chagaev, one of the two WBA heavyweight champions, from fighting since his decision win against Matt Skelton in January. That lack of activity is what is preventing Chagaev from taking the next step in becoming the world's top heavyweight.

Chagaev will defend his belt against the unknown Carl Davis Drumond in February. And after that, he's scheduled to take on Valuev in a rematch which will solidify the real WBA champion. Looks like it will be a while before Chagaev gets his shot at the men above him on this list -- and at his chance to prove he's the best.

6. Sam Peter (30-2, 23 KOs): Peter's loss to Klitschko was one-sided and embarrassing, but the Nigeria native has done enough as a heavyweight to warrant a top-six rating. He did, after all, beat heavyweight vets Oleg Maskaev and James Toney (twice).

In 2009, Peter will hope to land either of the Klitschko brothers -- the two men responsible for his losses. But if he doesn't, which is likely considering the one-sidedness of the Vitali loss, let's hope that the "Nigerian Nightmare" fights on against other top heavyweights. If nothing else, Peter's head-first style sometimes makes for exciting fights.

7. Chris Arreola (26-0, 23 KOs): Arreola can crack, but if he shows up out of shape against anyone on this list like he did against Travis Walker in November, heavy hands won't be enough for him to emerge victorious. Let's hope that an in-shape Arreola stays active against good

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competition in 2009. A bout against fellow prospect Jason Estrada would be very interesting.

8. Juan Carlos Gomez (44-1, 35 KOs): Gomez, one of the best cruiserweights to ever lace up in the gloves in the division's short history, has slowly but surely made his mark as a heavyweight over the past six-and-a-half years. Most recently, the slick southpaw won a comfortable decision in a title eliminator against Vladimir Virchis, which puts Gomez in position to challenge Vitali Klitschko sometime in 2009.

9. Eddie Chambers (33-1, 18 KOs): Chambers' most notable bout is a decision loss to Povetkin in January of this year, but Chambers, who made some serious noise in the heavyweight division prior to the Povetkin fight, has rebounded nicely from the defeat with three straight wins. Although the Philadelphia resident blew his first big chance, he will undoubtedly get more opportunities down the road. A Chambers-Arreola bout would be great for HBO's "Boxing After Dark."

10. James Toney (71-6-3, 43 KOs): The charismatic and skilled heavyweight proved he's far past his prime, both as a slick counter puncher and as a talker, when he struggled to edge Fres Oquendo on December 13 and then afterwards called Oquendo "a scary dude." That said, Toney, now 40, can still fight thanks to years and years of ring wisdom and decent hand speed. Toney would be best-served to walk away from boxing before he further damages his legacy, but he will likely fight on because of his immense passion for the sport. Let's hope 2009 will be the last year Toney laces up the gloves.

Please feel free to read more of Dan's work. His book is available here: <http://www.lulu.com/content/1499553>