

BOLD BORGES: Kevin Johnson Has No Chance Of Winning

Written by Ron Borges

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Saturday night Kevin Johnson is getting to fight for the heavyweight title but he's not getting an opportunity.

Kevin Johnson is no more ready to fight Vitali Klitschko for the WBC portion of the heavyweight championship than Kevin Costner is. Despite that, the 30-year-old American has been labeled by some as the best heavyweight prospect in the country. If this is so, it doesn't say much for the country.

The undefeated Johnson (22-0-1, 9 KO) may be a nice fellow and is certainly a dutiful one. After not beginning to box until he was 18, Johnson posted a 14-2 amateur record and then decided if he was going to spend his time getting hit he might as well get paid for it and turned professional.

That was six years ago and since that time Johnson has defeated everyone who stood in front of him but former Olympian Timor Ibragimov. The fact that that fight might have been his best tells the real story of what is about to happen to him.

Johnson had only three professional fights when he stepped in with the then undefeated (13-0) Ibragimov and boxed him to a standstill, ending up with a draw. It was a notable performance for such an inexperienced fighter. Unfortunately, it was also the most notable performance of his brief career.

Since that fight Johnson has won consistently but beaten no one of note. He has done what he's been asked but he has not been asked to do enough. At least not enough to adequately prepare him to challenge Klitschko.

In a way, Johnson is a poster boy for our times in boxing. He is a guy getting a title shot because somebody had to. After six years his biggest win was probably stopping one-time accidental heavyweight champion Bruce Seldon, the guy Mike Tyson mistakenly called "Bruce Seldom" before he knocked him out without landing a solid blow, Seldon collapsing to the floor at the suggestion he'd been hit by Tyson.

At the time he faced Johnson, Seldon was a year and a half into a comeback after serving nearly two years in jail. He was 41 years old and 13 years removed from his brief, one-fight grasp on the heavyweight title. He was seldom thought of any more.

Seven month ago, Johnson continued his progress, stopping undefeated former American Olympian Devin Vargas (17-0) in six rounds, Vargas' corner throwing in the title as Johnson peppered him with jabs. It was a good win. It was not, however, the kind that should result in a fight for the heavyweight title.

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Johnson is ill-prepared to face Klitschko, who is 38-2 with 37 Kos and has been in with the likes of Hall of Fame heavyweight Lennox Lewis, because he has no idea how to fight an opponent of the size and power of Klitschko. Worse, Johnson has shown an alarming decline in conditioning in the past year or two. In 2007 he fought at 229 pounds. In his last outing he was 246, a difference of 17 pounds of suet. That is not a fighter going in the right direction.

Yet he will be at the PostFinance Arena in Bern, Switzerland Saturday night in a fight that will be telecast on delay by HBO after the Juan Diaz-Paulie Malignaggi rematch in Chicago. The delay will surely last longer than the Klitschko fight because despite Johnson's dominant jab and superior speed, it is unlikely the light-hitting Johnson can hold off Klitschko for long. A two-inch reach advantage and a willingness to throw his jab will not be enough.

This is Klitschko's third title defense and comes 2 ½ months after he destroyed America's previous leading heavyweight contender, portly Cristobal Arreola. He did it with ease, stopping him after lumping up his face during 10 one-sided rounds. Compared to Johnson, Arreola comes off as Joe Louis, which he is not.

How things have come to this in America is difficult to explain. There is the issue of our heavyweights having gone off to play tight end, linebacker or power forward. There is the issue that so many of them now are forced into a fast-track toward a title shot they cannot possibly be prepared for because they have not had enough fights.

Worse, they are pushed into a position where they are ranked before they deserve to be, move up those rankings simply for winning with little regard for whom they've faced and suddenly they look up and find themselves being offered what appears to be an opportunity when it really is not.

The dream is not to fight for the heavyweight title. The dream is to win the heavyweight title. Surely Kevin Johnson has that dream and Saturday night he will carry it into the ring to face Vitali Klitschko. He will not carry a belt out with him because he is utterly unprepared to even be competitive.

It is not Kevin Johnson's fault that he can't punch. It isn't even his fault he's not ready for this. It is his handlers' fault he has been rushed into this well before he is ready. Had he faced Arreola or Eddie Chambers along the way, as well as some of the former champions still kicking around, Johnson would at least have fought the best competition. He would have been as prepared as possible for a showdown with Vitali Klitschko.

He has done none of that and so he comes to Bern with a stiff jab, no power to keep Klitschko off him, poor conditioning and no idea what is about to happen to him. Although he will not be able to overcome any of the former he will very quickly understand he is in a place he doesn't belong, fighting for a title he has dreamed about for years but has no chance of winning.