

Written by Eric Raskin
Thursday, 08 September 2011 20:30



Readers, weigh in here...What do you think of Tyson Fury? A stiff? A savior? Or something in between? Head to our forum and state your piece.

There are big ifs, and there are small ifs. The “if” in the phrase “if Tomasz Adamek loses to Vitali Klitschko” is of the infinitesimal variety. I’ve played it over and over in my mind, and short of both of Klitschko’s legs spontaneously disintegrating Odlanier-Solis-style, I can’t see how Adamek wins this fight. That’s not a knock on Adamek. He’s a brave, intelligent, championship-caliber fighter. But he can’t beat Klitschko from the outside, Vitali hardly ever lets anybody get inside, and Adamek doesn’t have the one-punch power to win a fight in which he loses every round. I’m not even convinced his hand speed is significantly better than Klitschko’s. I’ve made some inaccurate predictions in my day, but if Adamek wins this fight via anything other than fluky Klitschko injury, I’ll paint my face red and white, get as drunk as an Andrew Golota fan, and videotape myself suggestively devouring a kielbasa.

Assuming I don’t lose that no-win proposition, the heavyweight division will be, at the conclusion of Saturday’s fight in Wroclaw, Poland, in perhaps its worst state since the Queensberry rules were first published. The Klitschkos will have vanquished their two most theoretically exciting, interesting challengers, David Haye and Adamek, and it goes without saying that the brothers will continue to refuse to fight each other.

The heavyweight division has gone through a series of increasingly severe stages of decline—in both depth of talent and public interest in America—since a relatively strong run

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from 1990-2002. The moments that engendered a lowering of the bar: Lennox Lewis knocking out Mike Tyson ... Lewis retiring ... Vitali Klitschko retiring ... Wladimir Klitschko and Sultan Ibragimov making Michael Moorer vs. Vaughn Bean look like a slugfest ... Vitali un-retiring and ruining hopes for an undisputed ruler. Longshots though they were, Haye and Adamek gave us something to talk about for a few months. They even drew HBO back into the heavyweight biz.

But the landscape if and when Adamek loses is as bleak as Ric Flair's financial future. The top contenders to the Klitschkos flat-out aren't ready/willing to fight them yet. If you don't believe it's going to get worse before it gets better, I've got five words for you: Alexander Povetkin vs. Evander Holyfield.

TSS reader and frequent email correspondent Nicholas A. wrote in last week to ask me if this is the worst heavyweight era ever. He specifically inquired as to whether it was worse than the Schmeling-Sharkey-Carnera-Baer-Braddock era of the early 1930s. My answer is yes and no. I think the field of contenders is worse now than it was then. But because the Klitschkos are both elite (exactly how elite is up for debate), the overall talent pool, counting the two of them, might be better now. Then again, young Joe Louis was in the title-contention mix for a few years before actually claiming the title. So it's close. But I'll say this: The heavyweight division has never been more boring than it has been the last couple of years, and it will become even more boring the moment Adamek loses.

But here comes the twist. To this point, you've been reading another one of those "the heavyweights suck!" stories, approximately 3,000 of which have been written in the last eight years (2,500 of them by me personally). It's about to turn into that rare heavyweight article that tells you there's reason for optimism. Sure, it's going to get worse before it gets better. But it actually might start getting better sooner than you think.

For starters, there are two emerging contenders to be hopeful about. Not "excited" about—that might be stretching. But "hopeful" is a fair word to use.

One is Povetkin, who now has wins on his resume over Chris Byrd, Eddie Chambers, and Ruslan Chagaev. He is clearly the most deserving challenger to the Klitschkos. He'll presumably be better after another couple of fights. Whatever you think of his chances of winning against a Klitschko, he'll have done more to EARN a shot at one of them by 2012 than either Haye or Adamek did.

The other guy to be hopeful about is Robert Helenius. It's true, he's goofy looking (and, no, I wouldn't tell him that to his face) and his body makes Tony Tubbs look like Tony Atlas. But he's made a habit of knocking out decent heavyweights who aren't easily knocked out. And he's only been a pro for three years.

Neither Povetkin nor Helenius are going to fight a Klitschko in the next six months, nor should they. But by the spring or summer of 2012? They could be ready. This isn't exactly young Riddick Bowe and Lennox Lewis simultaneously rising up the heavyweight ranks, but Povetkin and Helenius offer evidence that Haye and Adamek weren't the last hopes.

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In his video blog last week on boxingchannel.tv, veteran broadcaster Al Bernstein said, "For the first time in a while, I can think of three heavyweights I want to talk about whose names are not Klitschko." Bernstein's third was Tyson Fury, and I can't say I share Al's enthusiasm there. But then again, Fury is only 23. In today's heavyweight division, he's a zygote. Fury has a LOT of time to win me over.

But the glimmer of optimism isn't based solely on the development of the guys working their way up the rankings. It's also based on the likelihood of decline from the two guys on top. Don't look now, but Vitali Klitschko is 40 years old. Wladimir celebrated a significant birthday this year as well and is 35. They will eventually show their age. And when they do, heavyweight title fights might have a little intrigue again. Povetkin vs. a Klitschko now is a mismatch. But if Povetkin gets half a notch better over the next year or so and the Klitschkos get half a notch worse, suddenly the outcome isn't so certain.

And there's also the possibility that the Klitschkos, neither of whom should be hurting for money, retire in the very near future, before the aging process gets the better of them. If that happens, yes, we'll be looking at the shallowest talent pool in heavyweight history. But we'll also have parity in the battle to determine the new champion, plus we won't have a situation where the two best in the division refuse to fight each other. A down-to-the-wire NCAA basketball tournament game is a lot more enjoyable than a midseason NBA mismatch, even if the skill level in the NBA game is substantially higher.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not saying there's reason to believe an era of heavyweight prosperity is around the corner. When Tyson Fury's name enters the conversation about fighters we're pinning our hopes on, you proceed cautiously. But most things have a breaking point at which they can't get any worse and therefore can only get better, and I sense that turnaround point is coming in 2012 for heavyweight boxing.

So don't despair when Adamek fails to break up the Klitschkos' duopoly this Saturday. And if Adamek should happen to do the unthinkable—well, I told you things would get better sooner than you thought, right?

Eric Raskin can be contacted at RaskinBoxing@yahoo.com. You can follow him on Twitter @EricRaskin and listen to new episodes of his podcast, Ring Theory, at <http://ringtheory.podbean.com>.

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