Written by Bernard Fernandez
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The two-time IBF champ is better known in Germany than his native Philadelphia...but he still plugs on, looking for that breakthrough opportunity. The heavyweight division is where the opportunity lies.

Sooner or later they all look up – well, a lot of them, anyway -- and are hypnotized by the prestige and more substantial purses that presumably await in the heavyweight division. That's why the really good light heavyweights of another era, and today's cruiserweights, eventually fall under the spell of that familiar siren song. "The heavyweights are where the big bucks and the glory are," the voice of temptation calls out to them, like the snake in the Garden of Eden beckoning Eve to chomp into the forbidden apple.

Some truly outstanding light heavyweights, Billy Conn, Archie Moore and Bob Foster among them, wandered north of their natural weight class to reach for delectable fruit that would so often prove beyond their grasp. But the snakes whose fangs sank so deeply into those heavyweight dreams, the Joe Louises, Rocky Marcianos and Joe Fraziers, were only somewhat larger than their marginally undersized opponents. Now the size gap between the heavyweight elite and the wannabes has widened by a considerable margin. It's not just the dominant Klitschko brothers who are so much taller and heftier than the light heavys and cruisers daring to upgrade; it is not unusual for many world-ranked heavyweights to go 6-6 and 245 pounds or more. One recent holder of the WBA version of the title, Russia's Nikolai Valuev, went 7 feet and 300-plus pounds.

But, hey, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, which is why the latest division-jumper to try his hand against the really big boys is two-time former IBF cruiserweight champion Steve "USS" Cunningham (24-4, 12 KOs), who makes his heavyweight debut Saturday night against journeyman Jason Gavern (21-10-4, 10 KOs) in a 10-rounder on the undercard of a show headlined by the 12-round pairing of Tomasz Adamek (46-2, 28 KOs) and Travis Walker (39-7-1, 31 KOs) in the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J.

Not coincidentally, Adamek also is a former IBF cruiserweight titlist who several years ago discovered that his sport's rewards are potentially greater for bulked-up 200-pounders willing to risk a beatdown from a giant in exchange for heavyweight-sized recompense.

"It did," Cunningham, a former petty officer second class in the U.S. Navy and father of three, said of the financial inducements that led him to attempt, at 36, to engage heavyweights who aren't merely destroyers, but battleships and aircraft carriers. "I'm a two-time cruiserweight champion, but I haven't seen even a percentage of those seven-figure purses. I made a couple of hundred thousand dollars for a fight here and there, but other than that, cruiserweights don't do anything in America. That's why I fought so often in Europe. I was chasing that lucrativeness.

“I know Marco Huck (a German) is making pretty good money as a cruiserweight, but I was an African-American fighting in Germany. I didn’t speak the language. We thought that my being a really good fighter was what mattered most, and it did to an extent. I feel I was pretty well accepted over there. But, you know, it’s not that easy to sell an American who doesn’t speak German when he’s fighting in Germany all the time.”

Join the Navy and see the world? Cunningham took up boxing relatively late, during his Navy enlistment, but it was the fight game as much as anything that kept his passport well-stamped. He has fought in South Africa (once), Poland (twice) and Germany (five times), most of the appearances in Germany coming after his eight-year contract with Don King Productions expired and he signed the best deal that was available upon his becoming a promotional free agent. That was with Sauerland Event’s Kalle Sauerland, who hoped to take advantage of Cunningham’s popularity in Europe that owed to his matchups with Poland’s Krzysztof Wlodarczyk and Adamek.

After capturing the IBF title on his second shot at Wlodarczyk, in Katowice, Poland, on June 26, 2007, Cunningham became one of boxing’s more frequent U.S. exports to Europe. He stopped the highly regarded Huck in the 12th round of a dandy first defense, in Bielefeld, Germany. He then nearly overcame three knockdowns to relinquish his championship to Adamek on a rousing split decision on Dec. 11, 2008, at the Prudential Center. Many have called it the best cruiserweight fight of all time, although that memorable slugfest might have to share space on the top tier with Evander Holyfield’s 15-round split decision over Dwight Muhammad Qawi on July 12, 1986, and James Toney’s 12-round, unanimous decision over Vassily Jirov on April 26, 2003.

After two successful defenses of his IBF cruiser strap, Adamek moved up to heavyweight, clearing the way for Cunningham to again win that title when he stopped Troy Ross in five rounds in Neubrandenburg, Germany, on June 5, 2010. He again made one successful defense, outpointing Serbia’s Enad Licina in Muelheim, Germany, before a six-round, technical-decision setback to Germany-based Cuban Yoan Pablo Hernandez on Oct. 1, 2011, in Neubrandenburg. A rematch with Hernandez, this past Feb. 4 in Frankfurt, Germany, also didn’t end as Cunningham would have wanted as he lost a unanimous decision.

Cunningham might have continued to ply his trade before appreciative audiences across the pond, but he couldn’t resist the emotional pull of his home country and, more specifically, his hometown of Philadelphia.

“Germany has great boxing fans, but Philadelphia’s in my heart,” said Cunningham, who has continued to live in Philly since his discharge from military service. “I take Philly with me every time I go someplace else. I did it in the Navy, and I’m doing it in boxing, too.”

No doubt Cunningham’s decision to step up to heavyweight was influenced by his wife-manager, Livvy, and his new promoter, Kathy Duva of Main Events, who has plumbed this territory before with Holyfield, the biggest heavyweight star ever to rise up from the cruisers, and Adamek. If your primary consideration is how many dollars (or Euros) you rake in, Adamek, who once held the WBC light heavyweight title, probably made as much or more for being taken out in 12 rounds by WBC heavyweight champion Vitali Klitschko on Sept. 10, 2011, as he did for all seven of his cruiserweight bouts.

Then again, money isn’t all that matters to a fighter who takes such obvious pride in himself, his profession and his roots as does Cunningham.

“When I won my first title overseas and came home, there was no reception at the airport,” Cunningham recalled. “After I won the title for a second time and came home, it was more of the same. And when stopped Huck in a great fight and came home, same thing.

“I’d be lying if I said it didn’t hurt me. But, in a way, it made me stronger. I made up my mind that I had to do what I had to do, whether anyone in Philly recognized me or not.”

Naazim Richardson, best known for his work with Bernard Hopkins and Shane Mosley, called it an “outrage” that Cunningham is less familiar to the average Philadelphia sports fan than the Eagles’ long snapper or a late-season minor league callup with the Phillies.

“As far as I could tell, it never bothered him,” said Richardson, who has been with Cunningham for his last five fights. “It bothered me. We’d be on the street together and someone would come up to me and say, `Hey, Naazim, what do you have coming up next?’ I’d say, `Excuse me, but this is the two-time cruiserweight champion of the world, Steve Cunningham, standing next to me.’ And the guy would go, like, `Oh.’

“It’s just incredible to me that Steve isn’t more recognized in his *hometown.* This is a champion who works as hard, if not harder, than other champions I’ve been with.”

Cunningham expects to weigh in “around 208 pounds” for the fight with Gavern, who, at 6-2, is an inch shorter than the Navy veteran but has ranged from 233 to 249 on the scales during his pro career. The road to heavyweight contention figures to be progressively steeper and more hazardous thereafter, but Cunningham dares to believe a high-paying date with Vitali or Wladimir Klitchko is in his future, or at least a long-awaited rematch with Adamek.

“I think I’ll be able to hold my own,” Cunningham said. “I’ve been in with guys bigger than me before. Maybe not *that* much bigger, but you have to have the mindset that you can do anything you put your mind to. I’m a Christian. I read my Bible. Everybody knows about how David slew Goliath.”

Comment on this article

deepwater says:

What the ? There is no excuse why Cunningham cant hire a publicist if he wants to be more well known. Main events should sort it out.

Radam G says:

WTF! Cunningham oughta drown himself. I'm with Deepwater. "There is no excuse," especially nowadays info ZOOM spreaded in cyberspace and real space. The turtle-slow newspaper and magazine are even gettin' their turtle speed on of the next, week and month.

Genie Naazim is a training-figher genie, not a public relations one. Holla!

the Roast says:

Steve ought to be worring agout that china chin hes got.