



It's hard to believe that today, June 21, it is 10 years since former heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis fought his last fight against reigning WBC title holder Vitali Klitschko. Lewis hasn't fought since that night when the fight was stopped after six rounds due to Vitali's severely cut left eye. Since then Lewis has slowly but surely climbed in the rankings of the all-time heavyweight greats and Vitali hasn't been defeated despite retiring for over three years then

## Looking Back At Lewis-Klitschko 10 Years Later

Written by Frank Lotierzo

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coming back.

Looking back in hindsight I think it's safe to say that both Lennox and Vitali are better fighters than what our perception of them was on June 21, 2003. Lennox, who was getting ready to fight Kirk Johnson, was never in worse shape or came into the ring heavier as on this occasion, when Klitschko replaced Johnson on two weeks notice. As for Klitschko, he was training to fight Cedric Boswell when he confronted Lewis on the same short notice that Lennox had. At that time Lewis was basically retired mentally and physically as a fighter being that in his last fight 54 weeks earlier he got the proverbial monkey off his back with an eight round knockout over former undisputed champ Mike Tyson. Klitschko was still under the stench of his first loss as a pro to Chris Byrd, on April 1, 2000. In that fight Vitali had the fight won after nine rounds but injured his shoulder during the bout and decided he couldn't continue.

On the night of the fight Lewis showed up fat and had a disposition that projected total disdain for Klitschko, projecting to everyone who observed him that he not only didn't think much of him as a fighter but also was certain that he would do to Vitali what he did to Michael Grant three years earlier, end the fight quickly. Vitali looked at Lewis as his chance to quiet the critics who questioned his heart and durability after withdrawing against the much smaller and less powerful Chris Byrd in the biggest fight of his career to that point.

When the bell rang for round one Lewis came out reckless and looked to put Klitschko away with every single right hand he launched. Only Vitali turned out to be better, better prepared, more awkward and much more determined and driven than what Lewis had planned on. Lewis was never hit more cleanly by another opponent in just a few rounds than he was during the Klitschko bout. In fact Lennox was almost dropped in the second round. However, he sucked it up and came back to rock and manhandle Klitschko more than any other fighter before or since. The fight was not pretty but it was a brawl and during the course of it no one would've ever said out loud that two of the greater heavyweights of the modern era were engaging in what looked more like a Toughman fight.

When it was decided that Klitschko couldn't continue despite his protest, Lewis was declared the winner. At the time when the fight was stopped Klitschko was leading by two points on all three judges' cards, which is exactly how I had it scored. Immediately after the fight it was debated by both factions as to who would've won had the fight continued, which was asinine. After the fight I was very critical of both fighters and the skill level that was exhibited during the bout and wrote the following.....

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"In my opinion, it looked more like a fight in the Toughman finals than it did a great heavyweight championship fight. If not the Toughman finals, how about Alonzo Mourning - Larry Johnson II? It certainly wasn't Foreman-Lyle. In fact it wasn't even Moorer-Cooper. This fight was nothing more than entertaining. "Great" is a word that should never accompany any sentence in describing the Lewis-Klitschko bout.

If Lewis-Klitschko was a great fight, then Laila Ali vs. Jaquie Frazier was the female "Thrilla In Manila"! Laila and Jaquie looked every bit as skilled and complete as either Lennox or Vitali, and Laila and Jaquie appeared to be in much better physical condition."

Looking back 10 years later and rewatching the fight, I still feel the same way. Both fighters were wild and sloppy and lacked the stamina that you'd expect from the participants of a world heavyweight championship fight. Their form and punch variation was something you'd expect from an eight round pro at best. That said, look at what we now know that we couldn't have grasped back then.

For starters, Vitali hasn't come close to being defeated since he fought Lewis. Actually, with the exception of his fight with Derrick Chisora a couple years ago, he's hardly lost any rounds. And Chisora only won three of the 12 they fought, four at the most. We see now how truly unorthodox and difficult Vitali is to fight. He's tall and strong with long arms, has a very sturdy chin and is physically strong. He likes to fight at a measured pace and is at his best fighting as a counter-puncher, but is more than willing to engage if he's confronted by an opponent who tries to assert themselves against him. Like him or not, since fighting Lennox Lewis, Vitali has fought every top heavyweight who deserved a shot at him with the exception of his brother, Wladimir. I know that a lot of old school and hardcore fight aficionados won't like this, but due to all the problems he presents in the ring physically, Vitali would've been a difficult night for the likes of Louis, Ali, Liston, Frazier, Holmes and Tyson (we've already seen the problems he gave Lewis). That's not saying he would've beaten them - just that they'd have to show up with their 'A' game to conclusively defeat him.

In regards to Lewis, now we can really see him with crystal clear vision. Lennox had height, reach, power in both hands and could fight as the attacker or sit back and counter. He was at his best if he caught his opponents at the end of his punches but also could fight on the inside and possessed a vicious right uppercut. Lewis fought and defeated a lot of big and powerful heavyweights during his era and never met a fighter he couldn't defeat. He only lost when he was out of shape and with the exception of Evander Holyfield, he's compiled the best heavyweight resume since Muhammad Ali based on the level of opposition he faced. And in looking back 10 years, it really says something about Lennox being that he beat the best

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heavyweight of the last 10 years in Vitali Klitschko, on a night that he was no doubt the least prepared for any big fight of his career.

In the 10 years gone by since Lewis and Klitschko confronted each other, here's what we now know. Lennox Lewis must rank among the 10 greatest heavyweight champs in history -- based on all that he brought to the ring as a fighter, his resume and also how he'd match up with the greatest of the greats who've held the title from Sullivan to Tyson to Holyfield. As for Klitschko, he's close behind Lewis; despite all that he brought to the ring as a fighter, it's just that his resume isn't nearly as deep as Lewis's and many other past heavyweight greats. We now can say that he gave Lewis one helluva fight as much so because of what he is as a fighter as much as it was Lewis was old, fat and disinterested on June 21, 2003.

Lewis smartly retired after fighting Klitschko and joined the likes of Gene Tunney, Rocky Marciano and Carlos Monzon among the short list of champions who got out of boxing at the perfect time and who left with their health, wealth, respect and their title, having cleaned out the division when they hung up the gloves for good.

### **tlig says:**

Although I wasn't a fan of Lennox Lewis towards the latter half of his career (despite being a huge fan in the early days) I have to say I respect his uniqueness amongst fighters. This dude recently made the list of the top 10 (?) richest athletes in Britain and he's been retired for ten years! Apparently he's worth as much as 120m US dollars..I mean, d@mn! His contemporaries like Bowe, Tyson and Holyfield have had all manner of financial problems despite each one of them earning similar amounts (and more in some cases). I distinctly remember him topping that list (the British richest athletes list i.e) back in 1993!

Say what you will about him (I found his fights profoundly dull and they have very little rewatchability value + he was arrogant and unlike-able as time went by) but the dude has proven himself a winner in and out of the ring and should be applauded for that. His decision to retire when he did made me respect him even more. The man realized it was time and it didn't matter to him if people thought he was ducking Vitali or/and was lucky to get the win in their fight (or that huge sums of money were on offer). He just left. And stayed away. Credit where it's due and Lennox deserves a lot of it.