

Wilder The Latest Hope To Save US Heavyweight Boxing

Written by Bernard Fernandez

Tuesday, 22 October 2013 08:30



Contrary to what some would have you believe, there are still American-born heavyweights actively plying their trade. But in recent years, due to the increasing domination of the division by Eastern Europeans, U.S. heavyweight *contenders* have become so rare as to be placed on the endangered-species list. And the mere concept of an American heavyweight champion, at least one capable of getting fight fans here and around the globe legitimately excited, has all but vanished.

It's enough to make you think that such iconic figures as Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield and Riddick Bowe, who in the 1980s and into the '90s represented this country's last golden era of heavyweight boxing, deserve not only induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame (Tyson was enshrined in 2012), but their own permanent exhibits in the Smithsonian Institute. Are American big men of their caliber already extinct, or soon to be? Are Iron Mike, the Real Deal and Big Daddy destined to be regarded as the pugilistic equivalents of saber-toothed tigers, woolly mammoths and T-Rexes?

In an increasingly parched-earth landscape, Americans have been patiently awaiting the next perceived savior of U.S. heavyweight boxing, a once-fertile garden that yielded such superstars of the sport as Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman and Larry Holmes, as well as the aforementioned Tyson and Holyfield. But the domestic talent pipeline began to be turned off nearly two decades ago, with the prevailing theory being that reasonably large, athletically gifted American kids were dreaming more of making it to the NFL and NBA than of becoming heavyweight champion of the world.

Oh, there has been no shortage of pretenders and wannabes to momentarily fire our collective imagination. Michael Grant, with one of the most magnificent heavyweight physiques since Ken Norton's muscles were something of a national treasure, was going to be The Man, at least until Lennox Lewis' overhand right landed flush on a jaw that was noticeably more fragile than Grant's granite-carved abdomen. Since Grant was revealed to be just pretty good, but hardly great, segments of the U.S. public have dared to purchase lottery tickets on such

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quasi-contenders as Chris Arreola, Eddie Chambers and Seth Mitchell, which to date have gone uncashed so far as the really big prize is concerned.

Which brings us to Deontay Wilder, 6-foot-7 knockout artist from Tuscaloosa, Ala., who again has boxing buffs daring to believe that America can reclaim at least a share of the heavyweight kingdom that the Klitschko brothers have held for what seems like forever, with no sign that their vise-like grip will loosen any time soon. Wilder (29-0, 29 KOs) attempts to run his remarkable knockout streak to 30 here Saturday night in Atlantic City Boardwalk Hall, in one of three Showtime-televvised bouts of a card headlined by IBF light heavyweight champ Bernard Hopkins' defense against Germany's Karo Murat, and there is a strong likelihood that Nicolai Firtha (21-10-1, 8 KOs) won't make it to the end of the scheduled 10-rounder.

"I know I'm blessed with God-given power," Wilder said after his most recent ring appearance, a first-round starching of former WBO heavyweight champion Sergei Liakhovich on Aug. 9. "I always pray that I don't hurt the guy I'm fighting, that if he has a family he will be OK enough afterward to continue to provide for them.

"I don't depend on (power), but it is there. I think all my KOs are helping me get a lot of people's attention, and I love that. I embrace it. I think more people are now starting to feel that maybe I can be the guy who brings the heavyweight title back to America. Honestly, I would love to be that guy."

So feel free to buy a lottery ticket on Wilder, a bronze medalist at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, if you are an optimistic sort. Twenty-nine consecutive victories inside the distance is an impressive feat, regardless of the level of competition. But upon further inspection, it is reasonable to conclude that Wilder has yet to swim with the sharks after spending virtually all of his professional boxing career splashing wading-pool-quality opponents.

Oh, sure, Liakhovich once held the WBO strap, but the native of Belarus is 37 and is now the loser of five of his last seven bouts. He's a trial horse these days, a stepping stone, trading on what's left of his celebrity status in exchange for paydays.

Englishman Audley Harrison, who also was taken out in one round by Wilder on April 27? He did win the super heavyweight gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, but he was 40 when

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he squared off against Wilder and hadn't had a victory of real consequence in years.

Other than Liakhovich and Harrison, the most notable entry on Wilder's resume – if you don't include Ty Cobb, who is no relation to the late, great Hall of Fame baseball player of the same name from the early part of the 20th century – is onetime fringe contender Owen “What the Heck” Beck of Jamaica, who was taken out in three rounds on June 23, 2012. Beck has now lost nine straight fights, and 12 of 17.

Not that any of this means that Wilder can't emerge as a truly elite heavyweight; many prospects' early diets consist of easy-to-chew opponents as they hone their craft and gain needed confidence. But at some point the pabulum must be replaced with tougher guys with some gristle to them, as capable of inflicting damage as of meekly accepting it. And when that step up in class occurs, it becomes less difficult to delineate fighters possessing the actual goods from those whose reputations are mostly fabricated.

Case in point: Philadelphia middleweight Tyrone Brunson, who began his pro career by stringing together 19 consecutive *first-round* knockouts.

“Even if you fought 19 grandmothers in a row, it's still kind of notable to get them all out of there in the first round,” Brunson's promoter, Carlos Llinas, said in August 2008. “Look, I know Tyrone has been moved slow. But I truly believe Tyrone has got what it takes to be special. He's got everything. He's got the heart, he's got the chin and, obviously, he has the power.”

Brunson, who hasn't fought in 19 months, is 2-2-1 since Llinas made that statement, which suggests he should have kept on beating up Granny. At the very least, he was done a disservice by being paired too lightly for too long and thus was denied a chance to develop whatever potential he might have had.

Promoter Butch Lewis, who was 65 when he died on July 23, 2011, is best known for his association with two heavyweight champions, Leon and Michael Spinks (Michael also was a cruiserweight titlist), but he took a chance on a pair of less-accomplished heavies, Vaughn Bean and Faruq Saleem, with varying results. Bean twice fought for versions of a world title, losing to Michael Moorer and Holyfield. Saleem might be described as Bean Lite; he won his first 38 pro bouts, but against a procession of barely warm bodies, most of whom would have had to

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redeem upgrade certificates to reach C-level. Still, Lewis desperately wanted to believe that Saleem could get lucky, if given the right opportunity.

“We’re talking about the bleepin’ heavyweight division,” the entertainingly profane Lewis said in November 2008, when the then-34-year-old Saleem had pieced together that 38-0 mark, with 32 wins inside the distance. “Every bleeper-bleeper whose name anybody recognizes is older than 34, damn near. And nobody’s a killer. I mean, who’s the killer?”

“I think Faruq has the potential to deal with any of these bleepin’ champions on a given night. That’s not to say how great my fighter is, but it tells you the level of what the division is. What we got to do is get the wins, then step up to where you can kick ass and look good doing it. Hit the right guy on the chin. Then you can pull down some real money.”

In his next fight after Lewis made those comments, Saleem was the one who got hit on the chin. He was stopped in the fourth round of a scheduled six against Shawn McLean, who entered the ring with a 2-4 record, and promptly retired. Another case of a rudderless ship crashing against the rocks of reality.

It’s a bit dicey at this juncture predicting on which side of the figurative fence Wilder –who wanted to play either football or basketball for his hometown Alabama Crimson Tide until circumstances steered him into boxing – falls. It’s clear he’s a better, more exciting prospect than some of those who were given a similar build-up but came up short. Like Butch Lewis said, correctly if not necessarily about Saleem, all it takes is hitting the right guy on the chin. And if you do that often enough and over a long enough period, you can even get to be a multimillionaire pay-per-view star with a spot for your plaque reserved on a wall at the IBHOF in Canastota, N.Y.

Given the indisputable fact that America very much needs a heavyweight to pick up the flickering torch laid down by Tyson, Holyfield and Bowe – I guess you could include ancient George Foreman in that number – here’s hoping that Wilder proves to be more than just another shadow of his predecessors’ greatness.

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brownsugar says:

Never has so much frailty and so much devastating power been combined in the same package. If he plays his cards right...Wilder could go far.

Hop says:

[QUOTE=brownsugar;39005]Never has so much frailty and so much devastating power been combined in the same package. If he plays his cards right...Wilder could go far.[/QUOTE]

I'm ignorant, B-Sug. Where have you seen the frailty?

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=Hop;39006]I'm ignorant, B-Sug. Where have you seen the frailty?[/QUOTE]

Punch Resistance...so far nobody can get past his right.

Radam G says:

WOW! The US HEAVYWEIGHT BOXING is in deep, deep kimche. And Wilder smells all the way to Venus. Holla!

amayseng says:

Deontay throws punches wide and out of control.

he has great power but a fundamental sharp shooter with decent power might spell trouble for him.

amayseng says:

his best chance is to fight Wlad and land a good shot, vitali has a solid beard but Wlad does not.

Spinach Chin says:

Not buying Wilder's hype. He's Shannon Briggs 2.0 until he fights a live body.

Domenic says:

Not sure what to think of this guy. Reminds me of Michael Grant. Big, imposing, and menacing on the surface, but a big question mark about what's underneath. He lost in the Olympics to a

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guy that looked very ordinary (courtesy youtube). A superstar should have been able to impose his will there, even in an amateur fight. Got outclassed. Hasn't fought anything more than retired bouncers and truck drivers with extreme hypertension to date. He should blitz this guy in the first round. He's the best hope of anything coming from American soil, but prepare for nothing more than another Clifford Ettienne/Calvin Brock/Ray Anus/Samson Pohua/Vaughn Bean type guy when the story is written.

The Shadow says:

Great points, everyone. He lacks solid fundamentals, yes. He looks clumsy to me. I think he's another Michael Grant waiting to happen, should he run into Wlad or -- *gasp* God forbid -- Stone Cold Vitali.