

Can Wlad's Reign Last Long Enough To Surpass Hopkins'?

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 24 April 2014 21:39



They say that nothing lasts forever. They also say that records are meant to be broken.

Those sentiments, though, seemed to be put aside in the aftermath of the light heavyweight unification victory by 49-year-old IBF champion Bernard “The Alien” Hopkins on April 19, whose controversial split decision over 19-years-younger Beibut Shumenov (“controversial” only in the sense that judge Gustavo Padilla, who gave the nod to Shumenov, apparently dozed off after the opening bell), convinced some media types that his status as the oldest man ever to hold a widely recognized world title can’t possibly be equaled, much less surpassed.

But Hopkins doesn’t figure he’s through tweaking the nose of Father Time. He envisions himself remaining a champion until the ridiculous age of 50, which he turns next Jan. 15, and possibly beyond. His next planned defiance of the natural laws of diminishing returns is likely to come in another unification matchup, with another relative kid of 36, WBC champion Adonis Stevenson.

“Absolutely amazing,” Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer, who promotes Hopkins, said of the old master’s continuing sips from some secret Fountain of Youth. “Bernard keeps turning back the clock and making history. Fight after fight he turns in these performances against guys who could be his son.”

Maybe it’s true that Hopkins’ feats of ring longevity, and at a level of excellence undreamed of by most prizefighters, are forever safe. Then again ...

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There is a heavyweight who fights almost exclusively in Europe these days, a comparative youngster of 38, who has announced – maybe not so much in words – that he is ready, willing and able to make a run at Hopkins, if he so chooses. And, apparently, he does choose.

That guy's name is Wladimir Klitschko.

Klitschko (61-3, 51 KOs) defends his slew of titles – his current collection consists of the WBO, WBA, IBF and fringe IBO belts – against Samoa-born, Australia-based slugger Alex Leapai (30-4-3, 24 KOs) this Saturday in Oberhausen, Germany. And while it's still a long way to 50 candles on the cake for "Dr. Steelhammer," he's thinking he just might hang around long enough to at least give Hopkins some competition as an age-defying visitor from another galaxy.

"I just turned 38, but that's only a number," Klitschko said of his birthday just passed and many more to come. "I am still extremely hungry and better than ever. A few years ago, I thought I couldn't improve, but my mission is still a long way from over. I want to box for 10 more years."

If Klitschko can tack on another championship decade to a career that already seems assured of eventual induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame, he might decide to, what the hell, go after Hopkins' "oldest champ" designation. As it is, the Ukrainian giant is much closer to another record once thought to be unassailable, one that should be within his grasp in comparatively short order unless some challenger offers him a much tougher test than he has faced in the past 10 years in which he has seemed virtually invincible. That test is not likely to be posed by Leapai, a 9-to-1 underdog, man-to-man. If you're inclined to get a bet down on Klitschko to win straight up, it's a 1-to-12 proposition, the sort of ultra-short odds you could have gotten on Secretariat to hit the finish line first in the 1973 Belmont Stakes.

If Klitschko – no need to always continue identifying Wlad by his first name, too, to separate him from his older brother, Vitali, who recently abdicated his WBC heavyweight championship to enter the even more perilous realm of Ukrainian politics – remains on top for four more years, he will eclipse the mark set by the legendary Joe Louis by ruling the division for an almost-unimaginable 12 years.

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In tacit acknowledgment that the younger and perhaps more enduring of boxing's Klitschko brothers has or soon will enter hallowed historical territory, his bout with Leapai is being widely televised in the United States (by ESPN) for only the sixth time in the last six years.

Since Wlad last fought in the United States, a desultory unanimous decision over Sultan Ibragimov on Feb. 23, 2008, in Madison Square Garden, he has gotten similar exposure on HBO in only four of his title defenses, against Tony Thompson on July 12, 2008, Hasim Rahman on Dec. 13, 2008, David Haye on July 2, 2011, and Alexander Povetkin on Oct. 5, 2013. He also had an ESPN-televised defense in his rematch with Samuel Peter on Sept. 11, 2010.

Maybe that's because, since Ibragimov, Wlad has fought nine times in Germany and once apiece in Russia and Switzerland, the time differential from Europe making it problematic to show his fights live in the U.S. rather than on tape delay. Maybe it's because some of the opponents he's manhandled with almost ridiculous ease (Franciso Pianeta, Mariusz Wach) were virtual unknowns to American fight fans. For whatever reason, several of Wlad's bouts over these past six years were available on TV to American audiences only on Epix, which guaranteed scant viewership and only to hardcore U.S. fight fans who had to be trying very, very hard to find the channel.

In addition to Klitschko-Leapai, ESPN also will televise the May 10 rematch of Bernane Stiverne (23-1-1, 20 KOs) and Chris Arreola (36-3, 30 KOs) for the WBC heavyweight championship vacated by Vitali Klitschko. These two fights represent a more extensive, and more expensive, investment in boxing by ESPN, whose "Friday Night Fights" telecasts on ESPN2 usually come with modest budgets.

"We are thrilled to have ESPN televise this 1-2 combination of world heavyweight title fights," said Brian Kweder, ESPN's director of programming and acquisitions. "The winners of these two fights will be on a collision course for the potential unification of the heavyweight title. With fighters like Deontay Wilder, Mike Perez, Bryant Jennings and Tyson Fury all waiting in the wings, the heavyweight division is poised for a major comeback."

If it is, expect HBO to take a keener interest in the heavyweight sandbox it claimed to have stopped playing in nearly four years ago. Remember how it was in the summer of 2010? The then-president of HBO Sports, Ross Greenburg, opined that the Klitschkos were too dominant, and too boring of style, to be considered must-see TV.

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"I'm souring on the heavyweights," Greenburg said. "We're not playing in that sandbox right now."

Perhaps Wilder (31-0, 31 KOs) and Jennings (18-0, 10 KOs), should he get past his May 24 matchup with Cuban defector Mike Perez (20-0-1, 12 KOs), would be as or more appealing to U.S. fight fans as opponents for Klitschko than were Haye, an Englishman, and Povetkin, a Russian. Wilder and Jennings are, at least, American and undefeated ones at that. But, really, HBO's more regular returns to that figurative sandbox probably owes to the fact that Klitschko has been too good and too popular in other places (frequently selling out European soccer stadiums) for too long to be as excluded from easily accessible, prime-time American TV as has sometimes been the case. If he gets close to the Louis record, interest in him surely would spike on these shores, and even more so if he hangs around long enough to take aim at Hopkins.

Make no mistake, Klitschko can still be difficult to watch at times, as was the case in his clinch-filled, pseudo-wrestling match with Povetkin. He frequently is as cautious as he is explosive, but when he does spy an opening in an opponent's defense the ending can come quickly and emphatically.

"For one-punch power, Wladimir tops them all," Klitschko's late trainer, Emanuel Steward, said before the rematch with Samuel Peter. "If he ever becomes more aggressive and just went after people, he could be the most devastating heavyweight puncher ever."

When you bring a 19-fight winning streak over 10 years into a match with a seemingly no-hope longshot like Leapai, it's difficult for a naturally reticent champion like Klitschko to verbally spice things up with the kind of trash-talking that other fighters speak so fluently. So leave it to others to at least forward the suggestion that Wlad is semi-vulnerable to a lucky punch.

"It's been 10 years since this guy's held the world title and you just feel he's never been hit," Leapai said to a reporter for the Sydney Morning Herald after his arrival in Oberhausen. "Once he feels what I've got, his game plan's going to go out the window. We're not here to win by points. This is Germany. We have to knock him out to win. And if the knockout (opportunity) comes, I'm going for it."

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One of Klitschko's sparring partners, Sherman "Tank" Williams, even dissed his employer by suggesting that Wlad didn't like to get hit with body shots. Then again, as the legendary Louis once observed, "Who do?"

"At the moment I think he's ready to be beaten," Williams, who has frequently worked with Klitschko, said of the 6'6" titlist. "He's ready to be knocked out. I've hit him with clean body shots. Wladimir doesn't like body shots."

It is a reasonable theory, given that Klitschko has a history of going down and sometimes not getting up fast enough or on steady legs when he does. Wlad – who will have a Steward pupil, Johnathan Banks, as his chief second for the third time – was stopped in fifth rounds by Lamon Brewster on April 10, 2004, his most recent defeat, and was taken out in two rounds by Corrie Sanders on March 8, 2003. Even in winning by unanimous decision in his first bout with Samuel Peter, on Sept. 24, 2005, Klitschko had to pull himself off the canvas after being floored three times.

But, like Hopkins, Klitschko insists that even the occasional disappointment can provide the sort of learning experience from which a talented and adaptable fighter can benefit.

"If I hadn't lost against Brewster 10 years ago, I never would become the person I am today inside and outside the ring," he said. "I never would have trained as hard as I'm training right now I compare it with the saying, 'What doesn't kill you makes you strong,' and that's exactly what happened 10 years ago. (Brewster) didn't kill me, but he showed me the way."

As did Steward, who remains a major influence on Klitschko's life and career even though he passed away on Oct. 25, 2012.

"I do hear Emanuel's voice when I train," Klitschko continued. "He's whispering in my ear, telling me what to do and what not to do."

No doubt Manny's voice is telling Wlad to strike hard when he spot an opening, to focus solely on the present and to let the future take care of itself until Louis, and maybe even Hopkins,

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appear in the rear-view mirror.

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oubobcat says:

Klitschko has been dominant as heavyweight champion. He is skilled but also as well all know there have been zero credible contenders in heavyweight boxing in the last decade. He has not been pushed for years and as such is still relatively fresh. Can he fight for another decade as champion? Its certainly possible if this current course does not change.

My feeling though is his reign will end sooner rather than later. He has been knocked out a few times in the past. Its also heavyweight boxing in which we have seen big underdogs emerge from seemingly nowhere to pull off big upsets with one punch. When that will happen, I don't know. But I don't think he will be fighting anywhere near as long as Hopkins.

ArneK. says:

Vitali Klitschko had his last fight at the age of 41. Wladimir will reach this age in March of 2017. My guess is that he won't compete beyond this point and that he'll follow his older brother into the political arena.

deepwater2 says:

I don't think so. I Am playing a lot of golf this summer. I am looking for a 40 year old golfer to yank off the golf course and put in the ring against VK.