Written by Ron Borges
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Tonight in Cologne, Germany, Vitali Klitschko will be a heavy favorite to retain the WBC heavyweight title from the challenge of an often too-heavy Cuban challenger named Odlanier Solis, and rightfully so. The question is how live is the underdog?

Arguably Solis is the best challenger the elder Klitschko has faced since defeating Samuel Peter 2 ½ years ago not because of the quality of Solis' recent competition but because of the Cuban's deep and highly successful amateur background as a six-time Cuban national champion, winner of the 2004 Olympic gold medal in Athens and conqueror of Cuban legend Felix Savon in two of their three matches.

Those experiences don't necessarily translate into being able to handle the robotic but powerful Klitschko but they should at least allow him to stay competitive for a time. If that time is long enough and Solis' resistance is stern enough might the 39-year-old Klitschko begin to implode

simply from the fact it has been so long since he faced a formidable challenge that he won't quite know how to handle the psychological as well as physical pressure?

Klitschko (41-2, 38 KO) thinks not of course and neither do the wiseguys and oddsmakers and understandably so. Solis (17-0, 12 KO) faced far sterner competition in Cuba than he has since he defected, in fact, his biggest professional victory probably being his second round knockout of journeyman Monte Barrett two years ago. On paper that would explain the sense many in Germany have that this is a coronation, not a fistic election fight, but someone who knows much about what both men will be facing sees at least an opening for the former Olympic champion.

"I think he (Solis) needs to really go to the body and just really come inside on Klitschko and really not get hit while he's coming inside and also use his feet, because I noticed that he's stationary on his feet – a little more feet action,'' said retired former unified champion Lennox Lewis this week. "He's got a tremendous history. It kind of reminds me of my own being a world junior champion and having all the different amateur accolades. I think if he puts a lot of that into motion, uses a lot of different amateur moves, such as you know combination punches and some quickness and definitely, like I said, on the body, and throws some good left hooks to the head as well …if he reaches Klitschko's.''

The implication was he felt all things are possible, although more so for Klitschko than for Solis. Perhaps that was just a bit of pre-fight hype by someone who is part of the fight's broadcasting team on the Epix premium channel network. Then again, frankly, he may have a point as much because of the age and relative immobility of Klitschko as from what Solis will bring to Lanxess Arena.

"I never fought against a guy who has so many titles as an amateur,'' Klitschko said of Solis. "He's Olympic gold medalist, three times a world amateur champion, and undefeated as a professional. A fighter's amateur career is very important for professional boxing, and that's why I know it will be not easy task.''

Klitschko may be on to something if Solis can stand up to the initial barrage Klitschko figures to fire in his direction and do something more. At some point fairly early in the fight he has to fire back because if he doesn't the towering Klitschko will walk him down and, minute by minute, chop him to pieces as he did Shannon Briggs in his last title defense.

Certainly Solis cannot match Klitschko's raw power and he lacks the professional experience Klitschko has behind him but he is younger, fresher and, one would think, well aware that this is his moment, the dream he grew up with in Cuba long before he fled the country and landed in Germany before finally settling in Miami.

"He wants to become the first ever Cuban heavyweight champion of the world,'' said Ahmet Oner, Solis' German-based promoter. "Vitali looked old and slow his last fight. Solis is definitely faster, stronger and technically better than Vitali. Solis knows this is the chance of a lifetime.''

We will see about that but certainly Solis possesses superior hand speed which could be used to his advantage if he can avoid Klitschko's sometimes heavy jab to get close enough to make

that difference a useable asset.

If he can do that often enough who knows when the soon to be 40 year old Klitschko suddenly ages over night? Might Solis be the challenger to do that?

On paper it would not appear so but boxing matches are not contested on paper. They are contested on canvas in the midst of a ring which has no exit signs. It is a place where things can suddenly and irrevocably go awry. Klitschko certainly understands that having seen it happen to him the last time he faced an Olympic gold medalist.

That man was Lewis, who stopped him in six brutal rounds in which Klitschko had his moments but ultimately suffered a gash over one eye that looked like Lewis had taken a sand wedge to it. Both Lewis and the larger boxing world gained respect for Klitschko that day but that was eight years ago and much has changed for him since.

Age and the passage of time can do things to a fighter that an opponent cannot, often wearing him down until he is vulnerable to a type of opponent who a few years earlier would have been only a minimal challenge to him. Only time and Solis will tell if that is the case but clearly he is as ready as he has ever been professionally to put his best foot forward.

Often troubled by carrying too much weight, Solis weighed in at just under 247 pounds Friday afternoon, 13 pounds lighter than his last outing and 20 pounds lighter than this time a year ago.

That seemed to be a sign not only of having taken his preparation far more seriously than in the past but also an effort to increase his speed advantage. What has gone all but unnoticed however is that although he is a half foot shorter than Klitschko, Solis' reach is 79 inches, a difference of only one inch from the champion's.

That means that although Klitschko's height and his ability to use it to stay out of harm's way are major assets, Solis' reach and hand speed could allow him to score frequently without having to expose himself at close quarters as often as one might expect.

Whether that will be enough for Odlanier Solis to pull off what would be considered a major upset and become the first Cuban national to win the heavyweight championship is a question he will have to answer for himself but in boxing it is often on nights like this – nights when little is expected and the storyline has already been written – that dreams are answered and nightmares are born.

Comment on this article

astro1 says:

Solis certainly is in good shape for this, also much younger. How it all translates is anyones guess. Just want to see a good heavyweight fight.

the Roast says:

I hope Solis wins this fight. Nothing against Vitali but I'd like to see a somebody else get a chance to bring so excitement back. Solis better know that he has to really take it cuz he wont win a close fight on the cards.

the Roast says:

So much for that!!!! Vit in 1!