

Haye Fight Is A No-Win But Better Not Lose Situation For Wladimir

Written by Ron Borges
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Such is the essence of boxing that 35-year-old Wladimir Klitschko's entire legacy is on the line Saturday night in Hamburg, Germany, not just the 50 percent of the heavyweight title that he controls.

Despite being 55-3 with 49 knockouts and 16-2 in heavyweight title fights, if the 35-year-old Klitschko gets clipped on the chin by the loquacious and bodacious David Haye and loses the IBF and WBA titles to the WBA champion it will be as if he never won a thing. That is a lot of pressure to carry into the ring with you, even if you do weigh 242 sculpted pounds and stand 6-foot-6 (give or take a hair).

It is also a lot of proving to do for a guy seemingly trapped by his dominance of a mediocre era in heavyweight boxing and Haye's relatively thin resume. If Klitschko is knocked out by the former cruiserweight champion, it will be widely argued that he was always little more than a papier mache champion who dominated arguably the worst collection of challengers the heavyweight division has ever seen.

By comparison, the era of Michael Dokes, Tim Witherspoon, Tony Tubbs, Tony Tucker, Pinklon Thomas et al is a golden age of heavyweights, which should make clear how sad the present collection of sad sacks in the division truly has become. That is not Klitschko's fault but it is his

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reality, which is what makes the Haye fight at the same time so important to his legacy and so unlikely to greatly improve it.

Basically, if Klitschko wins, much of the world will simply view Haye as a fraud, a pumped up cruiserweight with only four heavyweight fights and none of them against a particularly demanding opponent. He stopped journeyman Monte Barrett, won the title with a cautiously fought majority decision from Nikolay Valuev and then stopped 38-year-old former champion John Ruiz and ponderously unaggressive former Olympic gold medalist Audley Harrison in his forays into the division.

So if Klitschko beats a man he outweighs by 29 pounds (243 to 213) he will, for the most part, not get all that much credit for it except that people will concede he probably defeated the best of a sorry lot of contenders at Imtech Arena, a 55,000-seat outdoor soccer arena that figures to be jammed with juiced up Germans and lathered up Brits, a fact that could well put the best fights of the night in the stands rather than in the ring.

Yet while he may get only minimal credit for victory, if Klitschko loses it will deeply call into question those 16 title victories and 10 straight defenses of the IBF championship he won from Chris Byrd five years ago. It is a Catch-22 situation centering around catching leather or avoiding it.

If the quick-handed and power punching Haye lands one of his "Hayemakers" and shatters Klitschko's chin and his title reign it will not be as if he was beaten by the British version of Joe Louis. Some might even argue Haye is closer to Jerry Lewis, his notoriety coming as much from his trash-talking and often amusing verbal assaults more than any physical ones he's launched since becoming a heavyweight.

Against Valuev, the 7-foot Russian whose hands move roughly about as quickly as the rotation of the Earth, Haye stayed on the outside and contented himself with winning a match that resembled a kid trying to smash a piñata while always wary it might spin back and clip him in the nose.

Saturday night, Klitschko has promised he will not be his usual passive self, relying on his long jab and fighting tall to protect a chin that has come up short three times in his career in KO

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losses to Corrie Sanders and Lamon Brewster and also led him to be floored three times by Samuel Peter in a fight Klitschko still ended up winning (which should tell you all you need to know about Samuel Peter).

Haye has taunted and defamed both Klitschko and his older brother WBC champion Vitali, insisting each is a paper champion who has never faced a true challenger coming to win. The truth, frankly, is Haye's defense there but the larger question is might he not be just the latest extension of that?

If he is and Klitschko destroys him it doesn't really help the champion's international perception but at least it doesn't turn him into a fraud. But if Haye (25-1, 23 KO) ends up standing over a fallen Klitschko it will confirm all those who have long questioned his accomplishments. To be fair, one can't say Klitschko has really ducked anybody. His problem is that here hasn't been anyone worth ducking.

If Haye proves to be that guy it will infuse the division with new life and a far higher volume than has existed since Mike Tyson began to slip into oblivion. Haye will have a perfect next opponent in Klitschko's big brother, a clash that would be both the ultimate unification fight and also an opportunity to wipe out what remains of the Klitschko Era's legacy.

If he does not – and frankly unless he gets lucky early he probably will not – all Wladimir Klitschko will have gained is a reprieve from the doubts that so many in and out of boxing have about his reign as heavyweight champion.

That is the case unless one thing happens. If the fight turns into a rousing brawl that he survives he could be elevated in the same way his brother was when he lasted six bruising rounds with Lewis in Lewis' final fight as heavyweight champion before succumbing to a cut over his eye that looked as if Lewis had taken a sand wedge to his face.

Although he lost, Vitali Klitschko fought so bravely – and had an ill-prepared Lewis in so much trouble – that he came out of that fight elevated by it despite his defeat. He is still viewed eight years later as the tougher of the two Klitschkos and in most ratings is ranked above his brother even though the younger Klitschko is surely a more proficient boxer.

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That is what a display of heart can do for you. It will only be that way for Wladimir Klitschko however if he does both. He has to be thrust by Haye into a perilous situation and then overcome it and win. If he does, the skeptics may not look at him differently because of Haye's suspect status but at least no one will be able to argue that when he faced his greatest challenge he didn't respond.

Fairly or unfairly (and frankly it's probably unfair) that is the situation Wladimir Klitschko will find himself in when he slips between the ropes at Imtech Arena to face David Haye. It's a no win but better not lose situation fraught with danger and the kind of pressures that can break a man more readily than perhaps Haye himself can.