

Jennings Has Sparring With Idea of Sparring a Klitschko

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Thursday, 13 June 2013 11:51



The date was May 7, 2002, after the Philadelphia 76ers had been bounced from the NBA playoffs a year after they had advanced to the Finals, and the team's superstar guard, Allen Iverson, was going off on the perceived difference – at least as it pertained to him – between actual competition and the work that presumably needed to be put in to get ready for games that counted.

Known for his notoriously lackadaisical practice habits, when he practiced at all, Iverson treated a beat writer's question about the matter as something beneath a player of his magnitude. His infamous rant at a press conference that day has become a YouTube staple.

"We're talkin' about practice," Iverson responded in a mocking tone of voice. "I mean listen, we're sitting here talkin' about *practice*. Not a game. We're talkin' about practice, man."

Eleven years and one month have passed, and another reasonably notable Philadelphia athlete was explaining – albeit to a much smaller media audience – his disdain for a certain element of practice. It's not that Bryant Jennings (16-0, 8 KOs), the IBF's third-ranked heavyweight who takes on Russia's Andrey Fedosov (24-2, 19 KOs) Friday night in a scheduled 10-rounder to be televised by the NBC Sports Network from Bethlehem, Pa. – has anything against sparring, per se. His trainer, Fred Jenkins, says the sculpted 6-2, 225-pounder has "a work ethic that, I think, supersedes every other heavyweight."

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It's just that, well, Jennings doesn't think he needs to cross an ocean to spar somebody – even if that somebody happens to be a heavyweight champion of the world with the power to grant him a high-profile, high-paying shot at a version or versions of the title.

Jennings is steadfast in his belief that his refusal to serve as a practice partner to either Klitschko (Wladimir holds the IBF, WBO and *The Ring* magazine belts, while older brother Vitali is the WBC champ) is holding him back from the dream matchup he and his support team so obviously covet.

“I think you have to go to their camp (as a sparring partner) so they can test you, see what you're all about, so they can figure out what they're getting into ... whether or not they can handle you,” Jennings, speaking to reporters at the ABC Recreation Center in North Philly, said of the Klitschkos' propensity for selecting onetime sparring partners as challengers for their belts. “That seems to be the only way. A lot of their opponents have been their sparring partners, so that's one strategy (for moving to the front of the line).

“But I don't want them to figure me out just yet. I want them to find out what I'm all about when we get in the ring.”

Jenkins confirmed Jennings' take on the situation, although he was a bit sketchy on details. He does recall that the trip would have taken them to Germany, which is the preferred base of operations for each of the Ukrainian giants.

“It's something that would have paid very well and, I won't kid you, we could have used the money,” Jenkins said. “But Bryant and I talked it over and we agreed that we didn't want to go over there to be anybody's sparring partner. We want to fight those guys for real, with a world championship on the line.”

So, which Klitschko did the inviting?

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“I don’t know which one,” Jenkins said. “They both look alike to me. They fight alike, too.”

For sparring partners and non-sparring partners alike, the window of opportunity to swap punches with a Klitschko would appear to be closing. Vitali (45-2, 41 KOs) is 41 and has a history of injuries that have kept him idle for long stretches, and Wladimir (60-3, 51 KOs) is 37 and already has his next opponent lined up. He’s scheduled to square off with Russia’s Alexander Povetkin (26-0, 18 KOs) on Oct. 5 in Moscow.

This might not be a golden age of heavyweights, but Team Jennings correctly points out that there is a glut of wannabes, both from Europe and America, who would leap at the chance to take a beating from a Klitschko for a sizable chunk of cash. U.S. heavyweights who conceivably could be on the Klitschkos’ radar are another Philadelphian, Malik Scott (35-0-1, 12 KOs), as well as Tony Thompson (37-3, 25 KOs), Johnathon Banks (29-1-1, 19 KOs), Chris Arreola (35-3, 30 KOs), Deontay Wilder (28-0, 28 KOs), Amir Monsour (18-0, 14 KOs), Joe Hanks (21-0, 14 KOs), Kevin Johnson (29-3-1, 14 KOs), Seth Mitchell (25-1-1, 19 KOs) and Reading’s Travis Kauffman (24-1, 18 KOs).

It should be noted that the 41-year-old Thompson is 0-2 against Wladimir and that Arreola and Johnson each has lost to Vitali. It seems reasonable to assume that some of the other American candidates might have decided that their best course of action will be to wait for the Klitschkos to retire, then try to wangle a shot at a vacant title against someone far less dangerous.

Jennings, though, is a young man in a hurry. So what if he didn’t even take up boxing until the relatively advanced age of 24? So what if he has fewer pro fights than any of the other Americans who would love to become the first heavyweight champion from this country since Shannon Briggs briefly held the WBO crown in 2006? Time waits for no man, and Jennings, at 28, is an impatient sort.

“It’s been done before,” he said of relative neophytes (see Pete Rademacher and Leon Spinks) who bid for what used to be known as boxing’s grandest prize. “I could see waiting if it hadn’t been done before, but I’m not trying to do something that’s all that unusual.

“I’m on my path. I got the heart, I got the will, I got the skill. I couldn’t possibly do worse than some of the guys who have been in there (with the Klitschkos). And I would go in there to win ,

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not just to lay down and draw a paycheck. Look at some of the other guys that fought them. When it was over, it was like you didn't hear anything about them again. They took their check and pretty much disappeared."

Jennings has always been supremely confident in his own abilities. A three-sport athlete at Benjamin Franklin High School, he is used to being the top guy at whatever sport he tried. But being king of the neighborhood is not the same as being king of the world.

"Jennings came in (to the gym) thinking he was big, even in the beginning," said Jenkins, who in his 31-year training career has worked with, among others, 1996 Olympic gold medalist and former WBA junior middleweight champion David Reid, '96 Olympian Zahir Raheem and three-time world title challenger "Rockin'" Rodney Moore. "He's always thinking he's better than anybody else. He's used to winning, to being a standout at whatever he tried. Boxing is just his latest challenge. He wants to accomplish great things, and I think he can.

"Every 20 years or so a fighter comes along that's extraordinary. This is one of those fighters. If you want to be great, you have to dare to be great. Instead of waiting for the Klitschkos to retire, he'd rather step in the ring and *earn* his greatness now.

"This kid moves like a lightweight and he hits twice as hard as most heavyweights. He'd be competitive right now with anybody in the division, no matter what their record is or how experienced they are. I want him to get his shot now because he's eager and he's hungry. He's willing to take more gambles than maybe a more seasoned guy would."

Jennings' Philadelphia-based promoter, J Russell Peltz, appreciates eagerness in a fighter. But he said his personal preference would be for the man known as "By-By" to take things just a bit slower in his scramble toward the top.

"I honestly don't know how good Jennings is," Peltz said. "I know he's got the style, with all that in-and-out speed, to beat the Klitschkos. Whether he can pull it off is the question. He was on the floor in his last fight against a B-level fighter (Bowie Tupou, whom Jennings knocked out in five rounds on Dec. 8). But that can happen to any fighter in any fight. (Note: Referee Blair Talmadge ruled Tupou's apparent knockdown of Jennings a slip.)

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“It’s tough to hold fighters back today because of the money. Even if he loses to a Klitschko, well, everybody else has, too, or probably would. But Jennings has a chance. The Klitschkos are old-style heavyweights, plodding along. Jennings is an athletic kid with a lot of confidence in himself. And he knows how to win.

“When he beat Maurice Byarm (on a unanimous, 10-round decision on Jan. 21, 2012), Byarm was the better fighter that night. But Jennings is a winner. He finds a way, maybe because he is so athletic. You don’t see many heavyweights with his speed and reflexes.”

There is the matter of possible ring rust to consider. Although he was very busy in 2012, fighting five times, Friday’s clash with Fedosov will be his first actual bout in six months. Jennings said it’s no big deal because “that’s just the fight game. Boxing has a lot of politics. But I stay in the gym and keep myself sharp. Shouldn’t be any problem.”

Should Jennings get past Fedosov, he could be in line for a bout with the IBF’s top-rated contender, Bulgaria’s Kubrat Pulev (17-0, 9 KOs). A victory could catapult him into the position of mandatory contender, at least for the IBF version of the title. Not that Jennings is expecting much movement on that front. He said he and his support crew were offered a bout with Pulev for what they considered to be an “insulting” amount of money, said to be \$25,000.

“He’s sitting around, clogging up that No. 1 spot and he doesn’t seem very anxious to fight anybody,” Jennings said. “It gets real frustrating in this boxing business. Look, we all know what Pulev is doing. He’s not the big, bad wolf he makes himself out to be. He’s not getting turned down for fights because everybody’s scared of him. He made us a bum offer. He makes a lot of guys bum offers, and wasn’t nobody going to accept them.”

Nor is Jennings impressed by Thompson, the soft-bodied veteran who made himself a factor again when he took out unbeaten British contender David Price on a second-round stoppage on Feb. 23 in Liverpool, England.

“Tony Thompson is living proof of just how shallow the heavyweight division is, that he can come off his toilet seat and just knock a guy out,” Jennings sneered. “Tony Thompson didn’t

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even wipe his ass. He got back in the game and beat the crap out of David Price. Doesn't say a whole lot about David Price now, does it?"

So Bryant Jennings plays the waiting game, whether he wants to or not, and while he waits he keeps calling out the Klitschkos because that's all he can do for now. Unless, of course, he wants to become one of their sparring partners.

"It's hard, man," he said of his efforts to draw the attention of one or both of the Klitschkos. "Boxing is not a sport you're supposed to be in very long. Who has time to sit around?"

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Radam G says:

Kind of a strange piece. Bryant Jennings is a waiting lame. Dude ain't got no [sic] game! Against the Klitschko docs/bros, his arse will be on flame.

Tony Thompson and Jennings are the exact same -- syet-talking CLOWNS wasting scribes' time and copy. I guess pugilistic scribing is kind of slow right now. Holla!

deepwater says:

A damn blind bat could figure out Jennings . Inverson is broke and Busted who cares what he says. If he was a thinking man he would go spar them, be polite, work hard and play it safe. He might get a shot . But no he wants to hide his secret skills he has never shown because if he shows them the klitco boys will be too scared. I'm no fan of those brothers but they sure as hell would ko this c level heavy. Who wrote this? This article was broken before it started

Carmine Cas says:

Haven't seen this kid fight, so I can't really make a judgement

Bernie Campbell says:

Frisco cant take succcessive body punches! See Steve Collins at the Rock!