

The Great White Hope?

Written by Steve Kim

Monday, 29 November 1999 19:00

This Saturday night in Atlantic City, New Jersey Wladimir Klitschko takes a supposed step up in class when takes on the rugged Ray Mercer. This big Ukrainian is the consensus choice among boxing insiders to be the heir apparent to Lennox Lewis. Some even believe that Klitschko, a 1996 gold medalist and current WBO heavyweight titlist, could down Lewis right now. Sorry, but I think that talk is a wee bit premature.

I'm not saying this guy can't fight(because he can) or that he doesn't have the God-given physical tools needed(at 6'7, 245 pounds, he has more than enough size) but the truth of the matter is that outside of a win over Chris Byrd, he's beaten about the same level of pretender that a Michael Grant once went through as a prospect.

Francois Botha, Charles Shufford, Derrik Jefferson, Monte Barrett, Phil Jackson, Axel Schulz and David Bostice all dot his resume and were taken care of in dominant fashion. But what I still can't get out of my mind is his one loss- a knockout loss to Ross Purrrity, in which he would run out of gas in the 11th frame after dominating much of the action. Yes, yes, I realize that Sonny Liston's first loss was to a Marty Marshall, that Larry Holmes had once reportedly quit in an amateur bout to Duane Bobick and that a young Cassius Clay came within a split glove of getting stopped by Henry Cooper. But still, running out of gas against Ross Purrrity? Color me suspicious. And don't forget that his brother quit on his stool against the light-punching Chris Byrd. Are the Klitschko's, the 'Quit'chko's? Are they protected frontrunners who are lucky to be under the safe promotional umbrella of Universum? Even guys who have been vanquished by Klitschko aren't believers.

" In my opinion he's really nothing," says Francois Botha, who got stopped in eight rounds by Klitschko back in March. Botha, who has also been in there with the likes of Lewis, Mike Tyson and Michael Moorer says that he was plagued with influenza EMB and a liver infection prior to facing Klitschko." I believe that Ray Mercer will knock him out. He's a very basic fighter, just jab-right hand, I blocked all of his shots. If I had a little bit of energy left in me the fight probably wouldn't have gone two or three rounds. In my opinion he's really not that good. He took eight rounds to get rid of me and I was actually a dead man after the first round. I was very, very weak."

Max Kellerman of ESPN2 thinks Klitschko is given his lofty status because he could be the only guy to down Lewis at this present time.

" Klitschko, is the one guy out there that seems to pose a threat to Lennox Lewis," stated Kellerman. "because of his size and his pedigree, he's a gold medalist. He's reminds me of a heavyweight Diego Corrales, very smooth, effecient machine. He deserves the number ranking based on his win against Chris Byrd."

But Kellerman says that win is also tainted. " Chris Byrd has complained that his eyes were burning in that fight and he couldn't see. And were that in and of itself, maybe you say,' Well,

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Byrd is being a sore loser' or whatever. Many fighters have now come forward and complained about their eyes burning when they faced a Universum fighter.

" Chris Byrd is one, Obed Sullivan I've heard is another, Richard Hall is another, Montell Griffin is another, Freeman Barr is another and all these fighters are complaining that their eyes are burning, so it makes you think mayb there's some legitimacy to that. Nevertheless, until these allegations are proven, you have to give Klitschko a lot of credit for beating Byrd- a guy only two fighters have been able to beat."

Wow, there are so many conspriracy theories floating around that you'd think Oliver Stone should be writing this piece. The only thing missing is allegations of a third punch landing from a grassy knoll. But it has to be said, Klitschko is the prototypical 21st century heavyweight, who is a good athlete and can hurt you with either hand.

But I just wonder what happens when someone gets inside his lengthy reach and makes him throw it into reverse gear. And he has to do it outside the safe confines of Europe where he won't necessarily be the crowd favorite.

Will Mercer be that test that he needs? Well, he was back in 1996, the 2002 version of Mercer I'm not so sure. Since his life-and-death struggle with Lewis at the Madison Square Garden six years ago, Mercer has been beset by promotional, managerial and health problems. And he hasn't been the most active fighter to boot. Not exactly the type of recipe you need to cook up an upset of Klitschko. Mercer, comes in with a reputation of having a solid jab and a cast-iron chin but reports say he was less than stellar in those departments in his last fight against journeyman Brian Scott in October. But hey, if Purrrity can outlast Klitschko, it wouldn't be completely out of the realm of possibility for Mercer to still be competitive or go more than a few rounds.

But lets say that Klitschko passes this test with flying colors and eventually proves all his critics wrong, could he capture the imagination of the boxing world? Afterall, he's white and he can fight. Perhaps, but only to a certain degree in America. Yes, he may be white, but in this country we like our Caucasion fighters, corn-fed and white bread. Klitschko, is seen as more Ivan Drago than Jack Armstrong.

But while Kellerman agrees with that notion to a point, he thinks a great heavyweight can trascend all races, color and creed.

" Yes, because he's European and people want an English speaking heavyweight without an accent," concurred Kellerman." And yet you think a white heavyweight is marketable but you know what? A dynamic heavyweight is marketable. Mike Tyson, was huge and he was black, they want someone who can capture their imagination. Klitschko, part of his appeal is that he's a tremendous offensive fighter."

We may not find out everything we need to know about him against the 41-year old Mercer, but we'll know a lot more than before.

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JOSE SILLYMAN

Have you heard the latest pablum coming from that blowhard Jose Suliaman, the president of the WBC? He says that his organization will not support another bout between Marco Antonio Barrera and Erik Morales because in his words, "that it could be detrimental to the image and integrity of boxing by supporting the perception that those things are done only in the interest of the business. Once again, integrity is the basis for the WBC not to participate in a third fight."

Ok, where do I start? First, forget this talk of a robbery in Barrera-Morales II, over half the ringside media hand Barrera winning-some by as much as four points. Hell, this isn't even half as questionable as the first bout when Barrera got jobbed. Secondly, I think Suliaman is more upset that Barrera said openly that he would not accept the green belt of the WBC and after getting the decision he would hoist a WBO belt afterwards. And lastly, Jose, integrity over business?

Ok, please explain to me how your organization had any business rating one Mike Tyson as it's top ranked heavyweight. I'd say that was a business decision.

This guy sounds more like a promoter(or a puppet of one) than a president of what is supposed to be an impartial sanctioning body.