

# HEAVYWEIGHT EXCITEMENT

## An Oxymoron Courtesy Of David Haye

By Gavin Evans

David Haye's explosive fifth-round victory over Monte Barrett unleashed a much-needed force of excitement on an otherwise moribund heavyweight division.

The 28-year-old former world cruiserweight champion revealed several impressive strengths that could take him all the way, but also on display at London's O2 Arena on November 16 were vulnerabilities that could short-circuit his grand plan to succeed Lennox Lewis as heavyweight supremo.

Let's start with those assets: He's certainly the fastest heavyweight since the 1960s version of Muhammad Ali (and at 6'3", 215 pounds, not much bigger than Ali either). His quickness of hand and foot was highly impressive against the 226-pound Barrett, who, by heavyweight standards, is no slouch on the speed stakes himself. Haye has remarkably sharp reflexes as well as wonderful timing. Like Ali, he likes to fight with his hands low—and has the anticipation and head movement to get away with it (most of the time, anyway).

He has also carried his knockout potential up with him, and knows how to make openings, shifting his feet and changing angles to land his bombs. He never quite managed to tag Barrett with an on-the-button full-powershot, and yet he had him over five times, with the fourth and final knockdowns in particular revealing chilling power.

“I’m the hardest puncher, pound-for-pound, in the world, bar no-one,” Haye insists. That may or may not be true, but he certainly hits hard enough to deck most of the world’s top big men.

We could throw into the pot the fact that he loves to fight, he’s good looking with the body to match, charming, and a great talker too—and, let’s face it, it’s no bad thing that his first language is English. All this helps make him a compelling force. The fight against Barrett was not particularly well-advertised and yet attracted 10,000 fans, and it’s likely that the numbers will continue to grow.

What is so refreshing about Haye is that he’s always been up for the toughest challenge. His last two years as a cruiserweight, for example, saw him stop the unbeaten Giacobbe Fragomeni (current WBC titlist) in nine, then step up to knock out the then 37-1 (20), 231-pound Polish heavyweight Tomasz Bonin in one before stopping world

champion Jean-Marc Mormeck in seven, in his French backyard. And, finally, he settled scores with his local rival, WBO titlist Enzo Maccarinelli in two.

In beating Barrett (after several other fringe contenders backed off) to begin his heavyweight campaign in earnest, he could hardly be accused of over-caution. The erratic, 34-7 (20), American was fresh from a one-round knockout victory of 41-2 (37), 265-pound Tye Fields and had a reputation for upsetting rising prospects, having broken the unbeaten records of Dominick Guinn and Owen Beck, while coming within a disputed whisker of doing the same to Joe Mesi.

But while that eagerness to tangle with the best is admirable, it is often accompanied by an over-eagerness to please the punters, prompting a cavalier attitude when Haye steps into the ring. Against Barrett, he boxed according to plan for two rounds: plenty of movement, working the angles, using his reflexes to make the bigger man miss and pay, but late in the second, “Two Gunz” cornered him and landed solid headshots. After this, Haye forgot the script and elected to slug it out.

“I’m so proud of him, but when we get back, I’m going to kick his arse because he threw the plan out after round two,” Haye’s manager-trainer,

Adam Booth, complained. “Your first fight at heavyweight (actually Haye’s fifth fight over 200 pounds) is not the time and place for that. Monte is a good counterpuncher, so we wanted David to draw him in, but instead David got drawn into a dogfight. He started slugging because he wanted to prove he had the balls, and after that he stopped following instructions. He wanted to get into a brawl and that took away some of his key advantages, like his sharpness.”

That’s quite a harsh criticism for what was essentially a one-sided fight from the third onward. After a few fierce exchanges, Haye landed a very quick left hook to the head. It didn’t connect cleanly, but such was its speed and weight that Barrett fell, and Haye followed up with a glancing right as he touched down. Later in the round, Haye dropped him again, this time with a clubbing right hook behind the ear.

A jolting jab and a right put Barrett down again in the fourth, and at the end of the round the American was dropped once more, this time with a heavy right uppercut. Barrett struggled up at the count of nine and was saved by the bell.

Then, early in the fifth, came the moment of danger for the Londoner. He went for the knockout and was countered by a reflex left hook that put

him down, partly from the punch and partly a slip. But Barrett followed through with a far harder left hook, which landed flush on the temple while Haye was on the canvas.

Haye was up immediately, but with referee Richie Davies deducting a point from Barrett, he opted to take a breather, with the result that 30 seconds passed between the foul punch and the resumption of action. It was immediately clear that Haye's legs were firmer than Barrett's. A long left hook wobbled the visitor, and Haye followed through with a cracking cross and a final left hook that left the 37-year-old flat on his back. Davies dispensed with the count, and it was 25 seconds before Barrett was back on his feet.

Barrett said Haye was harder to hit than expected and grudgingly acknowledged his conqueror's power. "Look," he said, "anyone over 200 pounds can knock anyone out, but I didn't really feel hurt until the fourth round, and, of course, that last knockdown as well. My trouble was that I didn't stick to my game plan. I expected him to be more upright, but he fought very small, and I struggled to hit him."

Haye's fifth round tumble once again raised questions about his chin, questions that he made no attempt to dispel. "The actual knockdown punch

wasn't much, but that second punch, while I was down, buzzed me a bit because I wasn't expecting it," he acknowledged. "But actually, it buzzed me no more than a couple of other punches he landed earlier. His punches felt a lot heavier than those of any cruiserweight. Even his jab felt like a cruiserweight right."

In Haye's seventh fight, in 2003, blown-up super-middleweight Lolenga Mock dropped him with a hook to the temple. Then, in his 11th fight, he was dropped and stopped on his feet in five by Carl Thompson, although exhaustion was the prime cause. And, in 2007, Jean-Mark Mormeck dropped him with a hook to the temple, before he got up to win.

Barrett is a sharp puncher, but carries nowhere near the firepower of either of the Klitschko brothers, or even lesser contenders like Hassim Rahman and Chris Arreola. Haye will have to box more cautiously in the future if he is to avoid getting knocked out.

Another query is Haye's stamina. Ever since the Thompson fight he has trained far harder and paced himself better, but he was breathing heavily by the end of the fourth round (although he insisted: "I was never out of breath") and when boxers tire, they get caught.

Next, there's the question of size. Barrett, no behemoth himself, looked considerably bigger than Haye and was able to push him around in the clinches, which raises questions about how he would cope with the 250 pounds of the 6'7½" Vitali Klitschko, who was at ringside watching the future opposition.

“I was very impressed with his speed and power,” Vitali acknowledged. “But when I look at a fight, I don't do so like a member of the public. I analyze strengths and weaknesses, and I saw some weaknesses I will be able to use against him. I will knock him out. I'm sorry.”

He declined to elaborate on the weaknesses, but what he would have seen is a small heavyweight (by contemporary standards) who loves to trade and can be decked.

Haye, however, insists there are no problems regarding size.

“I feel far stronger and my punching power has increased two-fold,” he said. “People thought I might lose my speed, but I feel just as fast. I was 17 pounds more than for my last fight. For my next fight I will put on another three or four, and I will

grow into the division in a way that I don't lose any of my speed.”

Still, he won't have much time for growth. Both Klitschko brothers have mandatories to fulfil, but after that their calendars are free, and it seems they are pushing for Vitali to get there first (unless, said the ever-hopeful older brother, Lennox Lewis comes back, in which case the Haye gig will go to Wladimir).

To which Booth responded with a resigned shrug. “It looked like we were going to get the brother with the weak chin first,” he said, “but now suddenly it seems they're angling for us to fight the one with the strong chin first.”

Haye said he doesn't care which Klitschko he fights first; he wants to beat both.

“I'm nowhere near the finished article yet and only will be in a couple of years, but beating the Klitschko brothers will help me get there, and by the time I do, I will be unbeatable.”

Asked about the huge size difference, Haye said he was unconcerned. “I accept they are the legitimately rated as the two best in the world, but that's why I want to fight them, and if they told me that was my next fight, I wouldn't hesitate. Look,

Vitali is a huge lump, but I'll figure out a strategy to beat him. I'm so much faster than him and I'll use my speed to beat him. And look at the guys who beat Wladimir, such as Corrie Sanders. He's not much bigger than me, but he beat him on speed. Whichever one I fight, I'll take him out and then I'll take the other one out—and I'll do it in style.”

It is likely that Haye will have at least one more “warm-up” fight, against another fringe contender, probably in February, after which he will enter serious negotiations to take on one of the Klitshkos in the summer. Right now, you'd have to favor both brothers, but the odds would be a lot closer against the vulnerable Wladimir, who has been stopped three times and dropped 10 times, than the stronger, more awkward Vitali, who has never been down.

The loquacious Londoner beams at this kind of speculation: He loves proving doubters wrong. “I want those heavyweight championship titles,” he said. “I did it at cruiserweight and I'll do the same in the heavyweight division.”

Many boxers talk like this, but when the squeeze is on, they tend to desist. Haye is different: He means to deliver. And whatever transpires, his arrival injects a big dose of guaranteed excitement

into the sports premier division, just when it is most needed.