

Dedication, Focus, Results

THE RESURGENCE OF EDDIE CHAMBERS

By William Dettloff

You couldn't blame Eddie Chambers if he said to hell with it and walked away already. Why bother? You know by now all the reasons he never could be heavyweight champion of the world, or even one of the seven or eight heavyweights running around with a title belt from the WBA. You can recite the list as well as we can. You've heard it enough times. So has he.

Chambers is too small. He can't punch. He's not dedicated enough. He's lazy. He's too nice. He's chubby. He's a poor man's Chris Byrd. He's not even Eastern European. He was born under the wrong astrological sign. His nickname, "Fast Eddie," is insufficiently menacing (and unoriginal). He's not on probation. Freddie Roach isn't his trainer. Finally, and maybe most important, no tattoos!

Consider: Wladimir Klitschko, finally the world champion and the man to whose haughty position Chambers aspires, is a living Adonis, a 6'6½" walking, breathing monument to modern masculine perfection, with handsome European features, perfect orthodontia, and, when he feels like it, a right hand that could knock down buildings.

It is pure fantasy to think Chambers, a relatively stubby 6'1" and thick in the middle even when slimmed down, could hope to compete with such a force. Or, for that matter, with Wlad's older brother, Vitali, who, though less pleasing aesthetically, is just as big, tough like a horseshoe crab, and confoundedly effective.

Today, in 2009, guys like Chambers, who live in little American towns like Voorhees in dirty little states like New Jersey in once omnipotent countries like the United States, do not beat big, powerful, Eastern European behemoths. It just doesn't happen. Except when it does.

On July 4, of all dates, Chambers fought in Hamburg, Germany, and disassembled 6'7", 253-pound, top-10 rated and heretofore undefeated Alexander Dimitrenko, winning a decision that was of the "majority" kind only in name; an incredulous German crowd hissed and booed raucously when the cockamamie score of Paul Thomas was announced as 113-113. The other judges, Glenn Feldman and Fernando Laguna, watched the fight with their eyes open, and scored it accordingly, 117-109 and 116-111, respectively.

Chambers, 35-1 (18), out-jabbed Dimitrenko, 29-1 (19), counterpunched the bejesus out of him, forced a standing eight-count with a bodyshot in the seventh, and dropped him in the 10th round with a whistling left hook. It was the type of inspired, zealous performance many had begun to believe Chambers was incapable of delivering against an opponent not found near the bottom of the division's top 20 or so practitioners. Importantly, it stood in sharp contrast to Chambers' uninspired showings against Alexander Povetkin and, to a lesser degree, Sam Peter. According to Chambers, it was no fluke.

"It wasn't a situation where I could go in there and lose and feel okay about it," Chambers told THE RING a couple weeks after the win. "It was like a crossroads fight for me. But the focus was there, the sense of urgency was there, all the things we needed in the past: The great camp I had, the great team that I had, and the great challenge it was to go over there on German soil and fight one of the best heavyweights in the world.

"I put together the aggressiveness and the focus. Plus I got my weight down to a manageable weight. Everyone could see that I was in good shape, but not only was I in good shape, I was definitely on-point that night in every fashion."

Much like his fellow prospect Christobal Arreola, Chambers' weight is a topic of frequent

discussion and one of the favorite targets of those who dismiss him. Even so, his skills are undeniable.

"From Day One, the first moment I ever saw him on one of our undercards, it's always been a matter of being dedicated, of being in shape and conditioned, because he's always had the look," said Joe Tessitore, who has called several of Chambers' fights on ESPN2's *Friday Night Fights* series.

"Truthfully, his frame and his body type is that of a cruiserweight. He's always been heavy and carrying too much weight. But Eddie Chambers is extremely skilled. He knows how to box and how to box well. He has very fast hand speed.

"I think he should just totally commit to getting down as low as he can get and getting in as good a shape as he can get, because he got in a little better shape for Dimitrenko and it really paid off."

Getting the weight down clearly made Chambers quicker and more active than we'd seen in the past. He credited a new diet and strength-training regimen, and assures that his new body is his permanent one. His trainer and manager, Rob Murray Sr., told THE RING how Chambers came to weigh in for Dimitrenko at 208½ pounds after facing Peter at a fairly unsightly 223.

"After the Sam Peter fight, I told him, 'I don't like 223 on you.' He said: 'Neither do I.' I said, 'What weight do you think?' He said, 'What weight do you think?' I said 211. He said 208. So we came in between there. He put in the time and the work to make it happen."

Murray, a long-time Philadelphia-based boxing guy who counts Yank Durham, Willie Reddish, and Sam Solomon among his mentors, first saw Chambers in 2002 in Pittsburgh. Chambers, 19 years old at the time, was facing a heavyweight named David Chappell, who, unlike the comedian with a similar name, was not in the business of making people laugh.

"Chappell looked like Sonny Liston, and I saw Eddie and thought, *This kid's gonna get destroyed by this big guy*," Murray said. "Chappell had just got out of prison; he fit the whole Liston mold. He was whacking at Eddie like crazy, and I saw Chambers put a move on him, a little sidestep move, and he wound up behind Chappell, and Chappell put his gloves up over his face because he didn't know where Eddie was. I had never seen anything like that."

Murray began managing Chambers and, after Chambers' loss to Povetkin in Berlin in 2008, took over as head trainer. Buddy McGirt worked Chambers' corner against Povetkin, but until that time the fighter had been trained his entire career by his father, Eddie Sr., who had fought in the 1970s. The elder Chambers started exposing his son to boxing from the time he was nine years old, and by the time little Eddie reached 12, he was hooked. It was also around that time that circumstances conspired to instill in him some of the demons all fighters must possess to excel.

"Dad owned a few bars and had a decent amount of money when we were little," Chambers said. "Then he lost the businesses and everything changed. We had to move, and for a long time we had nothing. We didn't have heat or hot water. We'd put water on the stove to heat it up and take baths.

"Finally, Dad got some government funding. And then got our paper route. We were out there at three in the morning every day delivering papers. It paid a little less than \$1,000 a month. We'd go food shopping with that. That's how bad it was at one point. That's what we were living off of. Basically, we all lived on about \$1,000 a month."

When you talk to Chambers about things other than his childhood, it's easy to see why some people think he's too nice to be a fighter, why he could never stand up to the killers from other parts of the world that, presumably, spawn hungrier, tougher men. He's too polite, too genuine, too humble. Murray calls him honorable. And he appears to be that. But keep listening.

"Living that kind of life makes you never want to go back to it again," he said. "Living in one of

the worst-looking houses that you could ever imagine seeing and knowing you got to go to school knowing that your friends know. You have to go to school and hear about it.

"I want to be somewhere and be the best in the world. I want to be remembered and I want to have something when I'm done with this. And I plan not to have to deliver any papers or live that hard life or do any those things I had to do when I was growing up."

Murray said people shouldn't be fooled by Chambers' appearance or manners.

"Eddie is the guy that you see coming down the street and he looks soft, but you slap him in the mouth, and you wind up calling 911 to get him off your ass. He is a guy that looks like Mother Theresa, but in his heart he's John Gotti. He's a real tough, tough kid because he came up tough. He came up very poor."

But talk, as we all know, is cheap. In the most important fight of his career Chambers sprinted to an early lead against Povetkin and then spent the latter half of the fight covering up and getting hammered. He says now that he wasn't focused enough, and that distractions in his personal life and delays getting into camp forced him to cram what should have been six to eight weeks of training into 17 days. It was too much.

"You couldn't ask for a better start than I had in that fight, but what goes up must come down. But as a professional athlete, no matter what happens you have to be motivated and mentally focused, and whatever the situation is, just deal with it and bite the bullet and go in there and take your guy apart. I started that way; I just didn't finish it," he said.

In his next TV fight, against Peter, Chambers dominated but was criticized by many for not standing his ground more and throwing more punches.

Tessitore, who called the fight along with Teddy Atlas, told THE RING, "I think there were a lot of moments where Chambers disengaged from the fight, and the only reason he didn't pay the price was Sam Peter was worse. Eddie clearly won the fight and clearly controlled the fight, but what I saw that night was a fighter who couldn't fight every minute of every round, which is understandable—it's a hard thing to do. But if he could have, he would have looked spectacular."

Murray said there was a moment late in the Dimitrenko fight when Chambers again seemed to lose focus. He took drastic measures in the corner.

"After about the eighth round, he came back to the corner and had a dumb look on his face. I asked him a question and he didn't respond, so I slapped him and said, 'Wake up!' Then I asked him, 'When are you going to stop allowing people to bully you? The people in boxing are bullying you. Everyone says you're too small. You can't punch. You're underweight. You're boring. Everyone is dumping on you. They're bullying you. So you can't knock on the door anymore. You have to kick the door down. You can't walk through these fights like you're picking daisies. You're in Germany. You're in a fight!' And he woke right up."

No matter his condition or work rate, the biggest knock against Chambers will be his modest size in this time of monstrous heavyweights. The Brothers Klitschko, in particular, are giants but of a much different breed than Dimitrenko. Dimitrenko allowed Chambers to back him up; he pawed with his jab and seemed to have not a clue as to how to use his considerable height advantage. He displayed all the mobility of a Brontosaurus.

The Klitschkos represent an entirely different proposition. They use their height expertly. Wladimir has a bazooka of a jab, as does Vitali. Chambers won't back up either of them, and they've both taken shots from much harder hitters than Fast Eddie.

Still, Chambers talks the talk of all smaller heavyweights.

"We watched tapes of Joe Louis beating Max Baer and Abe Simon, watched how he put on constant pressure and kept his hands free on the inside. Evander Holyfield when he won the title was 208 pounds. Mike Tyson at his best was 210, 214. Muhammad Ali was 211 in his prime.

These guys were not big guys and they were able to contend and be successful against big guys. It worked back then and it should work now, and I proved it by beating Dimitrenko.

"I just have to get the big time guy out of there," he said, referring to Wladimir. "Then people will have no choice but to believe in me."

With everything that's going against him, it might take even more than that. □