

Chicago Welcomes Vitaly Klychko

April 24, 2004 was an extraordinary day, which will be remembered by all boxing fans and Ukrainians over the world. This was the day that Vitaly Klychko captured the title of heavyweight boxing champion of the world in the WBC division over Corrie Sanders.

Ukrainians everywhere waited anxiously with expectations for Ukraine to capture the world title. Chicagoans exalted in excitement and pride when it became known that the Klychko brothers would come to Chicago with the official delegation of the city of Kyiv.

As the sister city of Kyiv, Chicago has been engaged in a continuous program of exchanges with the capital of Ukraine since 1991. Mayor Richard M. Daley, a strong supporter of the relationship, invited Kyiv's Mayor Oleksandr O. Omelchenko with an official delegation to visit Chicago, together with Ukraine's sports heroes Dr.'s Vitaly and Wolodymyr Klychko. It is a well known fact that Mayor Omelchenko is the Klychko's biggest fan and supporter and that he travels to be with them at their fights.

A welcome rally in the center of the city at the historic Water Tower Square and a banquet at the Union League Club in honor of the special guests took place on April 25, 2004. The Chicago-Kyiv Sister Committee organized this special event with the participation of a committee that included community leaders and the representatives of Chicago's Ukrainian sports organizations. Within just a few weeks one of the most publicly held events in the community was organized and managed.

Most Ukrainians either watched or waited for news about the results of the championship fight on April 24. The victory of Vitaly Klychko was celebrated in the community in Chicago, in Kyiv and all over the world where Ukrainians live with fireworks, festivities, joy and pride. Our own CYM hosted a viewing of this fight with a full house in the lounge area. It was not surprising that on Sunday, April 25 hundreds of people came to Water Tower Square in downtown Chicago to welcome and celebrate their heroes. The beautiful location was filled with blue and yellow flags, balloons, children in Ukrainian dress, the Chicago Ukrainian brass band "Berkut" that provided musical entertainment. There were media representatives and many passer-by that shared in the joyful occasion. The Chicago Police Department milled around and everyone was talking about Ukraine's Klychko.

Marta Farion, Chairperson of Chicago Sister City Committee greeted everyone who came to welcome the delegation. After a very enthusiastic celebration of the previous night's victory, Ms. Farion announced to the crowd that the delegation would arrive late and would miss the rally. The crowd was shocked in disappointment. Many decided to wait and greet their boxing hero upon his arrival to the reception at the Union League Club. After a wait of a few hours, the guests arrived at the banquet hall, where they were first greeted by fans outside and children lined along the corridors, and then by the more than four hundred guests, who by now were seated and waiting in the stately, crystal filled

banquet hall.

The Ukrainian Jazz Band of Chicago provided the entrance music as the guests could not contain their thrill and pride and welcomed Vitaly Klychko and the Kyiv delegation with the traditional Ukrainian bread and salt, followed by chants of "Klych-ko, Klych-ko". Klychko paid special attention to the children who were thrilled to see their hero. Everyone will remember the scene of the children with happiness and pride in their eyes. It was apparent that Vitaly Klychko was emotionally touched as well.

The guests of honor were seated at an elevated dais and the audience quieted down. After the band played the national anthems, the guests of honor were introduced. Unfortunately Kyiv's Mayor Oleksandr O. Omelchenko was not able to travel and he was represented by his first deputy Volodymyr Yalovyj. To everyone's regret, Volodymyr Klychko was not able to attend either, but his fans repeated all night that despite his last defeat, he had the full support of all those that follow his career and believe he will also become world champion in his league. A well-received surprise of the evening was the appearance of Ivan S. Pliustch, former chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament and currently a leading member of Parliament and the "Our Ukraine" block. The official delegation also included Ihor Lyson, Chairman of Kyiv City Council, the head of the budget committee Volodymyr Prysiagniuik, city council member Andriy Ivanov and Volodymyr Herasymchuk, head of the foreign relations department.

Official guests included Archbishop of Ukrainian Orthodox Church Vsevolod, Bishop Richard of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, representatives of the Chicago mayor's office, the Illinois governor office, congressman Luis Gutierrez, congressman Danny Davis, Cook County treasurer Maria Pappas, state treasurer Judy Barr Topinka, state representative Cynthia Soto, and others.

The program included presentation of awards and greetings from the Mayor's Office of Chicago, the Chicago Kyiv Sister Cities Committee, the Ukrainian Sports Club "Lions", represented by Ivan Losko, the Association of Ukrainian Sports Clubs of North America, represented by its vice-president Volodymyr Pavelchak and Taras Jaworsky, Sports Director for Sports Club "Kryla" of CYM Chicago Pavlushkova branch. During Mr. Jaworsky's presentation he brought to the podium three "yunaku", that are members of Chicago CYM and their sport club "Kryla", to the stage with boxing gloves. The three members were Mark Zaparaniuk, Nick Kulas and Phil Kulas. They each posed with Vitaly Klychko and received his autograph on the gloves. These gloves were later donated by Mr. Jaworsky to CYM Chicago and the Ukrainian National Museum in Chicago.

Chairperson of the Chicago Kyiv Sister City Committee and event host, attorney Marta Farion stated, "We are proud that most prestigious boxing title belongs to a Ukrainian. We are grateful to him that he made this effort on the day after the fight, and spent eight hours on an airplane from Los Angeles, to be with us for three hours at this celebration. We appreciate his loyalty to the Ukrainian community and to his fans. Today we celebrate the domain of Ukrainian sport. We all recognize how profoundly Ukraine's

visibility and identity in the world can be shaped by the achievements of its athletes. Their influence on public awareness is profound. The impact of Ukraine's sports champions on public awareness of its independence has been a very visible and profound shift in world understanding that Ukraine is a real and well defined place in this world that exists independently of its neighbors".

The evening ended with the jazz ensemble performance of two songs that symbolize the on-going relationship between the two sister-cities, first the song "My Kyiv" and then the song "Chicago". This music served as an introduction to Vitaliy Klychko, who spoke to the crowd. He said that he was moved by such a warm welcome and he repeatedly thanked all his fans for their support. Klychko also mentioned that he was deeply touched by the children's greeting, as they are so innocent and genuine that it is impossible to forget. He added, "Today, once again I realized that what I am doing at the boxing ring is needed not only for me, but for all my fans and supporters who travel around the world to support me in times of victories as well as time of defeats, when moral support is especially needed. I really appreciate all your support. On behalf of my brother Volodymyr and myself, I assure you that we will do everything possible so that the world boxing championship titles belong to Ukrainians!"

All present applauded and cheered after the speech. Not everybody had a chance get Klytcho's autograph or take a photograph with him, but what was important was his impact on the hearts of his fans. One can say with confidence that only a person with integrity could spend eight hours on a plane, after a championship fight and sleepless night, to keep his word and come to Chicago for only three hours, and meet the Ukrainian community. Only a real champion, a gentleman and noble human being, is capable of actions like this.

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