

A HEAVYWEIGHT IMPLOSION:

Written by Charles Jay
Wednesday, 10 July 2002 18:00

At sometime around 11:30 AM last Friday, Teddy Atlas was preparing to go out for a jog at the Menominee Bingo casino, when he ran into Craig Hamilton and Jim Thomas, managers of Michael Grant.

"They told me, 'We have a problem'," says Atlas.

A problem indeed. Hamilton and Thomas explained the substance of

Chapter 28 of "Operation Cleanup"

to Atlas, something the veteran trainer was unaware of (Atlas later read the piece).

Atlas had immediate concerns, but he also understood the premise of our story.

"You're right," he told us later. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander. I've got to be accountable for the same standards I'd want everyone else to uphold. I can't just do it when it's convenient."

Atlas says that his initial ESPN report regarding Thomas Williams' alleged fight fix against Richie Melito, which took place in August of 2000, was long enough ago that he pretty much forgot about it.

"I honestly didn't make the connection," he said. "Believe me, I wouldn't have trained Grant for a whole month, and left my family on the Fourth of July to come all the way up here if I knew it was going to be a situation like this, with an opponent under indictment. I wouldn't have wasted my time."

At any rate, Atlas realized something had to be done about the situation, while there was still a chance.

"I told them to find another opponent," he says. "I wasn't going to go into the ring with this guy."

Grant's management team agreed, and told him the wheels were already in motion.

Matchmaker Eric Bottjer was on the phone. And for his first option, he looked westward.

A week or so before the fight was to take place, Bottjer had indeed contacted a Minnesota heavyweight named Brian Sargent to be ready as a possible "standby" opponent, just in case of emergency. When Thomas Williams showed up at the casino for the fight, Sargent "stood down", so to speak.

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Well, if ever there was an emergency, this was it. But as Bottjer reached out for Sargent at about noon, he was informed that the heavyweight, who lived some 500 miles away, had started to "imbibe", thereby rendering him unavailable to fight.

So while no one knew exactly who was going to be fighting Michael Grant, one thing seemed certain - if Atlas and his colleagues had their way, it was NOT going to be Thomas Williams.

And a little anxiety was setting in.

Of course, Atlas didn't want to ruin the show for the casino, if at all possible. He came up with an alternative idea - that if Williams absolutely had to be the opponent, he would force the fighter, and his representative (Mittleman) to sign affidavits testifying that they would put forth an honest effort. "I would make them sign it in front of everybody, including the commission," Atlas said. "But that was clearly a secondary option. What I really wanted was a new opponent."

At some point along the way, Craig Hamilton ran into Williams' agent, Robert Mittleman, in the parking lot. Realizing that the issue of the status of Williams' legal problems was at the crux of the current controversy, Hamilton asked Mittleman, straight-out, whether Williams was under indictment or not.

"He (Mittleman) said, 'Well, yes - he's under indictment....but he's not under suspension'," Hamilton says.

At long last, some truth.

A call was finally placed to Jack Cowan, a booking agent from Chicago who has dealt, at one time or another, with almost every fighter coming out of the Windy City. Cowan came up with a possibility - Ken Murphy, a former cruiserweight with a respectable 21-7-1 record.

Murphy's line-by-line mark was one of the more curious you're likely to find. In going unbeaten in his first 22 pro fights, he had faced opponents with an aggregate record (using Boxrec.com as the source) of 70-385-10 (15% wins), while in the process of losing his last seven fights in a row, his opponents took a record of 198-6 into the ring. And included on that list were capable fighters like Juan Carlos Gomez, Fabrice Tiozzo, Brian Nielsen, Clifford Etienne, and Lawrence Clay-Bey.

The 39-year-old Murphy, whose brother Lee Roy had once held the IBF cruiserweight title, was ready to take the fight on short notice - no doubt at a premium rate.

Of course, Murphy was not in Wisconsin; he was in Chicago, which was about 250 miles away from the casino. So it would be quite a while before his arrival. And when he got there, by the time he got his medical exam done, it was going to be cutting things somewhat close. The show was scheduled to start at 6 PM, because there were a whole slew of international amateur bouts on the undercard, and the casino didn't necessarily want to

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keep the crowd waiting.

Or had we mentioned - no one had bothered to notify the casino that there was a problem?

Logistical difficulties having nothing to do with Murphy himself also came into play. One of those involved what the reaction on the part of Mittleman and Williams would be.

The Mittleman "problem" was an especially delicate matter. He may be a charlatan, and often blind with greed, but Mittleman was no dummy either. He had a contract for a fight, and a payday that was going to come along with it, and he was not going to go away quietly, if at all.

Furthermore, Mittleman had previously booked Murphy into a couple of losing fights in Denmark, so he most likely knew how to contact him. It was probably feared that if he had knowledge of the Chicago fighter's imminent arrival, he might take some steps to "encourage" Murphy not to leave, even going so far as to offer him a side deal not to show up.

And perhaps most importantly, if Williams was told to get lost and Murphy, for whatever reason, didn't get there on time, no one wanted to be stuck without an opponent.

It was finally decided that Mittleman would not be informed of any new developments. He was not to know, for the time being, that another opponent was on his way in, and casino security was alerted to be on hand and ready, because if Mittleman and Williams caused a scene when Murphy showed up, they would have to be escorted from the premises.

But to say the least, time was of the essence. And the drive from Chicago to Keshena would be a long one. Murphy was to take off at 3 PM, and had a cell phone in tow.

At that juncture, it was just a matter of waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

And waiting.

NEXT: Part 3 - Some Enchanted Evening

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