

A HEAVYWEIGHT IMPLOSION:

Written by Charles Jay
Friday, 12 July 2002 18:00

I'm not going way out on a limb when I say the following scene will NOT be re-enacted as part of the Jackie Kallen biopic "Against the Ropes" (coming soon to a theater near you):

As the July 5 boxing show commenced, the people in charge of overseeing the Menominee Bingo Casino's interests - marketing director Craig Searl and promotions manager Cynthia Hughes - still had no idea that there was a major problem surrounding the opponent for their feature fighter, Michael Grant, and were oblivious to most of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that could very well have a material affect on the product their customers were about to see that evening.

Starting at about 6 PM, amateur boxers stepped into the ring in the finals of the Junior Olympic International tournament. There would be eight of these bouts, with boxers from around the world, followed by three professional fights on the undercard, then the main event.

It was about an hour into the program before Searl knew exactly what was happening with regard to a switch in opponents.

"It just would have been nice for Jackie (Kallen) or Jeanie (Miranda, Kallen's partner), or Eric Bottjer, or somebody to let me know what was going on," said Searl.

Back in Michael Grant's room, trainer Teddy Atlas and co-managers Craig Hamilton and Jim Thomas were hoping that Ken Murphy, the Chicago fighter who had taken the fight earlier in the day, would be able to get to the venue in time to get dressed and fight. Murphy allegedly departed from his home in Chicago at 3 PM, which left the Grant camp confident he would be at the venue in plenty of time.

"We (either a member of the Grant camp or Bottjer) had talked to him at least thirty times on the cell phone," said Thomas. "So it looked like he was certainly on his way."

By this time, the idea of making Thomas Williams or Robert Mittleman sign affidavits testifying to an honest effort had, for all intents and purposes, gone out the window, from the Grant perspective.

"That wasn't really appealing," said Hamilton. "Could we believe them anyway? What we wanted to do was just replace the opponent."

Mittleman had gotten wind of the fact that Murphy was on his way up, although it probably wasn't in the manner in which it was planned. It seems that after taking off, Murphy had gotten on his car phone and actually phoned Mittleman, who he knew was at the casino. What was said in that conversation is not available to us, but one must wonder whether it was contributory to the bizarre events that followed.

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One of those events was initiated by Mittleman himself, who angrily approached Gary Gittelsohn as Olympian Clarence Vinson, Gittelsohn's fighter, was in the ring for his bout against Sheldon Wile. Mittleman had a copy of our initial story concerning Teddy Atlas (

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), crumbled it up, threw it in Gittelsohn's face, and in the words of Gittelsohn, "attempted to start a physical altercation with me". Witnesses who were present say that Mittleman swung and missed with a punch, after which the scuffle was broken up.

But it left little doubt that Mittleman was fully apprised of things as they were unfolding.

After the Vinson-Wile fight was over, there was a customary 10-minute intermission, after which Grant and his opponent were to step into the ring and fight.

The identity of that opponent, of course, was still to be determined.

Bottjer, the matchmaker, was maintaining phone contact with Murphy during the course of his trip. But Murphy was running late. And he appeared to be getting lost.

It seemed every half hour Murphy thought he was getting closer to the destination, but wasn't.

"After a while, what he (Murphy) was saying didn't seem to be making any sense," said Thomas. "And at one point, he got very upset when Bottjer asked him where he was, and threatened to turn back. I said to myself, that's strange; why would he do that? We're trying to help this guy get here."

When it came time for the two fighters to come into the ring, Mittleman showed up with Williams, but there was no indication of Grant.

There were a lot of harsh words "backstage", as Jackie Kallen and Jeanie Miranda, who brokered the fight to the casino, wanted Grant to come into the ring. Searl wanted the show to go on, for the sake of his patrons. Roxanne Peterson, the administrative assistant from the Wisconsin commission, started to wonder just what in the hell was going on.

The Grant team, which consisted of Atlas, Hamilton and Thomas, were holding fast on their refusal to come out and fight this opponent, while at the same time trying to give Murphy every opportunity to get there, so that the fight as THEY planned it, could commence.

But ten minutes had become 20, which became 30, which became 40.....

Mittleman and Williams stayed in the ring and would not budge. There would seem to be little doubt as to the thoughts on Mittleman's mind at that time - he had heard Murphy was coming, and he didn't want to relinquish what were, from his perspective, valuable "squatter's rights".

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The stage was set for a scene that was, to put it mildly, unusual in boxing.

There was some talk that the tribal police were going to come in and make some arrests - Atlas and Grant, under "tribal law", for not fulfilling a contractual obligation, and Thomas, for allegedly being an "instigator" (Thomas had no problem with that, as he was fully prepared to litigate if that happened).

Searl claims that was not the case.

"No one was going to be arrested," he says. "It's more of a civil matter. If anything, there may have been a lawsuit, but that's all."

As the minutes ticked away, and because one of the main event fighters was standing in the ring without an opponent, the crowd started to get extremely restless. When the delay began to appear ridiculous, ring announcer Amy Hayes, a former Hawaiian Tropic girl and Playboy model who was clad in a red, white, and blue bikini, had to start improvising. She let Williams have the floor, and the fighter began to call Grant out, WWE-style.

"Michael Grant, why don't you come out and face me? Are you afraid?" or something to that effect, were the words coming from Williams, loud and clear, over the ring microphone. The crowd erupted into a chant of "Grant Sucks! Grant Sucks!"

But despite Williams, and the customers, egging him on, there was still no sign of Michael Grant.

And a few minutes after Murphy had told Bottjer that he was at a point which was just seven miles away from the casino, cell phone contact was lost with the substitute.

As the delay dragged on, Hayes was bringing people into the ring to participate in what turned out to be a conga line. Customers, who came out of the audience, were parading past Thomas Williams, who by this time was sitting on a stool in the corner.

It was surreal.

After what seemed like an eternity, Williams and Mittleman left and went to a van that was functioning as a dressing room.

Curiously, around that time, when Bottjer was finally able to get him on the phone, Murphy told him that he was in Green Bay - completely in the opposite direction. It was late now - about 9:45 PM, and Thomas figured that any plans on using Murphy would be futile.

"He was at least 45 minutes away," said Thomas. "There was no way he was going to get his physical exam, get dressed, cool down after the ride, and be able to get in the ring in any kind of shape to fight."

With each passing moment, it became more and more of a possibility that the fight card had

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to either proceed with a fight between Grant and Williams or be called off.

Meanwhile, the crowd was getting angrier. A chair was thrown into the ring. Hayes scrambled to entertain the customers some more. There's no question she earned her combat pay, and then some.

At some point along the way, it became clear to Kallen, Miranda, Gary Pliner (the promoter of record), Bottjer, and everyone else that Michael Grant was not going to come out and fight under the present circumstances. And it did not please them, because at a meeting much earlier in this long, long day, it was agreed that Grant would face Williams if no one else could be found.

"Teddy said, 'I just can't be in the ring with a guy who a Grand Jury indicted for fixing fights, and that according to this

article

(ours), admitted to fixing fights'," said Thomas. "And we're a team. We were ready to support him all the way."

Miranda was absolutely furious. She pointed to the assurances made by Atlas earlier in the day. Screaming followed. The acrimony was at such a fever pitch that Miranda was ready to call security - an action that would have undoubtedly escalated things to a more unpleasant level. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed.

Atlas later told Steve Kim of MaxBoxing.com, "I changed my mind. I do not deny that. She was absolutely right, we did say that. I thought about it, and I just did not feel comfortable with it."

Searl was also apoplectic. The casino marketing director had been left with the impression that Grant was going to fight Williams, if that's what it had to come down to.

Mittleman was running around, screaming that he had a commitment and a contract to fight, and that his man was not under suspension. Thomas had legitimate concerns about Grant - "Michael was a mess mentally at this stage. I was worried about him having gone through all this and then having to go in and fight."

Finally, amidst all the madness, Jackie Kallen came to Grant's team and suggested a compromise of sorts. Would they fight a ten-round exhibition? That seemed to be the most logical way to go at the late hour, seeing as Murphy was a no-show to that time, and no one among Grant's handlers really wanted to send an unhappy, unruly crowd away.

So a ten-round exhibition it was.

First, though, Peterson of the Wisconsin commission pulled Williams aside to give him a message. "We made sure we told him that we were going to be keeping a very close eye

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on him in this fight," she said.

Over in Grant's room, Atlas, who was extremely impressed with the professional way in which Grant had handled the whole fiasco, delivered a stern warning to his charge.

"I told him, 'You have to erase everything you've heard over the last few hours about dives and fixes. Get all of that stuff out of your mind'," Atlas said. "I told him 'I can guarantee you this guy's coming out to fight. He's going to come right out and try to knock you out!'"

Grant arrived to a loud chorus of boos. The crowd has to be forgiven, for they were not aware of the entire story. "I wondered why all these people (including the organizers) were mad at US, while they didn't get mad at the guys who lied about fixing fights," says Thomas.

As if to exacerbate things, Kallen didn't want to announce the fight as an exhibition. That was fine with Hamilton; as far as he was concerned, he was ready to turn around, go home and put the whole incident behind him. But once again, an accord was reached, and the fight, which by now was an anti-climax, began.

The delay between fights was estimated to be between 90 minutes and two hours in length.

Williams, as it turned out, put forth an effort. But unfortunately, the two fighters clashed heads in the second round, with Williams hitting the canvas. He went down twice more in the second round as a result of Grant's punches, and the referee stepped in to halt the proceedings after the second knockdown.

As Grant was signing autographs afterward, he was still booed by many of the customers. Williams, it seemed, had become the crowd's hero. And that gives you something of an idea of what kind sport boxing can be, I guess.

It somehow seemed appropriate that just as the fight was coming to an end, pulling into the casino parking lot - approximately eight and a half hours after he left Chicago - was Ken Murphy.

Or was it?

We'll explore that next.

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