

Written by Charles Jay
Wednesday, 25 December 2002 18:00

The 9th Round

ESPN had an opportunity, quite some time ago, to put forth a meaningful statement that would have told me they were sincere - truly sincere - about addressing an issue such as the proper reform of boxing.

Needless to say, the network failed that test, tucking its tail between its legs and running to some safer pastures.

As you know, on March 9 of 2001, Greg Page wound up in a coma, and subsequently brain damaged as a result of a fight in which the Kentucky Athletic Commission failed to have any of the proper safety requirements in place (ambulance and/or paramedics, stretcher, licensed physician, even insurance) that were prescribed by federal law, with the finger pointing squarely at Jack Kerns, the chairman of the commission, who would later become First Vice-President of the Association of Boxing Commissions.

About a month later - on Easter Sunday, in fact, an ESPN "investigative" show called "Outside the Lines" explored the Page situation with a trio of guests - Ron Borges of the Boston Globe; Greg Sirb, then-president of the ABC, and Lou DiBella, who had just resigned as head of boxing at HBO to go out on his own.

There was a pre-produced package, where the ESPN crew went down to Kentucky, interviewed Nancy Black, the executive director of the commission, along with Manuel Mediodia - the unlicensed doctor who was at ringside that night, and Patricia Love-Page, soon-to-be wife of Greg.

The ESPN crew made a few discoveries - though not many that weren't previously reported by other sources such as the Cincinnati Enquirer, for example.

What was considerably more significant was what they missed.

When I was doing my research for a special report entitled "Horse Manure Isn't The Only Thing That Stinks in Kentucky" (included in the 'Operation Cleanup' book), in the space of about a week I had managed to find out a whole host of things that the ESPN report did not contain - things that were not inconsequential, either.

For example, at the time of the Page fight, Dr. Mediodia had not just been put on probation twice by the state of Ohio for questionable practices, he was UNLICENSED in the state of Kentucky to boot. This not only conflicted with the federal law, it was contrary to Kentucky's STATE law as well.

That's serious business, and considering that Mediodia is said to have turned and ran out the

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door EVEN BEFORE PAGE'S FIGHT ENDED, it's probably one of the more serious acts of malfeasance in this case.

It surprised me that an ESPN "investigative" team would miss this rather crucial piece of information. And I was more than just a little curious about it.

So I placed a call to Andy Lockett, an ESPN producer who was in charge of doing the Kentucky piece for "Outside the Lines".

He told me that it was just assumed that Mediodia was licensed in Kentucky if he were working a Kentucky fight. After all, why would a doctor even attempt to practice in a state in which he did not hold a license? That would be absurd, wouldn't it? In fact, almost too absurd to follow up on.

I guess I agreed, to a certain extent, although I reminded him that this was boxing, and one should never make ANY assumptions when it comes to the ineptitude of a boxing commission.

Then our conversation kind of went like this:

ME: "Well, don't you think, in light of some of the irrefutable things we've managed to find out, that this is well worth a follow-up piece by you guys?"

HIM: "Absolutely. We already tried to do it."

ME: "Then why didn't you do it?"

HIM: "Because.....well, because, and I hope you wouldn't mention this, but (pause).....we were pressured by programming to back off."

ME: "Programming? I thought you guys WERE programming."

HIM: "No - I mean they figure they do boxing, and that's their product - it's part of programming, and they had a show coming up in Kentucky, and well,....."

Yeah, I know.

Indeed, ESPN went to Owensboro, Ky. on March 23 - just two weeks after the Page fight - to do a fight card featuring Bones Adams in a WBA 122-pound title fight against Ivan Alvarez, although I'm not quite sure why that should have impacted on anything investigative that they did or could have done. But then again, we're dealing with Disney here.

Oh sure, ESPN did what they considered to be a "follow-up" on the Page story. It focused in on the human interest angle of Page's friendship with Kentucky heavyweight Dale Crowe, his opponent in that fateful match. The piece, which was terrific, was produced by Lockett, but it intentionally sidestepped some of the substantive issues that prompted Page to file a lawsuit against the Kentucky commission, and what make that suit potentially an important one for anyone concerned with boxing reform.

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I bet Lockett, if he had his choice, would have done something different. My assumption is that he would have wanted to explore the issues of negligence a little further, or at least revisit some of the things we found. After all, one would imagine that would be more in keeping with what the purpose of "Outside the Lines" is - to present a "hard-hitting" sports editorial and news magazine program.

But hard-hitting it isn't.

I suppose it's not all that shocking that when Lockett had the audacity to want to be a newsman, his colleagues and/or superiors would slap that notion down. Just like HBO's "Real Sports", in which "nothing is out of bounds" except when it deals with sensitive areas of company business, commerce and conscience just don't seem to mix at the "Worldwide Leader in Sports".

And "conscience" is absolutely the right word, because when the ESPN "boxing personalities" decided they wanted to go into the business of influencing minds, and influencing federal legislation, they sent out a gold-plated invitation for the kind of scrutiny I have been putting them through.

And if you're familiar with the network at all, you realize it could never hold up to such scrutiny. Not now. Not ever. And the evidence to that effect continues to roll in.

We caused our share of controversy with our reports about the corrupt, inept, indifferent, imbecilic Kentucky commission back in the fall of 2001, and have forced a lot of commissions to take a very long look at what they are doing. I know it, because I get the phone calls.

But let's face it - I may get a lot of intelligent boxing fans, media members, and industry people to come to the TotalAction website, and read the "Operation Cleanup" books, but that's absolutely nothing compared with the kind of audience ESPN has.

If the network had decided, even before I had become well-acquainted with the Page story, to make a major issue out of the horrible, and avoidable, chain of events that led to the near-fatal injury of Greg Page, it probably could have created enough of a snowball effect to get the ball rolling on some positive national regulations that may have precluded me from ever having to write "Operation Cleanup".

But it didn't, and so now you're discovering that it's because it was more important to televise a Bones Adams fight from Kentucky than it was to affect some positive long-term change for the sport, which - and here's the really ironic thing, something ESPN doesn't seem to "get" - would make boxing, in the end, a more attractive product for consumers.

Instead, the ridiculous circle just keeps going round and round. What we've got is ESPN "commentator" Teddy Atlas, who's in bed with John McCain, who's in bed with Greg Sirb, who's in bed with Kentucky's "Minister of Maim", Jack Kerns.

You'll want to remember that.

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But don't be overly surprised, or even disappointed. I'm not.

It's what I've come to expect from the network of Mickey Mouse, Russell Peltz, and Bjorn Rebney - the most dangerous, disingenuous, hypocritical of all the alphabet soup organizations.

E-S-P-N.

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