

The 58th Round

There's this old story - I'm sure you've heard it - about the explorer in the jungle who comes upon a snake, wounded, who can't move, and carries it over to the other side of the river. He proceeds to nurse this snake back to health, then, when he's not looking, the snake lashes out and bites him on the hand. The man, who is absolutely flabbergasted, asks, "What the hell did you do that for?", to which the snake replies, "What did you expect? You knew I was a snake when you found me."

Of course, that's kind of like my feeling about these sanctioning bodies. You could talk yourself blue in the face trying to give them the benefit of the doubt, but at the end of the day, they're still sanctioning bodies. And they're going to act the way we have come to expect them to act.

As we speak, Freeman Barr, the World Boxing Organization's #1 super middleweight contender, is preparing himself for a fight that will take place on Friday against a world-rated opponent that has yet to be named. It's not as if Barr's manager, Steve Canton, hasn't found an opponent yet, it's that he is apprehensive about revealing it to the public, which certainly can't help ticket sales. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that the Florida commission is demanding that he come up with Barr's opponent by 4 PM today, we probably wouldn't know it until fight time.

Why is Canton so secretive? It's because he's afraid the WBO is going to sabotage his main event. He's not at all overly paranoid. The WBO has seemingly been on a continuous campaign to screw Barr, who has languished for over two years without getting the title shot that would appear to be mandatory under the WBO rules.

To give you a little background, the WBO placed Barr in its #1 (i.e., mandatory) position as of the April 2001 ratings. He didn't just appear there; he had worked his way up the ranks and was elevated to the top immediately after 168-pound champion Joe Calzaghe fought Mario Veit in a mandatory defense. To this day, despite repeated attempts on the part of Barr's people, and numerous requests that the mandatory obligation be fulfilled, Calzaghe has not come to the table to put his title on the line against the Bahamian native.

Time after time, promoter Frank Warren, who controls Calzaghe, has avoided the fight with Barr, ostensibly for the reason that he can't sell it to television, and the WBO has bent over backwards to accommodate him. This is not out of character by any means. On one front, Warren controls the organization, while the other kingpin, Klaus-Peter Kohl, the Boxing Writers Association of America's "Co-Manager of the Year", despite the fact that he's a promoter, has somehow been enabled to put a succession of ne'er-do-wells in front of his WBO cruiserweight champion, Dariusz Michalczewski, without ever having to fight a mandatory title bout.

The WBO has tried to throw a few roadblocks at Barr along the way, from requiring him to fight certain defenses of his North American Boxing Organization (NABO) title against designated

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Written by Charles Jay
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opponents in order to retain his ranking, to suggesting he fight an "elimination" bout when he was already frozen in the mandatory position, to tentatively setting fight dates with Calzaghe when they knew Barr was injured and unavailable to perform - all presumably for the purposes of building some sort of file to be used against Barr when they felt the time was right.

I guess the time is right.

This is what came down from the WBO office (or "orifice", as it were) on April 19:

FREEMAN BARR YET TO FULFILL RANKING REQUIREMENTS

"San Juan, Puerto Rico – WBO number one ranked Super Middleweight (168 lbs.) Freeman Barr is yet to fulfill the minimum requirements of the Muhammad Ali law to be classified in the top ten positions by the World Boxing Organization Monthly Rankings, and has not carried out an agreement between his manager Steve J. Canton and the WBO to maintain his current position.

The Muhammad Ali law states that for a boxer to be rated in the top ten (10) and to fight for a world title he "must have competed against another top fifteen (15) rated boxer within an eighteen (18) month period from the time the boxer gets rated."

The Ali law also states "a boxer who does not meet this level of competition shall not retain his/her rating."

Freeman Barr has never fought another top fifteen (15) rated boxer since he has been rated in the Super Middleweight division. His last four opponents, Dan Thornton (13-8-0), Mike Coker (9-6-1), Robert Davis (5-14-3) and Ojay Abrahams (19-35-4), have a cumulative record of 46 wins, 63 losses and 8 draws.

Even against such mediocre opposition, Barr has not looked dominating in his performances. Manager Steve J. Canton has always claimed an injury of some kind to explain his pupil's less than stellar showings.

Barr arrived at the top of the WBO Super Middleweight Rankings because those boxers rated ahead of him either lost to WBO 168 lb. Super Champion Joe Calzaghe, or fought for other titles.

During the 15th Annual WBO Convention, held from October 27 to November 2, 2002, in Panama City, Panama, an agreement was reached between the WBO Executive Committee and Barr's manager Steve J. Canton. It was accorded that for Freeman Barr to remain in the World Boxing Organization Monthly Rankings he had to comply with the Muhammad Ali law and fight another boxer rated in the top fifteen (15) by the WBO. Barr was given 120 days (until May 2, 2003) to fulfill this agreement.

Freeman Barr is yet to face an opponent ranked in the top fifteen (15) by the World Boxing Organization."

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With the threat of being stripped of his ranking, Barr, through manager Steve Canton, who obviously is not as "juiced" in the organization as Warren or "Co-Manager of the Year" Kohl, had to agree to fight a Top 15 WBO contender by May 2. Thus, the mad rush for an opponent.

Well, let me tell you how THAT went. About two months ago, Canton, who has a promotional contract with Miami's Rick Lazes for his fighter, got in touch with Jaffa Ballagou, a fighter from Togo who was ranked 15th by the WBO, and made a tentative agreement for Ballagou to come to Florida to fight Barr. Almost immediately after Canton informed WBO officials who was likely to be inserted as the opponent, Ballagou was yanked from the WBO ratings and replaced by Henry Porras, a Costa Rican whom Ballagou had knocked out a year before.

Canton then turned his attention to Rudy Markussen, who is the current #15 super middleweight. He thought he had a deal done on the first phone call, but then suspiciously, Markussen's connections in Denmark stopped returning his calls. Canton is convinced someone from the WBO pressured Markussen's people not to take the fight, to the point where they may have been offered money NOT to fight. That suspicion is unsubstantiated, but the pattern of behavior is alarming - all other would-be opponents in the WBO's Top 15 have refused to even negotiate with Canton for the fight, which is to take place Friday at the TECO Arena outside Naples, Fla.

All of them, that is, except one.

We won't know who that guy is until later today.

Not that the WBO hasn't put heavy pressure on the Florida commission to, in turn, put pressure on Canton to reveal the name.

But he won't do it, not until he is absolutely required to do so.

Perhaps Canton is carrying the paranoia thing a bit too far, but he feels the WBO is tracking his movements, trying to find out what who he's talking to and what he's talking about, and may even be tapping his phone - all in an effort to find out who the opponent is, so they can sabotage it, thereby making it impossible for Canton and Barr to live up to their end of the agreement with the WBO, which naturally would facilitate them being able to drop him from his #1 ranking. He also claims that his name has been forged to contracts granting Warren options on Barr in the event Calzaghe were to fight Barr in the mandatory.

Certainly if any of this is true and can be documented, Canton would have himself a pretty substantial lawsuit.

"This thing has been so crazy," he says. "At the end of all this, we'll be able to make a major motion picture that would make more money than Freeman Barr could ever make in the ring. We'll call it 'Chasing Joey (Calzaghe)'."

I'll do you one better, Steve.

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I'll put you in "Operation Cleanup - The Sequel".

But you know what? There probably was no need for Canton to sign that "deal with the devil", because the WBO doesn't even have a leg to stand on, morally or legally.

We'll cover that next.

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