

WBO SHOULD BE BARR-ED

Written by Charles Jay
Tuesday, 29 April 2003 18:00

The 59th Round

There's a big problem with the WBO's campaign to get Freeman Barr stripped of his #1 ranking. Obviously, if you recall from the statement the organization released on April 19, and which was reproduced in the last chapter, it is relying on the Muhammad Ali Act as the basis for its threats and what no doubt will be its eventual actions:

"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'."

But in point of fact, the Ali Act doesn't say anything of the sort.

WBO officials have referred to Section 11 of the Ali Act in particular. Here is the first paragraph of that section, verbatim, as it would apply to the ratings criteria:

"SEC. 11. SANCTIONING ORGANIZATIONS.

`(a) OBJECTIVE CRITERIA- Within 2 years after the date of the enactment of the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act, the Association of Boxing Commissions shall develop and shall approve by a vote of no less than a majority of its member State boxing commissioners, guidelines for objective and consistent written criteria for the ratings of professional boxers. It is the sense of the Congress that sanctioning bodies and State boxing commissions should follow these ABC guidelines."

It is the SENSE OF CONGRESS?

You're telling me about ratings GUIDELINES?

Are you f**king kidding me?

Folks, that's what is commonly referred to as "intentionally weak language".

That is NOT is a hard-and-fast MANDATE that the sanctioning bodies comply with these criteria. It certainly doesn't mean that there is any substantive action that can be taken by the ABC, a trade organization, if its GUIDELINES are not followed by sanctioning bodies.

What it DOES really say is something like:

"Gee, it would be very nice if you guys followed this criteria",

or,

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"This is not the law, but it's our FEELING that this is a pretty good POLICY to follow".

Actually, what it means is very, very little.

As such, the WBO's contentions about having to follow the Ali Act in its April 19 statement are completely hollow.

Furthermore, those criteria were not established until October 18, 2002, which means, in effect, that the WBO would be seeking to RETROACTIVELY enforce them against a fighter who was already entrenched as its #1 mandatory contender, while not applying such retroactive enforcement to all fighters in its ratings equally. That, of course, has no credibility whatsoever.

And come to think of it, the ratings criteria themselves may not have any real credibility. Section 11 of the Ali Act states that the criteria must be approved "by a vote of no less than a majority of its member State boxing commissioners". That IS a mandate. Yet, I have spoken with several executive directors of commissions who were never notified of this proposed "ratings criteria" and therefore didn't get to vote on it. And if you look again, the language reads, "a majority of its member State boxing commissioners", not "a majority of the ABC's Board of Directors" or "a majority of commissioners who appeared at the last ABC Convention." In other words, you don't just need a quorum present.

So there is a perfectly legitimate question as to whether this "ratings criteria" is valid in the first place, even as it is SUGGESTED by federal law. Indeed, excluding people from the vote would seem to invalidate the implementation of any policy that requires a vote.

To sum it up, contrary to the WBO's ill-informed statement, the "Muhammad Ali law", as these guys refer to it, does not in fact state anything they claim it does, and the entire thing smacks of a charade, contrived rather transparently as a device to facilitate the punishment of a fighter. It has no teeth.

Let me tell you what DOES have teeth, however. Contained further down in Section 11 of the Ali Act is the following requirement:

"(d) PUBLIC DISCLOSURE-

`(1) FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION FILING- A sanctioning organization shall not be entitled to receive any compensation directly or indirectly in connection with a boxing match unless, not later than January 31 of each year, it submits to the Federal Trade Commission and to the ABC--

`(A) a complete description of the organization's ratings criteria, policies, and general sanctioning fee schedule;

`(B) the bylaws of the organization;

`(C) the appeals procedure of the organization for a boxer's rating; and

`(D) a list and business address of the organization's officials who vote on the ratings of boxers."

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I'm assuming the WBO complied with this in order to be able to do business in the United States, and in the absence of anything that is specifically designated under the term "poilicies", it submitted its Rules and Regulations.

Now let me take you through some excerpts out of one of these rules - Rule 5, in fact, which covers "DEFENSE OF THE TITLE":

EXCERPT 1 - "All World Champions recognized by the World Boxing Organization in his/her respective weight category or division, from Minifly to Jr. Heavy, shall defend his/her title at intervals not greater than nine (9) months counting from the date of the acquisition thereof or from the last compulsory defense, as the case may be, in a twelve (12) round fight, against the 1rst available contender, according to the current list of Classifications of the Organization, unless an exception is made pursuant to Rule 19 of these Regulations."

So where has Calzaghe fulfilled this obligation, and why hasn't the WBO stepped in to enforce their own requirement?

Oh, and by the way, "Rule 19" which is supposed to provide for an exception, reads like this:

"19) WEIGHT OF THE GLOVES

The weight of the gloves to be used in World Championship contests shall be as follows:

From Mini Flyweight to Jr. Welterweight (8) ounce gloves shall be used.

From Jr. Middleweight to Heavyweight, ten (10) ounce gloves shall be used."

I'm assuming they probably mean Rule 20:

"20) EXCEPTION TO THE REGULATIONS

The World Championships Regulations shall be amended at any time, with respect to any aspect, through an exception or special case, provided the amendment is approved by the majority vote of the World Championships Committee and the Executive Committee."

Which means, of course, that all rules are soft, and can be changed at any time, presumably in a very flexible manner, according to the specific circumstances (wink, wink).

EXCERPT 2 - "To keep the position on the official list of classifications, contender number 1 and 2 shall defend his classification against any of the classified contenders in his weight category or fight for a regional title, according to the current list of classifications promulgated by the Classifications Committee. The World Championships Committee shall request Contender number 1 and/or 2 to comply with this Rule, and if he fails to do so, Contender number 1 may lose his classification as such."

In point of fact, Barr, while the #1 contender, defended his NABO championship - the "regional title" this rule refers to, against Ronnie Martinez, and before that, had done so against an opponent specifically designated by a WBO order - a 15-0 kid named Ricky Ramirez. Thus, he

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fulfilled this requirement.

EXCERPT 3 - "If any of the classified boxers (with the exception of Contenders No. 1 and/or 2) rejects the World Champion in a title fight or refuses to fight Contender Number 1 and/or 2 in a ten round fight, he/she shall be eliminated from the list of classifications."

But what if the CHAMPION (Calzaghe) refuses to fight Contender #1? Should HE be removed from the list of classifications? That's a question that deserves consideration.

EXCERPT 4 - "Within the sixty (60) days prior to the date of the compulsory defense, no World Champion shall sign a Contract for the defense of his title, nor defend it against a boxer other than the Best Classified Available."

Of course, I'm devious - I'm operating under the assumption that past the first nine-month period of time, every day is theoretically a day Calzaghe's mandatory defense is due. Well, there have been SEVEN full 60-day periods that have passed since Calzaghe has been in violation of the WBO rules for not defending against Barr. And he has made three "optional" defense during this period. Has the WBO given seven different excuses for ignoring its own rule? Has this rule EVER been adhered to, as regards Freeman Barr? Of course, that question is rhetorical.

And come to think of it, isn't the WBO, right now, looking to shove all these requirements down the throat of new heavyweight champ Corrie Sanders, ultimately at the behest of the Boxing Writers Association of America's "Co-Manager of the Year Who Is Really a Promoter", Klaus-Peter Kohl, who wants to manipulate a rematch against Wladimir Klitschko?

The bottom line is this - it isn't Freeman Barr who has conducted himself in a manner that is contrary to the Ali Act. In reality, if there are violations, it's the WBO that is committing them.

The difference, as any "Operation Cleanup" reader knows by now, is that in terms of what is perceived as the provisions of the Ali Act, the WBO has its own internal enforcement mechanism in place, while the United States of America most decidedly DOES NOT.

The WBO can arbitrarily strip someone of a title or a ranking, or arbitrarily choose NOT to do so, and there's very little anyone can do about it, or more to the point, nothing anyone has CHOSEN to do about it. It's all because the Ali Act, and the Professional Boxer Safety Act before it, are unfunded mandates.

And so Barr's manager, Steve Canton, is forced to agree to certain things in order to appease the WBO, when it really should be the other way around.

Now, perhaps, a disclaimer might be in order. None of this is intended to be an endorsement of Freeman Barr as the #1 super middleweight contender in the world. I think it's fair to say that if you took an objective poll of boxing media, or industry people, Barr's name would not show up in the #1 slot, and may not show up in the Top 10. On balance, he has not fought a distinguished roster of opponents. And even with that, he has received a WBO title shot before, losing on a stoppage to Bert Schenk in Germany in January of 1999.

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So it can be argued that in some ways he's been a beneficiary of the "system". But by the same token, he's become an even greater victim of that same system.

Some, who are not familiar with the background, may actually applaud the WBO's intentions here; the perception that Barr lacks in credentials is probably one reason no one's been motivated to address this issue.

But a couple of things must be properly understood here.

One is that, whether anyone likes it or not, the WBO placed Barr at #1 in its ratings of its own volition and by way of ITS OWN criteria - yes, the same criteria it was required by law to submit to the Federal Trade Commission. Because of that, it has an obligation to follow its own rules in the way it deals with Barr.

Another is that in making a tentative decision to remove Barr, the WBO is not doing so to upgrade the level of its mandatory cotenders, or its contenders in general. There is another agenda entirely. It's for the sake of convenience - to placate a promoter (Frank Warren) who simply doesn't want to put the fight on, for whatever reason. In effect, the WBO has placed the promoter squarely in control of the mandatory process - thus making it something less than "mandatory", or more like, "mandatory, at the option of the promoter".

At this point, and given these circumstances, there isn't a state in the country that should allow the WBO to collect a sanctioning fee for a championship fight. What we're looking at is textbook stuff here.

I related the story in "Operation Cleanup" of how an official in the WBO - Ricardo Rizzo, who is currently listed on the organization's website as an "international commissioner", whatever that is - doggedly solicited my partner and later pitched all of us - me, my partner, and a fighter we handled - on a plan to pay off the WBO in order to be rated #1 and in position for a mandatory title opportunity. We didn't pay, and consequently didn't get the title shot.

I would be delighted to recount that story, in as much detail as possible, to any state or federal court in this country, or to any Senate or House committee; that is, if anybody REALLY wants some eyewitness testimony about corruption in boxing.

I wonder if anyone will EVER take me up on it.

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