

### The 74th Round

Any discussion of the regulation of television interests in boxing has to start with a little perspective on just how TV affects the industry and the fighters in it, not to mention an exploration on just what kinds of abuses are possible.

Inasmuch as TV continues to point to the sanctioning bodies as boxing's true source of poison (part of that, of course, is that they don't control them), it needs to be pointed out, first of all, that we should have no illusions about what is more powerful - the influence of television or the influence of sanctioning bodies.

Even with all the sanctioning bodies and title belts available, the plain truth is that, relatively speaking, there are very few fighters who ever get to the point where they have the opportunity to fight for a world championship. On the other hand, however, almost any fighter could conceivably compete in a TV fight - whether that be at the four, six, or eight-round level.

For undercard fighters, and those on the way "up", the dependent factor may be not the ability of the fighter, but the whether a bout can be fit into a broadcast. Some contests appear as "swing fights" in the event a featured bout ends early.

So it would stand to reason that for the average fighter, and I would go so far as to say the average ten-round fighter as well, it would be much more injurious to fall into disfavor with a network than with a sanctioning body, because that is something that could affect a fighter at any stage of his career. If you're a fighter, and a network executive does not take a shine to you, it's likely you will find a difficult, if not impossible time getting onto that network.

If that's the case, that will certainly put you out of "network dollars", and in many cases will disqualify you totally from being on a card. And this can be for any of a multitude of reasons - it need not be a question of a fighter's style, but something completely outside the fighter's control - it could be that someone bad-mouthed him, or maybe the manager is generally regarded to be a pain in the ass.

The network is in a position to dictate this kind of stuff because it holds the purse strings. The economics of the business dictate that in the vast majority of cases, a promoter won't - indeed, can't - put on a show unless there is network money behind it. That's why the club show circuit is virtually dead, and has been for quite some time. And rare is the instance where the network has to buy whatever a promoter throws it in the way of a fight card - there is always a certain veto power the network holds, since not only is it more or less subsidizing the show, it is ultimately responsible for the product it puts out over the air.

That's perfectly understandable. And sometimes there are perfectly legitimate reasons as to why a network will not want to put a fighter on its air.

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If the fighter's style is so displeasing that he will turn fans off, or worse, prompt those fans to turn the network off, that fighter might not have a career as a TV performer, no matter how effective he is. If the fighter and/or his connections are so unrealistic or difficult to deal with, networks won't likely have a lot of patience.

This rationale should be obvious, even to novice boxing followers.

What I'm most concerned about with are the things that are NOT so obvious to a casual observer.

And you wonder whether those things carry the role of the networks beyond that of a mere "exhibitor", where the exclusion of talent goes beyond anything that could reasonably be characterized as "quality control".

For this, we need a hypothetical.

Let's say we've got a cable network going weekly with a boxing show, and it is the only network that is theoretically "open", that is, there is not an exclusive deal with one promoter to provide all the "output".

Let's say instead of having its boxing schedule split between a couple of promoters, this particular network decides to have maybe just one or two "output" deals with outside parties, in which a specific number of dates are guaranteed. The rest of the promoters then have to go through a procedure of putting together a prospective matchup, and pitching that to the network executives, in order to be considered for a show - at least that would be the normal process.

To help them in fielding the proposals for those shows, the network decides that it will hire a "consultant" - someone who might recruit promoters into the fold, and advise the network on which promoters will be used, and which main events will be televised. Just as importantly, he will certainly register his input on which main events will NOT be televised.

The consultant is a long-time boxing man, but there's something a little irregular about this arrangement.

For one thing, the consultant is also an independent promoter in his own right. And he's another guy that wants all the dates he can get - either directly or indirectly - from the network.

Within the way boxing is structured these days, that means, by definition, that we would commonly be engaged in the practice of signing fighters to promotional contracts - deals which tie up a fighter's rights for a certain period of time and also afford the promoter an opportunity to make a significant amount of "side money" when that fighter is "loaned out" to other promoters.

As you can imagine, this is valuable currency to have in the marketplace - certainly valuable enough for promoters to compete with each other over.

And "compete" is the operative word. What's difficult to reconcile about the position of anyone

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wearing those two hats simultaneously is that the people who would be competing with the promoter/TV consultant over promotional contracts - those who could afford signing bonuses when necessary; those who could guarantee minimum purses, were also the same people who had to get their own television proposals past him, as a representative of the network.

When you consider that getting those TV dates would put them in a better competitive position relative to the TV consultant in his role as promoter, it's not hard to see something wrong with that whole picture.

Simply put, it becomes an advantage only if you're not a threat to that consultant.

Naturally, tangential opportunities can open up - cutting the consultant in on promotions or contracts in exchange for receiving TV dates. Making beneficial "side deals" for the consultant when he's doing business that's not related to the network. One hand washing the other so much it starts to get water-logged. There's a virtual rat's nest of under-the-table shit that could conceivably go on.

And it brings me to other areas of concern, when TV executives are involved. Like hidden output deals - "wink-wink" arrangements where a whole slew of future dates appear to be tied up on a network, except no one seems to know which fights are going to fill them. Or promoters without any product to offer a network are getting an inordinately high number of dates.

What the public doesn't really understand is that a television network can literally create a promoter out of thin air. It HAS happened. It IS happening. And when that network acquiesces to being a "strategic partner" with a promoter, how can other promoters expect to find a level playing field?

The answer is - they don't. Believe me, fighters and managers get the message. It's all part of "playing ball". Talent will gravitate toward the promoters who seem to be getting the TV dates, because the understanding is, that's the way they're going to get on TV and therefore make more money.

And it's not always a passive message being sent. The practice of a network boxing executive "steering" a fighter in the direction of one particular promoter is certainly nothing new. And it happens subtly enough so as to be indiscernible.

And it can gravitate to other things. Promoters have been known to present fight proposals to networks, and were turned down on the basis that the fight is not up to standards, only to see that same fight later appear on another promoter's date. Other promoters are told, in terms that may be certain or somewhat uncertain, that if they want a fight or fighter to appear on television, they must "attach" themselves to a date that is owned by another promoter. Often, this provides a risk-free payday for the promoter who has been granted that date from the network, and diminished financial opportunity for the promoter who actually delivers the talent.

This stuff happens. And this hidden agenda not only has the effect of enriching certain promoters above others, but also increasing the leverage of those who are "chosen". Whichever

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way you slice it, it amounts to exerting undue influence over the balance of power among promoters.

Obviously, that shouldn't be allowed.

But it's the kind of thing that could conceivably happen at any network, as long as the proper pieces are in place. So maybe the important thing is not to zero in on one specific TV outlet, but to create the standard by which we can look at all networks, well into the future.....

.....Although I certainly hope some people in Bristol, Connecticut are listening carefully.

But wait - I'm not finished yet.

Imagine that, on top of its cozy - almost incestuous - relationship with designated promoters, which in turn tips the scale in favor of certain fighters, managers and agents - a network decides that it wants to become a dominant player (read: promotional partner) in the lucrative business of pay-per-view boxing AND, at the same time, undertakes to become the major influence over which entity is accepted by the public as an authoritative source for world ratings - in fact investigating ways to "brand" these ratings with its name.

What you're left with is a rather dangerous "vertical integration" of interests, my friend.

One that shouldn't go ignored.

One that may in fact be illegal.

You would think a lesson had been learned from the ugly Don King/ABC/Ring Magazine scandal of the mid-1970s, which sent an already moribund sport into a tailspin of monstrous proportions.

Evidently it hasn't. In large media companies, it seems wisdom isn't handed down from one generation to the next.

Someone should find the guy whose outburst originally broke that scandal wide open, and ask HIM about it.

What's Scott LeDoux up to these days, anyway?

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