

HE'S GOT NO DOG IN THIS FIGHT

Written by Charles Jay
Sunday, 10 August 2003 18:00

The 86th Round

(We'll start this thing out with a little disclaimer - I am currently involved with the subject of this piece, Scott Wagner, in business ventures outside the sport of boxing. But it bears mentioning that I'm not extolling his virtues because I do business with him; rather, I do business with him BECAUSE I have an admiration for those virtues he represents. That's an important distinction. The following story is a variation on a piece that has run on TotalAction.com before; it has been 'tweaked' so as to fit more easily into the "Cleanup" theme)

In case you were under the impression that promotional contracts were necessary for promoters to be successful in this business, you'd be wrong. That's because there are a few Scott Wagners out there proving that notion otherwise.

Wagner is the impresario behind a regular series of events held in Glen Burnie, Md. (right outside Baltimore) called "Ballroom Boxing", which is not just a clever monicker for a boxing show, but the product of a concept - one carefully devised by Wagner to offer a "unique selling proposition" for the sport at a time when most promoters are operating under a whole different set of parameters.

Wagner does not have a promotional commitment from, or financial interest in, any of the boxers that appear on his shows. Given the current atmosphere in boxing, that is truly thinking "outside the box".

Not only do Wagner's thoughts move in that direction, it's actually an intentional part of his overall strategy. That would be heresy to today's group of promoters, who would hardly think of featuring any fighter they couldn't "control".

But control of fighters doesn't really matter to Wagner. If you talk to him, sooner or later you're likely to hear the mantra - "With most promoters, the fighter is the commodity. For us, the FAN is the commodity."

Of course, he's onto something. And we've expanded upon it before - promoters, as a rule, have fallen into a self-indulgent pattern. The agenda is clear - build fighters, by whatever means, with the mindset that whatever is good for them is good for the fan. The live paying customer has taken a backseat with that kind of philosophy, which has been a contributing factor in the degeneration of the club show circuit in this country.

That won't do for Wagner, whose events has managed to thrive (he just finished his 50th show) through a well-developed reputation and healthy word-of-mouth, despite surprisingly little in the way of advance press in the Baltimore-Washington area.

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The rationale behind Wagner's strategy is beautiful in its simplicity - if you don't have long-term contractual obligations to fighters, you will not be consumed with the need to protect them. In turn, that will result in a better quality of fights, because they'll naturally be more competitive. And it stands to reason that the live customer prefers to see such fights.

"The bottom line here is that my crowd wants to be entertained," says Wagner. "And there's no better way to do that than to give people good fights. When managers bring their fighters to the ballroom, they know they're going to be in a real fight."

And real fights are what Chris Middendorf, one of the busiest matchmakers in the business, manages to deliver, on a continual basis.

Most matchmakers dream of an opportunity to be let loose like that.

"It's the most fun any matchmaker could have," says Middendorf. "I'm making even fights. I'm not given a 'A' side that I have to protect. Nobody's being protected. To match two guys, style-wise, to where they will make a great fight, that's just the most fun I could have."

It's not that Wagner hasn't been approached by fighters and/or their managers to make long-term deals. It is only natural that he would be, since he provides a regular outlet for boxing in a major metropolitan area. But Wagner, with support and reinforcement from the people around him, including his father Michael, a former Maryland state senator, and director of operations Dave Wilkerson, has stayed true to this vision.

"Boxing should be the biggest spectator sport in the world," Wagner says. "But fans are so disgusted with it, because of their perception of what the sport is, and the whole process has become polluted, because it has concentrated on building fighters, not building fans."

"The common fan can't name ten fighters. But they want to watch boxing. The ratings prove it. Our fans are watching the shows and don't even know the fighters. And when fans watch - that's when you breed superstars."

Of course, there are those local favorites who appear with a degree of regularity on Ballroom Boxing shows by virtue of the fact that they have a fan following. But more likely than not, they're matched in something a little more substantial than a "stepping stone" bout. And promoters sometimes place their fighters on Ballroom cards, but almost without exception, they know they're going to be in tougher than the promoter would require on his own shows.

Wagner's revenues are generally derived from ticket sales, through an exhaustive effort. Yes, that's a novel concept for many promoters to digest. Want to buy a ticket? If you were fortunate enough to get Wagner on his cell phone at 4 AM, he'd be happy to take your credit card number. One could hardly imagine a King or Arum doing that.

We'd say Ballroom Boxing has had a string of sellouts, but I guess theoretically, a Ballroom Boxing card is NEVER sold out.

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"I don't care if all my seats are gone," says Wagner. "If someone comes up to my door with the price of a ticket in hand, we're not going to turn him away. We'll find a way to squeeze someone like that in."

Wagner has become adept not only at retaining customers - he makes use of an extensive mailing list and sends out frequent newsletters - and has mastered the art of maximizing revenue from a number of different sources. Yes - it helps when you have your own venue.

Wagner's family owns Michael's Eighth Avenue, and so there's no rent, and all the concessions belong to them. But there's opportunity cost, because Michael's could be booked every night of the week. And there isn't a market in this country where an industrious promoter couldn't find a venue at a very low cost, with control of food and drink sales, if he looked hard enough.

Certainly it takes more than that. It takes a plan, a commitment to that plan, and, most importantly, the execution of that plan.

Just because Wagner doesn't operate like a typical promoter does not mean that he doesn't consider television an important part of his overall strategy. But instead of being dependent on the likes of ESPN and Fox, which tailor their dates largely toward promoters who "own" talent. Wagner, in keeping with his independent philosophy, went about producing his own TV shows and having the tapes distributed to cable carriers and regional networks across the country. Now he's got New England Sports Network, Sunshine Network (Florida), Empire Sports Network (New York), Comcast Sports South, MBC (Major Broadcasting Corp.), various Equity Broadcasting affiliates, DirectTV, Armed Forces Network and others in his distribution cycle, which approaches 50 million homes in all.

The basic philosophy of action-packed fights, once again, directly related to his "neutral" position with the fighters, is essential.

And Wagner takes it a step further, by continuing to "re-purpose" his tapes so that they take on an "evergreen" quality, as they're shown in one-hour and two-hour formats, with different combinations of "The Best of Ballroom Boxing" airing over and over again on his outlets, which have been nothing but pleased with what they've received.

With sponsors in the fold, and absolute authority over production, Wagner sees the day when he can generate as much money with his independent distribution as other promoters can through cable rights fees, and he sees it soon.

What makes that so important is that, in this day and age when networks are the real power in boxing, it involves a promoter taking a step toward controlling his fights on television, rather than television controlling HIM.

There's a lesson to be learned here for both aspiring promoters and others who are already in the business - there certainly is another way to do things, as long as you've got a little imagination and fortitude, an independent spirit, and give yourself sincerely to the philosophy that re-emphasizes the "grass roots" concept of personal sales and service as a principal

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vehicle for income, rather than the quasi-management of fighters, which may or may not ever bear fruit.

As far as Wagner is concerned, if you do that, everything else has a way of following. And that can only be good for the game in the long run.

"When the Ravens won the Super Bowl, they had to beat 30 other teams. That's the truth," he says. "In boxing, you can bullshit your way to the top even when you're not the best. If we could see a day in the sport of boxing where the cream rises to the top on merit, where the person with the most talent wins, you'd have promoters packing fight venues in every city in the country, as opposed to people who are trying to control the truth themselves, selling the public on something that isn't really there.

"Remember, the public knows a lot more than they're given credit for."

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