

The 92nd Round

Bob Arum has acquiesced to not having evidence of a "conspiracy" in the scoring, judging, or selection of judges for the Oscar De la Hoya-Shane Mosley fight. He has basically apologized to the Nevada State Athletic Commission and thrown himself on its mercy, the result of which will probably be no disciplinary action taken at the commission's October 15 meeting.

But my angle on this controversy is still very much alive.

There is one thing I can say about Marc Ratner - whenever I place a call to the Nevada State Athletic Commission, the secretary answers, and I ask for Ratner (the executive director), I never get an inquisition about "Who's calling? What is this regarding?". What happens is that my call goes through and Marc always gets on the phone, without any screening. And while he may "shape" an answer to some extent, he doesn't avoid me.

At the other end of the spectrum, you've got people like Greg Sirb, who I'll e-mail with rather simple and straightforward questions or requests, only to see him slip, slide and squirm before ultimately being far less than forthcoming, or refusing to answer at all.

Or Nancy Black, the former executive director of the Kentucky Athletic Commission, who has actually upset that I had reached her on her cell phone, despite the fact that the number was posted on the commission's website, then proceeded to lie through her teeth to me, throughout the conversation.

As public officials in boxing go, Ratner exhibits a pretty high level of professionalism. And since he handles a healthy percentage of the big-time fights, he has a job that is not immune from the spotlight - in many ways thankless at best.

Still, he's not immune to politics. The selection of Stanley Christodoulou as a judge for the De la Hoya-Mosley fight was political in nature - make no mistake about it. Political, because it involved a member of the ABC (Nevada), and until recently, a member of the ABC's executive board (Ratner) muscling up against one of the ABC's political opponents. Don't have any illusions - all the sanctioning bodies are despised by the ABC braintrust, and an effort to neuter them is very active.

Regulations are imposed on them, and against them, by federal law, and as new legislation has been compiled, the sanctioning bodies have not been given any opportunity to offer input. No one from the WBC, WBA, or IBF was invited to testify at the Senate hearings pursuant to the Professional Boxer Safety Act, and when they were able to set up a meeting with Ken Nahigian (who is Senator John McCain's point man on the subject), they were more or less blown off.

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Written by Charles Jay

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The general attitude is that the sanctioning bodies are not to be heard from, and soon, not to be seen. This is obvious when you look at the way the ABC has dealt with the selection of officials for championship fights. The position that has been advanced by the badly-informed Sirb, and which he easily coerced his handpicked successor as ABC president, Tim Lueckenhoff, to support, is that each state has the right to appoint whatever officials it wants for any championship fight - even if that means all the officials come from the champion or challenger's hometown.

That kind of policy produces incidents that are potentially embarrassing for the sport. Last July, Ratner appointed Nevada judges and a Nevada referee for the WBA heavyweight title fight between John Ruiz of the U.S. and Kirk Johnson of Canada. The WBA, which was the only sanctioning body involved in the fight, had rule calling for geographically-neutral officials when fighters from different countries competed in the home country of one of these fighters. That rule was overridden. Adding insult to injury, Ruiz had recently purchased a home in the Las Vegas area and had taken up residence there, meaning Ruiz had all hometown officials, including referee Joe Cortez, who declared Ruiz the DQ winner, then, seven months later, exhibited a rather curious degree of inconsistency when he stood by and watched while Fres Oquendo brought a knockout punch directly down on the back of Maurice Harris' head, yet took no action.

Sirb, who serves as executive director in Pennsylvania, has made no secret of the fact that he has intentionally named all Pennsylvania officials, including some from Pittsburgh, to work Paul Spadafora's fights in the Steel City.

In fact, when the "neutrality" issue was brought up by Romanian-Canadian Leonard Dorin's camp before his May 17 fight with Spadafora in Pittsburgh, this is what was written in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

"Greg Sirb, Pennsylvania's boxing boss and the past president of the U.S. Association of Boxing Commissioners, reiterated yesterday that he gathered the most 'fair, neutral' panel possible for this fight -- especially when you consider that every other previous Spadafora title fight in Pennsylvania included in-state judges and Pittsburgh-based referees."

In an August 8, 2002 memo sent to ABC members, this was Sirb's attitude toward having neutral officials:

"....we as commissions are going to continue to have this sort of problem if the WBA and any other organization has in their by-laws/regulations that they indeed must approve officials or that officials must be 'neutral'."

Material like that is absolutely essential to put this issue in its proper perspective.

Sirb has misinterpreted federal law from the start, and in other cases ignores it when it is convenient. We've made that point in both Operation Cleanup books, but specifically in Chapter 64 of OPERATION CLEANUP: A BLUEPRINT FOR BOXING REFORM.

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I'll reproduce it at length, to refresh your memory:

*** "Here is Section 16 of the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act, as is contained under the title "JUDGES AND REFEREES":

"No person may arrange, promote, organize, produce, or fight in a professional boxing match unless all referees and judges participating in the match have been certified and approved by the boxing commission responsible for regulating the match in the State where the match is held."

What that means is just what it says - CERTIFIED and APPROVED by the boxing commission. That doesn't say SELECTED or APPOINTED. The way this law is written, it seems to automatically contemplate that there is one entity who would be offering the officials for approval, and another entity (the commission) that would actually APPROVE them.

Otherwise, the law would have specifically stated that the boxing commission is solely responsible for SELECTING the officials. Certainly, if the state commissions were to be selecting the officials unilaterally, the term "certified and approved" would not even be included in the language, since it would no doubt be redundant. After all, one must pre-suppose that if an entity were SELECTING the officials, it would be implicit that the entity would have already APPROVED them, wouldn't it?

It is very clear to me that the spirit of the law was not intended so that one party alone would have the authority to appoint officials, at least for championship fights, without input from the other entity. I know this because when I was reading the brand-new legislation that is going to be up for consideration in Congress - the Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2002 - it took into consideration the involvement and some degree of participation on the part of the sanctioning organizations. Look at Section 115 (c), at least the way it read as of September 12, the day of the hearing:

'(C) SANCTIONING ORGANIZATION TO PROVIDE LIST - A sanctioning organization --

(1) shall provide a list of judges and referees deemed qualified by that organization to a boxing commission; but

(2) may not influence, or attempt to influence, a boxing commission's selection of a judge or referee for a professional boxing match except by providing such a list.'

This, at the very least, invites input from the sanctioning bodies." *****

Of course, this little piece of news caught Sirb and others by surprise. He realized the objective of his ABC colleagues was not addressed properly by the statute, especially after I had made a speech about it at the 2002 WBA convention.

So he scrambled to change the language of the proposed bill through Nahigian. Now it reads,

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"No person may arrange, promote, organize, produce, or fight in a professional boxing match unless all referees and judges participating in the match have been SELECTED (this previously said "certified and approved") by the boxing commission responsible for regulating the match in the State where the match is held."

Also,

``(c) Sanctioning Organization NOT TO INFLUENCE SELECTION PROCESS (This previously read "Sanctioning Body to Provide List").

.....and that a sanctioning organization:

``(1) MAY (previously was "shall") provide a list of judges and referees deemed qualified by that organization to a boxing commission; but

``(2) SHALL (previously was "may") not influence, or attempt to influence, a boxing commission's selection of a judge or referee for a professional boxing match except by providing such a list."

Naturally, that illustrated two things to me - (a) these guys understood they were not standing on solid ground (otherwise, why change the language?), and endeavored to take steps to correct that mistake; and (b) Sirb indeed has a direct pipeline to Nahigian for the purposes of influencing what was going to be in the legislation.

And as we sit here, the legislation has not yet passed, so the current language is still in effect.

So why is everyone taking the hard (and wrong) line on it?

Maybe there's an element of ego in it - the product of insecurity, or perhaps self-importance. An affinity for power? Anything is plausible.

Here's what I don't understand: since he can "certify and approve" officials before they are even allowed to work in Nevada, Marc Ratner would appear to have some veto power to begin with. Why wouldn't that be sufficient for him? Why wouldn't that provide a solid basis from which he can negotiate and cooperate with a sanctioning body to appoint officials for a championship fight? Is there a particular reason not to take that kind of initiative?

Is it because all those people "dirty"? I would hope not, because until this year's ABC convention, Ratner had served as that organization's vice-president, and thus had huddled with people just as dubious, if not more so, than most you would find in a sanctioning body.

And do I even have to mention that when commissions refer in their rules to "championship fights", aren't they, in effect, recognizing and giving credibility to the sanctioning bodies? After all, these are not championship fights decreed by THEM, or by the ABC, but by the sanctioning bodies themselves, correct? Doesn't that deserve at least a small degree of respect, if not

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deference?

The WBA submitted the names of six prospective judges to Ratner for the De la Hoya-Mosley fight. Ratner didn't like them. I would grant you - the WBA probably erred in not putting forth six American judges, competent and experienced, and well-established in their respective states, to minimize the possibility of an objection, since I think you'd agree, if a judge who fits that description was considered unfit to work the DLH-Mosley fight, what business would he or she have working ANY title fight in ANY state, right? Are lesser championship fighters entitled to a lesser quality of judging? If so, that would be a hell of a commentary on the ABC's "certification" process for officials.

Ratner could have asked for six more names, or a larger list. He could have asked them for Americans. But really, his decision had already been made, making any communication process moot. He elected to bypass the WBA and contact Christodoulou on his own. Christodoulou accepted, on his own. Ratner, in effect, decided for the WBA, as did Christodoulou, who their judge was going to be, despite the fact that the judge sits on that organization's committees that sanction title bouts, and rate fighters. The WBA knew that, and were well aware of the ABC's position regarding someone like Christodoulou judging a fight (pursuant to the letter they sent Armando Garcia), and as was reported in the last chapter, made their objection on that basis known. Yet if they pulled their sanction from the fight for that reason, they would have been vilified.

Could you blame the organization if it were upset?

Is the next step for commissions to sanction world title fights, and to strip champions of their belts when and where they deem appropriate?

Doubtful.

Actually, I think I know what direction they're going in - and which path I'm going to take to counter them.

That's next.

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