The 35th Round

Amongst all the pre-fight hype for the Mike Tyson fight this past week, this press release, issued by Senator Harry Reid, caught my attention:

REID SAYS SPORT OF BOXING TO SUFFER "BLACK EYE" IF TYSON PERMITTED TO FIGHT

Wednesday, February 19, 2003

Washington, D.C. - Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV), the Assistant Democratic Leader of the U.S. Senate, today warned that the sport of boxing will suffer a severe blow if the Mike Tyson-Clifford Etienne fight is permitted to go forward. Less than 24 hours after Mike Tyson issued a statement saying that Saturday's fight was off due to serious medical ailments and an inability to train, Tyson changed his mind and declared that he is now ready to fight.

"The announcement that the Tyson-Etienne fight is back on is yet another example of wide-ranging problems with the sport of boxing that are beyond the scope of the current system of state regulation," Reid said. "Any decision allowing this fight to go forward as scheduled will likely result in a devastating 'left hook' to the sport of boxing."

Tim Lueckenhoff, President of the Association of Boxing Commissions (ABC), conceded there is a problem with the current law, stating "the ABC has no authority to do anything in this situation other than to beg Tennessee to do the right thing and be very thorough."

"Lueckenhoff's statement reveals the shocking truth about the lack of power the ABC possesses to protect the health of boxers," said Reid. "Based on the recent reports of Tyson's poor health and the inherent risk of his newly obtained facial tattoo, I urge the state of Tennessee to refuse to allow this fight to go forward."

Marc Ratner, Executive Director of the Nevada Athletic Commission, agreed with Reid's concerns. "With all the rumors about Tyson's health, he should be thoroughly checked out medically before fighting."

Reid plans to push for passage of his legislation to provide uniform regulations for professional boxing, in order to protect the health and safety of boxers and ensure fairness in the sport. Reid is a former boxer and the senior Senator from Nevada -- which hosts many of the premier boxing matches in the world.

"This is exactly the reason we need federal oversight of the sport of boxing," said Reid, the author of the National Boxing Commission Act of 2001. "Who is the watchdog for the integrity of this great sport? It is clearly not the trainers. Tyson's

trainer, Freddie Roach, said he would stand behind Tyson's decision despite the fact that he is worried about Tyson's health and readiness to fight. A National Boxing Commission is needed for exactly this reason - to establish greater standards to protect the health of boxers."

I guess I can buy a little bit of that, though truthfully, not a whole lot.

I certainly don't think anyone is, or was, overly concerned with the health of Mike Tyson. I think what people are most concerned with is what they perceive to be buffoonery on Tyson's part, and the criticism boxing receives from the mainstream press because of it.

Not that those concerns aren't legitimate. Boxing has a public relations problem, which prevents it from being taken seriously by a lot of people in the media, especially those who don't know very much the game but are happy to crawl out from under a rock when there's a juicy Tyson story to exploit.

Those people may not be particularly knowledgeable, but they represent a constituency that needs to be "converted" if boxing is to move to a more prominent place on the public's radar screen.

But the Tyson "problem" will take care of itself in time. After all, he won't fight forever, will he?

Actually, I think there's too much focus on Tyson from that perspective; too many "good samaritans" popping out of the woodwork when he fights, as if preventing Iron Mike from fighting is going to represent a real step forward in restoring integrity to the sport. They've been led in that direction by some of the state regulators who areleast aren't too dumb not to recognize a "hot button" issue. But we've seen promoters who have admitted to bribing sanctioning bodies, and receive nothing more than a slap on the wrist. So who's kidding who when it comes to sending a message about "integrity"?

If you really want to talk about safety concerns, I'd rather see them channeled in other directions. For example, using the quote from Ratner in Reid's press release as a reference, I don't see why EVERY fighter shouldn't be checked out thoroughly. If history has taught us anything, it's that the tragedies we see in this sport have a way of coming out of nowhere. In many states, there's nothing in the way of a true pre-fight physical. Who is putting any real pressure on these states?

And I wonder how we're doing when it comes to safe-guarding against very dangerous mismatches - not necessarily those where a kid gets knocked out right away, but where a circuit loser with no discernible skill at all, except for the ability to absorb a succession of clean, sharp, gratuitous punches, round after round, looking respectable perhaps on paper but in reality cooking up a genuine recipe for disaster. I see it going on in state after state. THAT'S a safety issue worth addressing, isn't it?

And needless to say, following safety procedures at ringside - not only those that comply with the law, but those that represent plain old common sense - should be on the front burner for every boxing commission, but unfortunately, they aren't. Somehow it still hasn't resonated that it

makes the most sense to have not one, but two doctors at a fight, so that if a fighter gets knocked out, one doctor can examine him in the dressing room while the other doctor attends to the rest of the fights as they are happening.

And it simply astounds me that through much of the ABC, there is still this mentality that ambulances are somehow too expensive or troublesome to have on-site at a professional boxing card. In upcoming chapters you'll see where this problem comes squarely into focus.

As you can imagine, there are a lot of things to work on that have absolutely nothing to do with Mike Tyson. And I'm hoping that folks like Senator Reid will someday understand that it's just as important to issue press releases about the critical, real-life concerns as it is for those semi-cosmetic issues that are, to an extent, contrived for publicity's sake.

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