

King Rules Heavyweight Boxing Past and Present

Written by Pat Putnam

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SPECIAL to TheSweetScience.com from Pat Putnam. From the *Pat Putnam Classic Series*, this article originally appeared in Sports Illustrated.

One of the secrets of Don King's success is his ability to wedge a pod of round heavyweights into a square hole. A glaring example of this porcine phenomenon was the King pay-per-view card Nov. 13 at Madison Square Garden, when tonnage took top billing over talent. Another was...

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It is the unbending rule of marital disputes and heavyweight championship contests that it takes two to fight. Anything else is shadow boxing, which may be pleasant for a beleaguered spouse but makes for a boring fist fight. "No problem," said Don King as the gates of an Indiana prison slammed shut on Mike Tyson, "if I don't have the champion, it will be one of my guys coming out of the other corner."

Quietly, King began to gather his whales. They didn't have to be proficient, just breathing. Ratings were no problem. For Jose Sulaiman, King's WBC lap dog, it only took a phone call. For the right price, the WBA would rank Mother Theresa. Bob Lee's IBF is cut from the same checkered cloth. Now, it is fight one of King's vassals or fight no one.

"I got a call from King six months ago," Rock Newman, Riddick Bowe's manager, said Friday. "He offered me a half interest in Oliver McCall and Tony Tucker for half of Riddick. I asked him why he didn't just try to sell me the bridge over the East River in New York. He told me to make an offer.

Two weeks from today, around 1:30 a.m. in the east, McCall fights WBC champion Lennox Lewis at Wembley Arena. Because the fight is a mandatory, Lewis had no choice, fight Tyson's ex-sparring partner or be defrocked. After McCall, there is Tucker, everybody's No. 2, who lost a 12-round decision to Lewis last year. He will move up automatically as the mandatory challenger should McCall lose.

Tucker, of course, richly deserves to be ranked second. Since Lewis decisioned him in Las Vegas, he has defeated three unknowns named Graves, Stephens and Coffee. Larry, Moe and Curly. None of that fettered trio stumbled beyond the second round.

"When I turned King down," said Newman, "he told me Riddick would be dropped out of the rankings and that he'd never get another title shot. Then he made it happen."

In the latest IBF ratings, Bowe, the former heavyweight champion Lewis has agreed to fight

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after McCall, was rated No. 5, behind McCall, Tucker, Bruce Seldon (whom Bowe knocked out in one round in 1991), and Joe Hipp, as tough as any, not as good as your sister. When Newman telephoned Lee to complain, the IBF president told him to call King.

"Lee told me that if I made a deal with King, he'd put Bowe ahead of everybody else. No. 1," said Newman. "What's so sickening about King, is how he tries to steal and manipulate in the name of blackness. That is more sickening to me than whatever his other financial transgressions might be. He is totally devoid of ethnic integrity. That outrages me."

Others on Newman's hate list are Billy The Kid, Willie Sutton and Al Capone.

The other alphabet bandits, the WBC and the WBA, blandly ignore Bowe. The WBC does rank four of King's has-beens and ex-sparring partners in the top six, including the top three, and half of the top 12. The WBA, in open shamelessness, ranks King's minions in its top five places, with a full half-dozen among the top 12.

One such is 5th-ranked Franz Botha, the most dreadful heavyweight to come out of country renowned for dreadful heavyweights, South Africa.

Fortunately for the British fans, McCall is the best of King's lot, as it should be considering the \$2 million plus King charged to supply him. At the moment, McCall thinks his share of all that money is \$1 million, but then he hasn't been paid yet, has he? King's expenses, the ones he sucks from a fighter's purse, are legendary.

For this one, King ordered McCall to camp a month early, although by the time he arrives in London tomorrow, he should be so travel weary he may be unable to fight. His training odyssey opened in Las Vegas 10 weeks ago. Then he was moved to Detroit, before being relocated to train with Julio Cesar Chavez outside of Mexico City. The last anyone heard of him, King had moved his training camp to Tijuana, on the Mexican west coast just south of San Diego.

"I thought we were going to Tahiti," said a bemused Jimmy Adams, McCall's manager of record.

"The whole thing is a joke," says Richie Giachetti, the trainer King replaced with portly Greg Page and Manny Steward. "They put him in camp because you have to watch him 24 hours a day. King is hiding him, but when Manny goes off to train Chavez, Oliver is going to take off. What is Page going to teach him? How to eat? But I'll say this: if Oliver fights the way I taught him, he'll beat Lewis. He has the tools; he just has to use them the right way. If he hasn't been fooling around."

A strong and awkward mauler with a big punch and an extraordinary chin, McCall's greatest weakness is his sparring partner mentality, which shaped his five defeats. Sparring partners are accustomed to fighting the boss; if they make him angry, they go home. They do not fight to win, only to sharpen the other man's tools. After three or four rounds, they hope someone will call time, so they may take the rest of the day off.

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"The difference between him and me," says former champion Larry Holmes, who once toiled as a sparring partner, "is that I did it to learn while he did it as a job. Look at his career and at mine. He just wanted to get paid and he lost and lost and lost. I won and won and won. He could get lucky with Lewis, but he's not that great a fighter. But then, I don't think Lewis is so great either. But Lewis has been champion awhile, so he has that going for himself."

For this one, King turned to Steward, who trained Evander Holyfield to reclaim the title from Bowe. After one look, Steward introduced McCall to the basics, a discipline he had managed to ignore during his nine-year career. Steward added crispness to his punches.

"Because he was a sparring partner, he never took boxing seriously," said Steward. "He told me about the fight he lost to Buster Douglas, just before Douglas knocked out Tyson. He didn't take it seriously; didn't train seriously. He was out partying and drinking, not worrying about having a fight. He was getting paid as a sparring partner and he just felt lucky to be on the undercard for another payday. He knows what might have been if he had beaten Douglas. He is taking this one very seriously."

When Steward trained Michael Moorer, before he became the WBA and IBF champion, he was offered a fight with McCall. He turned it down. "Not now," he said then, "not ever."

"I'll tell you this," said the veteran trainer, "he is not the kind of guy I would want Lennox to fight if I were training Lennox. Remember, he's never been knocked down or cut, and he is the first guy ever to knock Tyson off his feet."

For sparring with Tyson, McCall was paid \$2,000 a week. Others fighters were not so generous, and there were times when paydays were far apart for a married man with a growing family. In 1988, the 6'2", 230-pound heavyweight, then in his fourth year as a professional fighter, apparently found other work; he pleaded no contest to two counts of burglaries in Wisconsin.

Racine County Judge Jon Skow sentenced him to 60 days in the county jail and five-years probation. There is a plus side to that: it did give him something in common with King. Now for the next few weeks over tea and crumpets, the pair can discuss something other than the London weather.