Who's the "Next Great Champ"?

I doubt we'll ever find out, after the Fox Network's over-hyped boxing "reality TV" show debuted on September 7. The ratings were poor, just 5.2 million, which was only half of what CBS televison did with their "reality" hit, "Big Brother." The "Next Great Champ" finished just fourth in its time slot, according to the Nielsen ratings, which are the Bible of the television industry. Women in the important 18-49 demographic wanted nothing to do with the farce, and Fox spokesman Scott Grogin admitted, "After all the commotion surrounding the show, we're disappointed with the initial rating."

Supposedly, there are nine more episodes to go, but the "Next Great Champ" is already reeling like a punch-drunk club fighter. Give it two more episodes before it's flat on its back, and Fox throws the towel in.

Boxing insiders thought this show would help the Fight Game, and enable it to bust back into network TV, but the "Next Great Champ" has about as much to do with real boxing as "Judge Judy" has to do with the Supreme Court.

Supposedly, the survivor of the twelve-man elimination tourney will get $750,000, and a shot at a "WBO world championship," but how can you possibly take a complete novice and, in ten weekly shows, groom him for boxing stardom?

"I'm knocking on the door of greatness," claims Rene Armijo, one of the twelve participants.

Oscar De La Hoya lent his prescence to this melodramatic fraud, and so did "legendary trainers" Lou Duva and Tommy Brooks. Director Brian Smith uses a lot of ridiculous "jump cuts," so it's impossible to really discern how good any of the boxers are. One second, he's focusing on a fighter throwing a combination, the next millisecond he's on the "crowd" or the fighter's feet. This is supposed to be "reality TV," but he's even thrown in sound affects. Too bad we don't have interactive television: he could pass out LSD.

Smith knows nothing about boxing, but tried to milk every shred of human emotion, and it comes off about as real as the soap operas women watch in the afternoon. Naturally, fighters have to show "personality" or viewers don't know who to root for, but under Smith's crude direction and lousy editing, the "good guy - bad guy" thing is absurd.

"I'm looking to crack ribs, break noses. I will get pleasure from his pain," says one boxer, which sounds like dialogue scripted by some studio hack.

The resident "bad guy" is David Pareja. Pareja is from Chicago, or at least fought in the Chicago Golden Gloves, though you'd never know from the paucity of information you're given. He reeks of arrogance and says things like, "I will get absolutely every fighter's

respect...including Oscar De La Hoya's."

When the twelve competitors get to the loft-like dormitory where they supposedly live and train, Pareja starts bitching because there's no "jacuzzi or hot tub."

Maybe where he comes from they have Perrier in the water bottles and the speed bags are made of Gucci leather, but also throws in a bit of racism, boasting about being a "pretty white" boy who's not scared of someone black and ugly from the ghetto.

Pareja's much older looking wife also plays her part and reeks of greed. "I want you to bust him up," she says, before her young husband's first fight.

Before the actual fisticuffs could begin, De La Hoya gives his motivational speech, and then they all take a run that's supposedly to conjure up images of "Rocky." Brooks, who comes off like a Marine Corps drill instructor, barks, "Time for your first competition."

After being hoisted up toward the rafters, the participants are forced to hang upside down like carcasses of beef and do situps. It's a tough exercise, but under the laughable editing of Smith, the guys were shown wrapping their hands. Maybe the great unwashed masses don't notice, but fighters wrapping their hands to do sit-ups is about as realistic as watching the Bolshoi Ballet perform "Madam Butterfly" in combat boots.

"Remember, people, you're rating is everything!" bellows Duva, as he's flanked by Brooks and De La Hoya.

As the sweaty bodies hang upside down, and are cheered on, doing a fast series of situps in 90 seconds, the winner will get $10,000 -- and a number one rating. What's that got to do with fighting? Who knows, who cares. This is "reality TV."

"You have no idea of what agony I'm going through. My abs are killing me," moans Arsenio Reyes to his younger brother.

When the beef is finally hoisted down, Brooks, playing his role to the hilt, tells competitor Jimmy Mince that 28 out of the thirty situps he did don't count, because he cocked a leg and somehow pulled himself up. In the confab between Brooks and Duva, Tommy "angrily" wants to kick Mince out of the competiton because he doesn't like cheaters. Of course, Lou Duva never cheated in his life...

After a final showdown, between Pareja and Paul Scianna, who were previously tied, Brooks, full of pregnant pauses, like he's doing Hamlet, tells a waiting world that Pareja did 25, Scianna 24.

That earns the mouthy "bad guy" $10,000, but the rest of the fighters have to be ranked. Pareja is rated number one, by virtue of his victory, while Otis Griffin is 2nd, followed by Mike Vallejo, Scianna, Fred Bachman, Armijo, Gilbert Zaragoza, Mohammad Elmahmoud, Luis Corps, Lawrence Alonzo, Mince, and Arsenio Reyes, who is 12th and last. According to rules of the

competion, the first three guys can get $25,000 if they win their next fight, but the twelfth guy, the doormat in the rankings, has to fight one of the first three and win -- or he's eliminated. And he gets nothing.

As Reyes tearfully tells his brother, he feels like going home, his brother admits to the audience that Arsenio isn't mentally tough and he lacks courage. Arsenio tearfully tells his brother he can't go home and have his mother support him anymore. Apparently, the 28-yearold hasn't thought of getting a job, but in the final confrontation to choose his opponent, Reyes has to painfully choose who he'll fight, in front of the other eleven boxers and their wives or girlfriends. Reeking of melodrama, Reyes rules out Vallejo, whose girlfriend looks on imploringly, then laughs and cries in genuine emotion, because Reyes and Vallejo are long-time friends.

Milking this for everything it's worth, Reyes then says something no boxer, or street fighter, would ever say, before he chooses Pareja: "(If) I'm going to get my head beat in, it'll be by the number one guy."

According to veteran fight figure Jack Cowen, who holds the franchise for the Chicago Golden Gloves, "Pareja is just an ordinary kid. He's nothing special."

But the audience never knows that, and Reyes is actually bawling, and seems more like an accountant than a would-be fighter. The preposterous melodrama is revved up by "ringside" announcer Rich Rose, who does the blow-by-blow, all the time "questioning his heart, his character, his manhood." Once the bell actually rang, in the loft made to look like a fight arena, Reyes swarmed and banged ahead, though it's hard to tell from the way it was edited, but he seemed to be winning the first two rounds. Pareja's corner told him after the third, "You haven't been effective at all."

Pareja landed a couple of solid shots in the fourth, but so did Reyes, yet after another impossibly long, Shakespearean pause, the winner of this four-rounder was announced as Pareja!

As Reyes exits the ring, he symbolically hangs up his gloves, while the nasty Pareja is another $25,000 richer, but what makes this whole thing so unbelievable is that of all the participants, incredibly, "crybaby" Reyes had the most experience as a professional fighter! According to BoxRec.com, Reyes was a 28 year old light heavy, who was 2-0, with two Ko's, but hadn't fought in four years. Only Zaragoza and Armijo had pro fights, according to BoxRec.com, and they'd won their only encounters. Yet, viewers never knew this.

The rest of these guys had yet to throw a punch for pay. Furthermore: how was this supposed to be an elimination tourney?

Armijo is a welter; Zaragoza is a cruiser; while Reyes was a super middleweight in his two pro fights.

Can't Duva, Brooks or De La Hoya tell the difference?

A couple of years ago, the California commission shamed the sport by allowing "Celebrity Boxing" to proceed, but the stench is already in the air, and prior to this broadcast, the Los Angeles Times filed a legal challenge that will be heard on September 27 to see "whether the State Athletic Commission puts the interest of boxing promoters and reality TV shows over the interest of the public."

It's one thing not to release the names of the winners. That would kill the show. But different weight classes? Has somebody gone crazy?

There's got to be an investigation. This whole thing stinks.