

## The Contender

Written by Randy Gordon  
Tuesday, 08 March 2005 18:00

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It was worth waiting for. Round One of “The Contender” was a smash hit.

NBC’s boxing reality series—hosted by pugilistic icons Sylvester Stallone and Sugar Ray Leonard—was better than anybody thought it would be. That is, anybody except Stallone, Leonard, Executive Producer Mark Burnett and Co-Executive Producer Jeffrey Katzenberg.

In this 2005 world of reality television, “The Contender” has the look and feel of a winner. Unlike “The Next Great Champ,” which FOX-TV rushed onto the air last fall in order to (excuse the pun) beat the Burnett/Katzenberg/Stallone/Leonard show to the punch, “The Contender” is a well-thought-out, high-budget, no-expenses-spared reality show that is more about the lives of 16 determined, hungry young men than it is about boxing.

The 16 men come from all over the USA and from all walks of life—from an ex-con to a lawyer. All are middleweights. Divided into two teams of eight—East vs. West—their goal is to eliminate each other in a series of five-round bouts. When there are two men left, the championship fight will be held late this spring at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada, with the winner taking home “The Contender” championship, incredible notoriety and fame, as well as the \$1,000,000 Grand Prize.

While all the fights you’ll be watching have already been taped, the championship bout will be “live,” complete with all the hype and hoopla that go along with a major championship fight. You don’t know the contenders now, but in a short time, you will. You most certainly will. You’ll be seeing them on magazines, in newspapers, on talk shows and even in your dreams.

Unfortunately, “The Contender” family suffered a tragedy on Valentine’s Day, when contestant Najai Turpin fatally shot himself outside his Philadelphia apartment during a break in the taping. It has been suggested that Turpin was depressed because he had been eliminated, but no official word has come from the family of Turpin, from NBC or from the Philadelphia Police Department, which is conducting an investigation.

In the premier episode, we were introduced to each of the contenders, as well as to team manager Tommy Gallagher, a noted trainer, and to Ms. Jackie Kallen, a manager/publicist whose life was portrayed by actress Meg Ryan in the movie “Against the Ropes.” Also to make some appearances in “The Contender” will be Sylvester Stallone’s brother, Frank, a gifted singer and a diehard lover of The Sweet Science. His passion for the sport once put him in a celebrity match against newsman Geraldo Rivera. In that bout, Stallone came out on top by decision.

In alphabetical order, the contenders are:

Anthony Bonsante—a single father of two from Minnesota

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Jesse Brinkley—a country boy who claims his love for boxing began when he watched “Rocky”

Brent Cooper—a Born-again Christian from Hermitage, Tennessee

Juan De La Rosa—from the Tex-Mex border. At 18, he is the youngest contender

Miguel Espino—intends to fight his way out of the barrio in Los Angeles

Jeff Fraza—a New England native who comes from a long line of boxers

Alfonso Gomez—a Mexican-American who is trained by his father

Joey Gilbert—holder of a law degree and is licensed to practice law in Nevada. He also happens to be an NCAA boxing champion

Ahmed Kaddour—a flashy dresser whom the contenders call “Hollywood.” He is a native of Lebanon who was raised in Denmark

Jimmy Lang—is a father of two who just may have the highest IQ among the 16 boxers

Peter Manfredo, Jr.—a devoted family man from Providence, RI.

Sergio Mora—is called the “Latin Snake.” He comes from the East Los Angeles, CA, area

Jonathan Reid—a rehabilitated ex-con who is married with four children

Tarick Salmaci—from Michigan, this Lebanese-American was once a world-ranked middleweight who has come back for one last shot

Ishe Smith—a deeply religious man, he is anything but shy

Najai Turpin—raised in tough neighborhood of Philadelphia. Died at his own hand this past Valentine’s Day

As the weeks go on, you’ll get to know each of them very well. I’ll be covering each show, so don’t worry if you missed it or forgot to set your tape or TIVO. For the title bout, I plan on being ringside.

As for last night, the West team won the right to choose which member of their team would lead off the competition and handpick his opponent from the East. That was accomplished when the West won a race - carrying logs up the side of the hill upon which sits the famous Hollywood sign.

The West chose baby-faced Alfonso Gomez, who then was asked to toe-the-line and call out a member of the East team. Gomez looked at each East-team member, then called out the man most seemed to regard as their best fighter, Peter Manfredo Jr. His choice surprised Stallone

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and Leonard, as well as a majority of viewers. His choice, however, was the right one. The rugged-looking Manfredo fell victim to Gomez's faster hands and nonstop punching, giving the West a 1-0 lead in the competition and sending home the show's first contestant.

If I have any complaint, it's with the music which was mixed in with the Gomez-Manfredo bout. I thought the camera angles were fine and so were the sound and crowd effects, but the music was a bit overdone. Oh, and, unless I missed it while scooping some salsa onto my baked chips, I'm not sure we were told who the judges were. You may say, "Does it really matter?" The answer is, "Yes, it does." I'd like to know if the judges were California State Athletic Commission licensees, members of the studio audience, Stallone, Leonard, Burnett and Katzenberg or members of the L.A. Kings hockey team, badly needing to pick up a few dollars, as they went unemployed this winter.

If the succeeding weeks are anything like the premier, "The Contender" will be more than a smash hit.

It will be a knockout!