

## The Contender Spotlights Tommy Gallagher

Written by Robert Ecksel  
Sunday, 27 March 2005 18:00

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For many of us, reality is show enough. Pop art genius Andy Warhol's vapid dictum - "In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes" - has finally come true. With the rise of the reality show, any Tom, Dick or Harry without inhibition can be a star.

Mark Burnett, the father of the reality show, DreamWorks honcho Jeffrey Katzenberg, showbiz vet Jeff Wald, Sylvester Stallone (aka Rocky) and Sugar Ray Leonard, all under the watchful eye of NBC, have brought us the long awaited "The Contender," the most expensive reality show ever produced, and the most real reality show produced, because its focus is boxing, and boxing is as real as it gets.

According to Burnett, "Nobody cares anymore about boxing, because nowadays boxers are felons or just unlikable characters. This show is our first step in changing that." Burnett understands TV audiences better than TV audiences understand themselves, so when he talks it is wise to listen: "People today don't care about boxing like before because they don't have good role models to root for anymore."

Role models used to be a dime a dozen. Now they're as rare as boxing kangaroos.

"There's something very noble and heroic about the sport," Katzenberg said. "We both remember back to the Muhammad Ali era, when I grew up. To be able to reclaim boxing, both for boxers and for fans, was the thing that inspired us to do this."

Katzenberg wasn't the only one inspired by this project. Stallone told the *Pasadena Star-News*: "Like we did in the 'Rocky' movies, what we're going to try to do in this is, it's very important to (show) the involvement of the families. What is their motivation? What is their support group? What makes them tick? What are their fears, their loves, their dedications? Is it just that they are money-oriented, or are they dealing with family responsibilities?"

Sugar Ray Leonard added: "The reason anyone, even men and women who are not boxing fans, will enjoy 'The Contender' is that it is a feel-good show. If you look at the movie 'Million Dollar Baby,' it didn't win an Oscar because it was about boxing. It won because of the story behind it. It didn't win because of Hilary Swank's boxing ability, but because of her character's compelling story and the adversities that character had to overcome."

The concept of "The Contender" is a classic. Take 16 top-twenty middleweight fighters. Have them fight in a series of box-offs. The last two men standing get to rumble for \$1 million. The 16 boxers are divided into two teams, East and West. The teams live together in immaculate grade-A digs, the kind of place you hate to leave if you live in a barrio, ghetto or suburb.

It's not easy for fighters to get fights. Boxers work hard for their money. "The Contender" gives these 16 men a chance to earn \$800 a week, plus what they get for the fights, plus room and board for them and their families, plus lots of perks, not too mention a shot at those million

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smackers.

The first episode of "The Contender" introduced us to Stallone and Leonard, our masters of ceremonies; the 16 boxers; James Toney's former manager Jackie Kallen; and the straight-out-of-central-casting, shoot-from-the-hip, take-no-prisoners boxing trainer Tommy Gallagher.

To decide which team's fighters fight the other team's fighters, arbitrary contests have been devised. This is the worst aspect of "The Contender." For example, in the first show, the teams, wearing their team colors, carried telephone poles up a steep hill in a barren California landscape. Watching Tommy Gallagher with a megaphone on the back of a moving pickup imploring the boxers to "hurry up, hurry up, them's guys is beating you" was no fun. (It was no more fun in the weeks that followed watching the fighters run around the Rose Bowl, play dodge ball, pull a truck along a dry river bed, engage in a spelling bee, or put tires in a dumpster.)

But we do get to see, courtesy of "The Contender," the fighters training, bonding, interacting with each other, sharing private moments with their families and friends. We get to peek beyond the scrim into a world where machismo and self-doubt collide as if on cue.

"The Contender" is more a documentary than a reality show, more a reality show than a night at the fights.

After an hour of back story, lead-in, psychobabble, trash talk, high-fives, commercials and whatnot, the bouts were ready to begin. The camera panned the handpicked crowd. Chuck Norris was there. Melanie Griffith was there. So was Sonny Corleone. The bell rang to start the action - but the action was broken into snippets a few seconds long. While kettle drums pounded portentously on the soundtrack, Team Contender gave us highlights of highlights of highlights. Rapturous music filled the air and tugged at the strings of the heart. Each punch that landed sounded like an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) detonating in Iraq.

We saw thirty seconds of round number one, followed by a block of commercials.

Round two lasted twenty seconds, including cutaways to ringside reaction shots, followed by another slew of ads.

Round three came and went in thirty seconds. A wall of commercials came and stayed forever.

Rounds four and five lasted a minute.

The final bell sounded. The fight was over. It was time for more commercials.

When all was said and done, we saw three minutes of a five round fight and a million adverts in ninety minutes. The sublime symmetry of three-minute round/one-minute rest period/ followed by three-minute round was in some parallel universe. No judges were named. No scores were announced. The West's Alfonso Gomez won. The East's Peter Manfredo lost. And that was episode one.

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The producers predicted that 25 million viewers would watch the premiere episode. 8.39 million tuned in for the first show. Of that 8+ million, half a million threw in the towel before it was over. "The Contender" had a disappointing 5.6 rating/8 share rating. The show's 5.6 rating means that 5.6% of every household in the U.S. was watching. The 8 share represents the percentage of households actually watching TV while the show was aired. The competition of "The Contender," Fox's "American Idol" and CBS "CSI Miami," garnered a 16.1 rating/23 share and 15.9 rating/24 share respectively.

The ratings have been all over the place in the last few weeks, spiking with last week's episode four, which featured Najai Turpin, the fighter who lost on "The Contender" and committed suicide five months later.

I spoke with Tommy Gallagher, who landed the plum role of a lifetime playing himself on primetime TV, and asked about the show, the ratings, and my misgivings.

"The show is the best thing in the world to get a look at what our community is all about," Gallagher told me. "It shows the fighters that they're not just animals or thugs, like you read about in all the other papers. And the real glory here should go to the young kids that put the show together and shot the show and edited and did all those things, because it was so well done it made everyone look exactly as they are."

I mentioned to Tommy that reality shows in general turn me off, but people whose opinions I respect think "The Contender" is the greatest.

"They should," he said, "because it shows what fighters are all about. They go out and it's up to them and they take responsibility for themselves."

There were many complaints about how little action actually aired on NBC. Some folks felt robbed. Gallagher came to the show's defense and said "It was a combination of everything. This is what the deal is. It's about these guys who are men – that just happen to be fighters. And they're showing the other side of them, the family side, the people they care about, and how important it is to be prepared. It just puts the fight game in a better light. That's all. Not that everything is back door, back room, sleazy bullshit."

Gallagher swears by "The Contender," in part because it's been good for him, in part because it's been good for the fighters.

"I hope it gets picked up again so 16 more kids can get a shot," Gallagher said. "They did anything and everything anybody could ask people to do to take care of these fighters. And they all came off as gentlemen. It's the closest thing I can think of to a gladiator situation. Two-thousand years ago they put these gladiators in a surrounding and they trained together. And then they had to go out and kill each other. The only difference here is that they don't have to go out and kill each other. They act like human beings."