

The Long Count vs. The Long Stand

Written by Ed Schuyler

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The Battle of The Long Count is the most legendary controversial fight in boxing history. Supporters of Jack Dempsey maintained, and still do, that when Dempsey knocked down Gene Tunney in the seventh round he was cheated out of regaining the heavyweight title because Tunney was down for at least 14 seconds and should have been counted out.

I have been thinking about the Battle of The Long Stand, which does not seem destined to become part of boxing legend, but which has raised what to me is an important question: Does a knockdown signal a lull in the action? It was treated as such by referee Tony Weeks.

In their sensational fight on May 5, Diego Corrales took out his mouthpiece after being knocked down a second time by Jose Luis Castillo in the 10th round. Because he did, he was given almost twice as much time to recover as Tunney.

“Every thing the referee did that night, we have no problem with,” Marc Ratner, executive director of the Nevada State Athletic Commission, said by telephone. “Certainly, there was more time than we would want. We are fine-tuning the rules. We are always fine-tuning the rules.”

After the first knockdown, Weeks picked up the count at three, and Corrales got up before he could say “nine.” Because Corrales’ mouthpiece had been knocked out, Weeks called time and took the fighter to his corner to have it cleaned and put back in. Four times Weeks told trainer Joe Goossen to “put it in.”

I counted 11 seconds from the time Corrales got up until the fight resumed.

After the second knockdown, Corrales took out his mouthpiece while on the floor. Weeks again picked up the count at three and Corrales was up at nine. Weeks then called time and indicated to the three judges that he was penalizing Corrales one point for removing the mouthpiece. Then he took him to his corner to have it washed and put back in. This time Goossen, like any good trainer would, took his time ascending the steps.

By my count 26 seconds elapsed from the time Corrales got up until action resumed. That is a tremendous amount of time to give a tired, hurt fighter.

Corrales might have won without the extra time and his comeback is to be applauded, but before he stopped Castillo shortly after the fight resumed he took some more blows he might not have withstood without the delay.

I must admit Corrales could not have been in a dense fog if he had enough presence to deliberately remove the mouthpiece to buy some time. That does not make his action right.

When a mouthpiece comes out with both men on their feet it is not put back in until there is a lull in the action. To me a knockdown is not a lull in the action but part of the action, which ends

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if the downed fighter is counted out or is ruled unable to continue after he rises. If he is OK after getting up, the fight resumes and it should not be stopped until there is a lull in the action, such as a clinch.

Ratner said the Nevada commission is considering having the mouthpiece of a fighter who gets up from a knockdown "put back after he creates a lull in the action."

There also are other options concerning the replacement of a mouthpiece, Ratner said, adding that the commission also "is discussing with referees about having them take a point away after the bell rings ending a round." That would not allow more time for a downed for fighter and it would not interrupt the flow of a fight.

Another rule change Ratner said is being discussed would be to give a two-point penalty to a fighter who deliberately removed his mouthpiece. Two points, however, might be a small price to pay for a fighter who is clearly ahead late in a match.

So, it seems, the rules, not the action of Weeks, worked in favor of Corrales. It was also the rule and not referee Dave Barry which also worked in favor of Tunney way back in 1927.

My understanding is that if a fighter scoring a knockdown goes immediately to the farthest neutral corner, the referee picks up the timekeeper's count. If the referee sees that the fighter scoring the knockdown stopped before getting to the corner or left the corner, he can stop the count. If he stops the count at five, he would, when ready, resume the count at six.

Dempsey, used to standing over a downed opponent under the old rules, refused to go to a neutral corner after knocking down Tunney in the seventh round. By the time he did the timekeeper was shouting five. Since Barry had not begun a count, he correctly began counting "one."

A referee often is working in a chaotic atmosphere at the time of knockdown, especially in a big fight, and there have been a lot of so-called long counts. There also have been more than a few short counts. For instance, referee Mark Conn began counting over Oscar Bonavena in his first of two knockdowns by Muhammad Ali without Ali having gone to a neutral corner either time.

A smart fighter takes advantage of all the time he can get while on the canvas, but he should not be allowed to buy time by taking out his mouthpiece.

By the way, the Battle of The Long Stand appears to have been a more entertaining fight than the Battle of The Long Count.