

A Few More Rounds

Written by Tim Graham
Sunday, 21 August 2005 19:00

I guess I don't blame them for not returning phone calls. I wouldn't want to admit my fingerprints were on this train wreck either.

Those who have supported former heavyweight contender Clifford Etienne have been scarce since he was arrested in Louisiana on charges of attempted first-degree murder, attempted first-degree murder of a police officer and two counts each of armed robbery and second-degree kidnapping.

Makes Mike Tyson, Riddick Bowe and Ike Ibeabuchi look like nickel and dimers, and with a plethora of witnesses to the Etienne rampage there's a decent chance we'll see a female pope before The Black Rhino walks free.

So when longtime co-managers Eddie Sapir (a New Orleans city councilman and former municipal judge) and Les Bonano (director of investigations for the attorney general) were contacted about their former client, they apparently had nothing to say. Same with current manager Mike Borao.

These were men who had fallen for one of the most clichéd storylines in boxing: the misunderstood slugger who needed only the chance to show he really possessed a heart of gold – and make his starry-eyed backers a lot of money in the process.

Etienne once was a poster boy for prison rehabilitation, having used boxing to become a Louisiana prison champ before building an exemplary-looking life, complete with a family and a heavyweight career that earned him a top 10 ranking and seven figures in purses.

Now you would be more likely to see Etienne on a wanted poster in the post office had police not captured him shortly after sticking up a Baton Rouge check-cashing business for less than \$2000. He had a gun and fired a shot during the robbery to make the clerk move faster.

During the escape he tried to shoot a police officer, but the gun malfunctioned. Etienne then attempted to carjack two vehicles, each with children inside. He couldn't start the first car and moved on to another that contained a father and two kids. When the man resisted, Etienne pointed the gun and pulled the trigger, but it misfired again.

One of the few people not feeling like a dupe in this case is former Gov. Mike Foster, who in 2004 went against the Louisiana Pardon Boards recommendation and denied the request to overturn Etienne's 1988 conviction for armed robbery, for which he served a quarter of his 40-year sentence.

Foster's fortunate decision upheld Etienne's parole through 2008. The governor based his verdict on the violent nature of Etienne's crimes. Just before his senior year of high school, the honor-roll student and blue-chip football prospect inexplicably joined three others in an armed

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robbery spree. In one case, Etienne shot a man in the arm.

Etienne had never boxed until the state locked him up. He reportedly ran up a record of 30-0 behind bars and claimed the state prison title while at Dixon Correctional Institute. Word of his dominant performances eventually filtered back to Sapir, who took a shine to the prospect of managing a future world champ. Sapir got fight game veteran Bonano involved.

Etienne offered a riveting, made-for-TV story, and in just two years on the outside he had compiled a 19-0 record. He beat current WBO champ Lamon Brewster and handed Olympian Lawrence Clay-Bey his first pro defeat.

Showtime signed Etienne to a three-fight, \$1 million contract, but he lost his next fight in brutal fashion. Fres Oquendo exploited Etienne's terrible flaw of looking downward when attacking and dropped Etienne seven times – all with overhand rights – before referee Jay Nady finally stopped the fight in the eighth round.

Etienne rebounded with five straight victories over nondescript opposition, then engaged Frans Botha in an epic brawl that resulted in a draw even though Etienne was floored twice.

That set up Etienne's big moment, a \$900,000 bout with Tyson in February 2003. The match lasted 49 seconds and pretty much signaled the end of Etienne's hopes of making it big.

He fought twice this year, losing to fringe contenders Calvin Brock in January and Nicolay Valuev in May. Etienne was said to have another fight scheduled soon.

So, even if the cash Etienne had made in the past wasn't enough to maintain his lifestyle, at least he was working.

Why would he be so desperate to stage a holdup?

His mother suggested it might be drugs. His former trainer, Buddy McGirt, indicated Etienne might be experiencing ring-related neurological damage. McGirt said he pleaded with Etienne to see a doctor and then resigned from the corner after the fighter refused.

The story is pathetic, no matter what reason is behind it. Thankfully, nobody got killed.

* * *

SCRATCHING THE UGLY SURFACE: What a whirlwind summer it has been for Mike Tyson.

Whoever would have thought his loss to Kevin McBride would be the start of such a controversial period in Iron Mike's life?

OK, OK. You can put your hands down.

Tyson has provided more tabloid fodder in recent weeks than Oprah (now this is scary: "Oprah"

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was in my spellchecker).

Tyson has been the subject of outrageous rumors he will embark on a career as a porn actor and has been fined for water skiing without a helmet in the Mediterranean.

Yet there have also been serious charges leveled against him. Florence Botoli, a 33-year-old from Cameroon, has accused the former Baddest Man on the Planet of assaulting her after she refused to snort cocaine and have sex with him.

She alleged in a police report Tyson snatched her off the dance floor at Billionaire's nightclub in Sardinia and took her to his yacht.

"There was a white powder on a tray; it was cocaine," she said in her complaint, according to The Scotsman newspaper. "Tyson took some, a lot, and then started hitting me ... He tried to force my head down into the powder but I don't do drugs."

"He said he wanted to have sex with me. But when I said 'no' and didn't take the drugs he went mad. He punched me and then threw me to the floor. It left me stunned. Tyson kept shouting at me until his bodyguard told him to calm down and stop because he was going over the top."

Botoli showed bruises to the Italian paparazzi.

While I've been around long enough to be suspicious of accusations leveled against a major celebrity, I'm convinced this is the type of behavior we can expect from the self-destructive Tyson until he dies, and that day might not be far off.

SMOKING BLUEGRASS: How sad it was to read the chairman of the Kentucky Boxing and Wrestling Authority suggested to some regulatory reformers from New York they're going about their business all wrong.

The *Louisville Courier-Journal* on Wednesday reported that Dr. George Ginter "launched into a criticism of New York-style boxing regulation at the conclusion of a meeting" on Tuesday. This from the commission that brought you the Greg Page tragedy, a debacle of epic proportions chronicled extensively on this site by *The Sweet Science's* patriarch, Charles Jay.

Kentucky has operated one of the weakest commissions – and perhaps the most dangerous in terms of boxer safety – in the country.

That's why state officials were compelled to create the Boxing and Wrestling Authority this year. Kentucky presumably wanted to clean up its act, to join the ranks of states that at least appear to give a damn.

But after hearing courtesy presentations of New York's regulations, which include mandatory brain imaging and other pre-fight medical requirements that make Kentucky's screening procedures look like something out of a Civil War triage tent, Ginter was underwhelmed.

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The *Courier-Journal* reported that Ginter, who came off in the article very much like someone easily threatened by city slickers, "questioned whether data supports the idea that increased testing prevents deaths" and indicated he would "oppose some of (New York's) ideas in Kentucky, including mandatory imaging tests of the brains of all boxers."

Ginter, an anesthesiologist, had multiple arguments against brain scans, rejecting the fact they are a tremendous safety guard. He said they are cost-prohibitive, will lead to fewer cards because of the hassle and invade a boxer's privacy.

It's all enough to make a truly compassionate boxing regulator puke. Ginter appears as if he's more interested in protecting the business of boxing rather than the boxers.

And his claim that brain scans infringe on civil liberties – he cited the fact Kentucky doesn't have a motorcycle helmet law as an example of what the state believes in – was ridiculous.

Straddling your Harley and motoring down I-64 without a brain bucket is one thing, but giving that biker permission to ride if he's physically impaired is another. Perhaps Ginter believes it's nobody else's business to down a quart of Jim Beam at Kingfish's back bar and then drive to Big Bone Lick State Park (my all-time favorite road sign, found on the way to Grandma's house).

You say drunk driving poses a threat to others, while boxing while impaired affects only the fighter who chooses to do so? Tell that to Page's wife or Gerald McClellan's family or those who look after Louisville's favorite son, Muhammad Ali.

After what happened to Page four years ago, Kentucky has enacted a grand total of zero statutes to reform boxing in the state. Unless the Boxing and Wrestling Authority makes sweeping changes – and being so dismissive of mandatory brain scans is rather discouraging – Kentucky boxing will continue to be a laughingstock at best, and a danger zone at worst.

MORON OF THE WEEK: The concept of irony is difficult to define, but examples are plentiful, Alanis Morissette's lyrics notwithstanding. Isn't it ironic the tales Morissette sings about in her hit song "Ironic" aren't actually ironic at all?

But I digress.

The day after baseball pariah Rafael Palmeiro returned from his 10-day suspension for steroids, former light middleweight champ Fernando Vargas threw out the first pitch of a Chicago Cubs-St. Louis Cardinals game at Wrigley Field.

So this week's honor goes to Cubs manager of entertainment Joe Rios, who – at a time where baseball executives are trying furiously to distance themselves from steroids – clearly was ignorant of the fact that Vargas once tested positive himself.

Vargas had stanozolol in his system the night he was knocked out by Oscar De La Hoya in 2002. Vargas was suspended for nine months and fined \$100,000.

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Palmeiro tested positive for stanozolol after pointedly telling Congress this spring he had never taken steroids in his life.

Rios invited Vargas to throw out the first pitch as part of a promotion for Saturday's fight with Javier Castillejo in Chicago. I don't know at what speed Vargas' pitch was clocked, but I'm sure it was a few miles per hour slower than he would have thrown it in 2002.

BURNING QUESTIONS: If heavyweight champs Vitali Klitschko, Chris Byrd, Lamon Brewster and John Ruiz all disappeared tomorrow, would the interest level in the division change at all?

Why did I involuntarily shudder when I read the headline "Boxers team up with rappers" recently on www.Fightnews.com ?

QUOTEMARKS: "Floyd says he's never ducked anyone and never will. If he will not fight me, he's going to have some explaining to do. Fighters know things that other people don't. By looking over me, he's telling me he fears me." – welterweight champ Zab Judah on Floyd Mayweather

"I'll take on all comers because I know I am the best the division has to offer. It won't be long until I am on sitting on the mountain top." – heavyweight Audley Harrison after defeating Robert Wiggins on Thursday

"I only give myself a 'B' for performance, but I think I did enough to win ... It is what it is." – Hasim Rahman after his dull decision victory over Monte Barrett

"I said I was going to knock him out in one round, but I just wanted to put pressure on him and play with his head. As the fight moved on he jumped on his bicycle and he couldn't compete against me ... Piccirillo fought scared all night long." – Ricardo Mayorga after defeating Michele Piccirillo for the vacant WBC welterweight title

"Two of the three knockdowns came from blows behind my head that diminished me. He is a dirty fighter. They should have taken points away from him for the way he fought." – Piccirillo on Mayorga

"I certainly saw weaknesses in his armory, and though I'll have to be at my best to beat him, I still don't believe there's a super middleweight on the planet who can live with me." – WBO super middleweight champ Joe Calzaghe on his upcoming bout with IBF champ Jeff Lacy