

Should Titles Be Won in the Ring or in The Ring?

Written by Eddie Goldman
Monday, 06 February 2006 19:00

Newsflash: The National Football League has declared the 21-10 victory by the AFC champion Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XL, held Sunday in Detroit, over the NFC champion Seattle Seahawks null and void. The reason is that the Steelers failed to pay the proper sanctioning fee to the NFC, and thus cannot claim the undisputed NFL title, despite winning the game on the field. Plus, it wasn't that entertaining of a game anyway, so the NFL plans to have Seattle play Indianapolis, who lost to the Steelers in the playoffs, in two weeks for their championship, to be shown on NFL Pay-Per-View.

The above, of course, is pure fantasy, maybe even nightmare, as no real sport runs its affairs in such a manner – except, of course, boxing (along with a few smaller combat sports as well). With its multiple sanctioning bodies and sanctioning fees, between the time this article has been sent in and posted, there may yet be even more recent outrages than, say, Zab Judah retaining the IBF strap after having been defeated in Madison Square Garden on Jan. 7 by Carlos Baldomir in a fight card clearly named "Undisputed." Baldomir, as has been widely noted, did not pay the IBF sanctioning fee, so Judah not only retained that title but will actually be defending it April 8 against Floyd Mayweather Jr. on HBO Pay-Per-View, thank you, in a fight already being billed as for the "World Welterweight Championship."

There is widespread agreement in the boxing community that such Alice in Wonderland-like scenarios are greatly contributing to the discrediting and demise of professional boxing. There is no consensus, however, about what structure ought to replace the present anarchic collection of petty warlords and extorters.

Into this discussion has jumped boxing writer Bill Dettloff of The Ring. In an article posted on their web site, and which has generated some debate online, Dettloff challenges those in the boxing media who do not recognize or mention The Ring's champions:

"Those who make their livings writing about and covering this business and resist supporting The Ring champions – by not mentioning the title in their copy when a Ring title is on the line, while naming the sanctioning bodies they routinely vilify – baffle me. Hello? How much sense does that make? What are you guys waiting for? The day you get sent to more UFC fights than boxing matches?" (<http://thering-online.com/ringpages/ringupdate.html>)

Let's leave for elsewhere a comparison of how boxing and UFC determine titles, since the latter's title picture is even more jumbled (hint: in UFC the promoter **IS** the sanctioning body).

If all Dettloff were pleading for was that some fights are for The Ring's championship belts and that fact deserves reportage, that is certainly reasonable enough, especially on the Internet, where the most comprehensive and knowledgeable boxing journalism resides. But he goes much further:

"And even if I didn't work for The Ring, I would support their championship policy simply as an

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alternative to the sanctioning bodies. Duh. How hard is that to understand?"

It may be easy to understand Dettloff's own opinion, but here it is much harder to defend The Ring as being the sole arbiter of who holds which title in boxing. That's where it gets stickier than a box of Homer Simpson's donuts.

First of all, the anointing by The Ring of now-retired Vitali Klitschko as the heavyweight champion of the world alone should have disqualified them from being the best or even only alternative to the alphabets.

In what was a legitimate world heavyweight championship title fight, Klitschko famously lost in June 2003 by TKO to Lennox Lewis because of severe facial cuts. Lewis, of course, later retired after that fight.

In Dec. 2003, Klitschko fought in what was billed as a WBC title eliminator against Kirk Johnson and won by a second-round TKO. But this was the same Kirk Johnson who just a year earlier had been disqualified and humiliated in a WBA title fight with their champ, John Ruiz. Johnson "earned" that shot at a WBC eliminator by beating unknown Jeremy Bates and veteran Lou Savarese, in his next-to-last fight, after losing to Ruiz. That was who Klitschko fought, the WBA's sloppy seconds, to get through this alphabet eliminator.

After Lewis retired, Klitschko won the vacant WBC title from Corrie Sanders, who had been WBO champion but gave that belt up to fight for the WBC one. Sanders had been semi-retired as a boxer and was pursuing his golf career until he was matched up in March 2003 with Vitali's fragile-headed younger brother, Wladimir, whom he took out in two rounds. Then, with no intervening fight and after 13 months of inactivity, Sanders was given his WBC title shot, and was stopped in eight by the elder Klitschko. Since then, Sanders has only fought once more, getting a second-round knockout against a 21-13 journeyman in Dec. 2004 in Austria. For where he is now, call the golf writers.

What would turn out to be Klitschko's last fight in his WBC and Ring title reign was another eighth-round TKO, this time in Dec. 2004 over Danny Williams, whose main claim to fame at the time was knocking out a faded Mike Tyson that July.

Next, Klitschko was supposed to defend his title against Hasim Rahman, but that fight was postponed numerous times when Klitschko said he was injured. Finally it was cancelled in November with Klitschko retiring shortly after.

Such was the glorious championship run of The Ring's belt holder.

By declaring Klitschko heavyweight champion without him ever having fought and defeated any of the other alphabet champions or fighters widely regarded as being in the top tier of the heavyweight division, The Ring actually added credibility to the WBC's farcical process for filling its vacant title.

Klitschko never even had a rematch with IBF champion Chris Byrd, who beat him by TKO in

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2000 when Klitschko quit, citing a painful shoulder injury. Byrd had won his then-vacant title in 2002 against future Hall of Famer Evander Holyfield. And John Ruiz, another fighter then near the top of just about everyone's heavyweight rankings last year, also first won his WBA title in 2001 against Holyfield.

What boxing sorely needed, and still does, is a heavyweight unification tournament to crown a consensus world champion. It did not need a magazine dignifying the heavyweight title belt shenanigans of the WBC.

The Ring, of course, is in no way in lock step with these loathsome alphabets. Much to their credit, they recognize Antonio Tarver as light heavyweight champion, despite the fact that he holds no belt from any of the largest alphabets. The Ring also recognizes Baldomir as the welterweight champion, ignoring the nonsense cited above. And in their ratings dated Feb. 1, 2006, they still have John Ruiz at number five at heavyweight with Nicolay Valuev at number ten, despite Valuev's highly controversial majority decision over Ruiz in December in Germany, and his being awarded Ruiz's title belt.

That said, being awarded The Ring's titles is not as separate from being awarded titles from the alphabets as many would believe. Here is a list of their current champions, with their major alphabets' titles listed next to them:

Cruiserweight - O'Neil Bell, WBA WBC IBF

Light Heavyweight - Antonio Tarver, none

Middleweight - Jermain Taylor, WBA WBC WBO

Welterweight - Carlos Baldomir, WBC

Jr. Welterweight - Ricky Hatton, IBF WBA

Lightweight - Diego Corrales, WBC WBO

Jr. Featherweight - Israel Vasquez, WBC IBF

Note that of these seven champions, five hold multiple belts. And before the Judah-Baldomir title belt fiasco, Judah, who held the WBA, WBC, and IBF belts, was also The Ring's champion.

There is also only one fighter who holds more than one major belt who is not The Ring's champion: Marco Antonio Barrera, the WBC and IBF 130-pound champion.

Of the remaining ten weight classes with no champions designated by The Ring, none of their number-one-ranked fighters hold multiple belts. Eight of those ten hold one major alphabet belt, as listed here:

Heavyweight -#1 - Chris Byrd, IBF

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Super Middleweight -#1 - Joe Calzaghe, WBO

Jr. Middleweight -#1 - Roman Karmazin, IBF

Jr. Lightweight -# 1 - Manny Pacquiao, none

Featherweight -#1 - Juan Manuel Marquez, none

Bantamweight -#1 - Rafael Marquez, IBF

Jr. Bantamweight -#1 - Martin Castillo, WBA

Flyweight -#1 Pongsaklek Wonjongkam, WBC

Jr. Flyweight -#1 - Roberto Vasquez, WBA

Strawweight -#1 - Yutaka Niida, WBA

At featherweight, Juan Manuel Marquez did hold two belts but was stripped of them due to more alphabet nonsense.

The bottom line is that The Ring does not ignore the alphabets but merely has a fairer policy on not stripping fighters over absurdities and, of course, not charging sanctioning fees. But these numbers also show that it sure helps to have won multiple alphabet titles to get theirs, too.

In addition to these issues, we have to consider the overall journalistic credentials of The Ring when deciding whether or not to hand over the awarding of all title belts to them.

Which of boxing's endless scandals have they exposed? Where has their must-read investigate reporting been? What reforms which they have advocated have actually been enacted?

This is a media outlet which was a decade late in getting on the Internet. Why should they now dictate policy, especially to those of us who knew better all along?

True, this is not a corrupt outfit like so many others. But all we can conclude about The Ring is that they are one voice in boxing, but not **THE** voice. Their clinging to 1920's-era Judeo-Christian religious imagery by retaining the title of "The Bible of Boxing" only has us responding that we are certainly not fundamentalists.

Last but not least, consider this: The Ring is part of the Kappa Publishing Group. Among the other titles they publish besides this Bible are Horoscope Guide, which they call "The Last Word in Astrology," and Pro Wrestling Illustrated, which they tell us "has been recognized as the sport's [sic] number one magazine."

If The Ring is "The Bible of Boxing," are these publications their New Testaments? And is this to whom we want to give the final say in crowning the champions of the world?

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So what is my solution? You'll have to wait for the rematch to find out, but at least it won't be on pay-per-view.