

New Champ Hatton Hits The States

Written by George Kimball
Monday, 10 April 2006 19:00

Monday's press conference had been scheduled for 11 am, but an hour and twenty minutes elapsed before Ricky Hatton was even called upon.

"I had a fantastic speech prepared," said the 2005 Fighter of the Year, "but, what the f---, I forgot it."

If you felt sorry for Hatton, sitting there trying to stay awake while listening to, mostly, Don King, consider for a moment the plight of the poor redcoats standing at attention behind him this whole time.

Each wore an ancient British Army costume which bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the outfit Gabriel Byrne wore in the recently-concluded Broadway run of "*A Touch of the Poet*," but then Byrne, as Major Cornelius Melody in the play, was *supposed* to look ridiculous.

The occasion was the formal announcement of Hatton's HBO fight against Luis Collazo at the Garden next month, and while King isn't even the lead promoter of the event, Art Pellulo, who is, seemed more than happy to let his bombastic counterpart carry the day.

"To arms! To arms! The British are coming!" King would intermittently shout.

"Who needs TicketMaster when you've got him?" asked Pelullo.

Although King represents Collazo, who is the World Boxing Association welterweight champion (and may still be by the time the fight occurs on May 13), for The World's Greatest Promoter the Garden was merely a pit stop on the way to Worcester, where a few hours later he would formally announce the Alex Terra Garcia-Jose Rivera card, which will take place on Showtime a week before the Boston event.

Although Hatton fought in this country a couple of times early in his career, May 13 was supposed to represent his American debut in a championship fight, and as an HBO headliner. Hatton's big splash was originally to have taken place at Foxwoods, but was moved to the larger Boston venue a few weeks ago, after the supply of viable 140-pound challengers appeared to have evaporated and the decision was taken to move him up in weight to go after Colazzo's WBA welterweight belt.

Which is where the confusion only began. Although it might appear to be a simple, *pro forma* bit of matchmaking, rarely in the history of boxing has a bout been arranged with so many legal encumbrances on the part of both participants.

At Monday's Boston gathering, King publicly conceded that a WBA sanction had yet to be

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obtained, but that he fully expected Collazo-Hatton to go forward as a full-fledged title fight.

Remember that when Collazo won this title via a split decision over Rivera in Worcester a year ago, it wasn't a full-fledged title, but it apparently became one when Zab Judah lost his 'super championship' by getting whipped by Carlos Baldomir back in January.

In any case, having acquired a WBA belt, Collazo was obliged to defend it against the top contender, but requested and received absolution to engage in a 'voluntary' defense against Miguel Angel Gonzalez last August. A condition of participating in that bout was that Collazo agreed to make his next defense against top-rated Oktay Urkal of Germany.

Last October 17, Collazo-Urkal went to purse bids, and the right to promote it was won by DKP, whose \$465,000 tender virtually doubled that offered by Sauerland Events, Urkal's German promoters.

That fight was tentatively scheduled several times, most recently for the Sergei Liakhovich-Lamon Brewster card in Cleveland, but was abruptly scratched – apparently when the opportunity for the Hatton fight presented itself.

Meanwhile, based on the assumption that Collazo-Urkal would go forward, the WBA had also ordered an official eliminator between Joel Julio and Carlos Quintana, with the winner to get the first shot at the Collazo-Urkal survivor.

But Collazo wasn't the only participant bringing excess baggage to this matchup. In response to a lawsuit filed by Souleymane M'baye, the WBA's top-rated light welterweight, a US District Court judge in New York last fall granted a preliminary injunction enjoining the WBA from "sanctioning as a championship fight any fight between the winner of the Hatton-Maussa fight and any fighter other than M'Bayue."

Now, while the judge clearly didn't contemplate the possibility of Hatton moving up in weight, the language as presently constituted could be construed as barring the English fighter from participating in *any*

WBA title fight. Sometime between now and May 13, it will be necessary to go to court and ask the judge modify that injunction.

As word began to circulate last month that a Hatton-Collazo bout might be in the cards, Sauerland CEO Christian Meyer put Pellulo's Banner Promotions and Fight Academy, Hatton's English promoter, on notice that they were "interfering with the contract Mr. Urkal has with DKP."

All hell broke loose when the Boston *Globe*, in announcing Hatton-Collazo, stated that "The people in Germany were informed that Hatton would fight the welterweight mandatory next if he wins the title, and if not, Collazo would. Along with that promise, the story goes, went a small envelope to the contender-in-waiting (Urkal) and his management team."

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For one thing, the Germans had been informed of no such thing. More ominously still, it set them to wondering what happened to the alleged bribe, since it had never reached the Fatherland.

"We have neither received that 'promise' nor that 'envelope,' nor have I given the 'Okay' for the match Collazo-Hatton," complained Sauerland's Meyer in a transcontinental, show-me-the-money fax.

One can only imagine the consternation that must have been taking place in the Sauerland offices at this point. Boxing people are suspicious by nature, and the allegation of the 'envelope' doubtless spread mistrust, with each of the Germans wondering whether one of his colleagues might have pocketed the cash and was holding out on the others.

Pat English, the New Jersey attorney who represents Julio, insisted that the WBA had some 'splainin' do to:

"Mr. Pellulo has apparently made an announcement that Don King has gotten the WBA sanction," wrote English to his counterpart with *Los Bandidos*, Robert Mack. "Apparently he is spreading the story, according to the article, that a "small envelope" (apparently money) was slipped to the Urkal camp.

"I don't know how King got it done, but it's done," English quoted Pellulo, as quoted in the *Boston Globe*.

"After seeing Mr. Pellulo's comments, I spoke with Chris Meyer who denied the story," continued English." Pellulo, with his stories of 'white envelopes' and Don King 'getting things done,' has lent a sinister air to this. The last we heard there had not even been a request for sanction... Put bluntly, this is beginning to smell based upon Pellulo's comments."

Although the WBA could grant another 'exception' under its Rule 19 (the one which says, essentially, that all the other rules may be broken), no application had been received as of Monday.

Does this mean Collazo-Hatton won't be for the WBA title? Don't be silly. But it does enormously complicate matters in the meantime.

The WBA has already put Pellulo and King on notice that it will be up to them to deal with the M'baye injunction. In the meantime, King's Director of Boxing Bobby Goodman believes the promoter is already out from under the Urkal obligation.

It seems that when Urkal fought in this country earlier in his career – in Las Vegas in 1999, and again in a loss to Kostya Tszyu at Foxwoods in 2001 – he entered the country illegally, on a visitor's visa, and that US Immigration now refuses to grant him a visa to enter the country to fight Collazo. If the Germans can't produce Urkal on American soil, then apparently arrangement brokered in the purse bid becomes null and void.

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“But this was based on an opinion from the US Emigration (sic) and there were never any contacts made,” said Meyer.

In the same conversation in which he initially announced Hatton-Collazo to the Boston *Globe*, incidentally, Pellulo had suggested that “Irish middleweight sensation John Duddy” might also be on the card.

This produced an angry response from Duddy’s promotional team, who had already flatly told Pellulo that Duddy was fighting (for a reported six-figure purse) on the June 10 Cotto-Malignaggi undercard in New York and under no circumstances would he jeopardize that by appearing on the Boston card.

Irish Ropes matchmaker Jim Borzell described Pelullo as “a weasel promoter” and accused him of using bait-and-switch to sell tickets.

At Monday’s press conference the promoters trotted out Irish heavyweight Kevin McBride (who, according to King, could be fighting for Laikhovich’s WBO title before the year is out), and introduced the Clones Colossus from the audience. The inference was that McBride might be appearing on the May 13 card, but, according to McBride advisor Paschal Collins, that was never the case.

“(King) wanted us to fight on the Worcester card May 6,” said Collins. “They only brought us here to sell tickets.”

And as it turns out, McBride won’t be fighting anyone in May. He injured his right shoulder in his April 1 TKO win over Byron Polley on the Liakhovich-Brewster card in Cleveland.

“I did it when I missed him with a punch,” explained McBride.

Oblivious to the turmoil swirling about the bout, Hatton remained all smiles at the Boston announcement. He had flown into town a day earlier and almost immediately visited the Tara Pub in Dorchester, and on Monday met Collazo for the first time.

(I’m tougher than I look,” Collazo warned the Englishman.)

With talk of a Hatton-Floyd Mayweather fight already rampant on the boxing landscape, Hatton insisted that he was not overlooking next month’s foe.

“I’m not looking past Luis,” said Hatton. “Luis is just in the way of me getting there.”