Referee Arthur Mercante Sr. was at the Sam Peter/Julius Long fight this past April, but he stayed outside the ropes. When his name was announced, the veteran referee stood and the Mohegan Sun crowd gave him a warm reception, recognizing Mercante's past competence when he worked inside the ring. Mercante was 81 when he retired, and while he seemed fit and spry (for an 81-year-old) up until his retirement, some questioned his decision to stick around well past his prime. Thankfully, Mercante's career ended without any major professional mishaps, but one has to wonder about referees staying in the boxing business too long. A referee is really the sole arbiter in a fight and his split-second judgments often have grave implications. A referee who lets a fight last too long can jeopardize a boxer's health. A referee who stops a fight too early can jeopardize a boxer's career.

This past Friday, at the legendary Blue Horizon, the night's two referees were dangerously incompetent, but particularly disturbing was the sight of Frank Cappuccino, a veteran referee who has worked numerous title fights, looking weary under the arena's bright lights. At 72 years old, Cappuccino was too slow, too unsure, and too oblivious to competently fulfill his assigned task.

In a fight between two relatively inexperienced fighters, Cappuccino's actions were potentially dangerous. When Elad Shmouel (12-1) knocked out Joe Johnson (1-8) in the second round, Cappuccino started his quiet count. The problem was that Johnson was so obviously out, that no count should have been administered; instead, the medical professionals should have been called in immediately. Johnson was horizontal, his eyes glazed, his right arm extended as if his punch had been frozen beyond time, and his legs were twitching, a textbook sign of danger. There was no way this man was getting up and he didn't get up for a solid minute. Clearly, Cappuccino's reaction time was dangerously slow.

In a fight between Max Alexander (10-0-1) from Philadelphia and veteran Jurgen Hartenstein (11-9-1), Cappuccino's actions were simply incompetent. Alexander nailed Hartenstein with a punch in round two, and when the German fighter went down, Cappuccino called it a slip. A few seconds later, Hartenstein was on the canvas again. When the fighter stood up, Cappuccino hardly looked at Hartenstein's eyes before he waved his arms, officially calling the fight. No clear indication was made about whether the fall had been ruled a slip or a knockdown, no count was given, and suddenly the fight was over. The German fighter did not appear to be badly hurt and light-punching Max Alexander, despite his undefeated record, only has a single knockout to his name. Instead of letting the fight go on, instead of allowing the contest to resolve itself more naturally and fairly (and according to Cappuccino's rulings, the German had merely slipped once and had perhaps slipped a second time), this veteran referee stopped the fight prematurely.

These were the most obvious lapses in Cappuccino's judgment. The other lapses were more subtle, yet still indicative of a referee not ready to do his job. When the bell rang to start each bout, he made no motion for the boxers to move forward, as virtually every referee does—it is a

motion boxers expect. Instead, this referee stood back and waited, clearly not in charge. During one fight, Cappuccino didn't hear the bell that started a round, wasting precious seconds of that round. Whenever a fighter went down, Cappuccino whispered the count in the fighter's ear without saying the numbers out loud for the other fighter in the neutral corner, for the judges, for the ring doctors, for the fans. And physically, Cappuccino looked tired and hot and disgruntled, his eyes unfocused. It was clear that this referee was not sharp on this Philadelphia fight night.

In most jobs, not being sharp can be forgiven. But having a bad night as a referee in a boxing match is a far more serious matter. The Pennsylvania commissioner should have looked closely at Cappuccino after he refereed his first flawed fight, and taken him out. Without the strong presence of a sharp, competent, firm referee, boxers are left without protection. Joey "Eye" Intrieri, a veteran cutman who worked the corner of several losing fighters, said after the night's card was over, "Without a referee, a fight becomes a street fight." As it is, too many fighters get hurt, but without an able referee, dangerous and damaging anarchy can prevail. There were moments at the Blue Horizon, when these professional pugilists could just as well have been fighting outside the arena on Broad Street.

Fighters need to receive yearly medical tests to determine their readiness to fight. Referees, the protectors of fighters, should be held to an even higher standard; after all, they are paid to protect other men. Frank Cappuccino has had a long, notable career as a referee, but all he has to do is make a single grave mistake and his name will be tarnished forever. No doubt, being a boxing referee is a tough job. These men are rarely complimented, easily criticized, and some referees have been vilified (sometimes rightfully so) by their bad decisions. Richard Steele blew it when he stopped the Meldrick Taylor/Julio Cesar Chavez fight—Taylor's pedigree luster was dulled forever. Randy Neumann incompetently and prematurely stopped the Mike Tyson/Carl "The Truth" Williams fight in round one—Williams never got another world title shot. Tony Weeks should have stopped the Jesus Chavez/Leavander Johnson massacre before the eleventh round—Johnson died after the fight. And the list goes on. Most of these referees were young enough to continue working, and some of them indeed learned from their mistakes. But when a referee is clearly no longer prepared to protect fighters and their careers, when a series of bad judgment calls add up to more than a bad night, something must be done.

Ideally, referees would retire themselves when they felt their skills deteriorating. There is something honorable about knowing self, about knowing when it's time to move on. But if referees hold on too long, if it's obvious that the fighters they are being paid to protect are not being adequately protected, then the commissions should step in. If Frank Cappuccino is not ready to bow out gracefully, he should be told to retire before any further damage is done.