

The Fight Behind the Dueling Pay-Per-View Fights

Written by Eddie Goldman

Wednesday, 07 June 2006 19:00

The beautifully destructive sport of boxing is taking yet another ugly self-destructive step this weekend with dueling pay-per-views being held in the neighboring markets of Atlantic City, New Jersey, and New York City. Tarver-Hopkins at Boardwalk Hall and Cotto-Malignaggi at Madison Square Garden each are quite worthy fights headlining cards featuring established and upcoming contenders and prospects alike.

When I raised this issue last week on media teleconference calls with Top Rank chairman Bob Arum and Lou DiBella, who are both of course putting on the card at the Garden, about why this conflict of dates occurred, they both recommended that I call HBO. I did it one better by speaking in person with the man in charge of HBO's pay-per-view division, Mark Taffet, HBO Senior Vice President of Sports Operations & Pay-Per-View, at the Tarver-Hopkins press conference Tuesday, June 6, at New York's ESPN Zone. I also took a transcript of this interview and asked Arum to comment on it the following day, Wed., June 7, right before the formal Cotto-Malignaggi press conference at Madison Square Garden.

You can read those transcripts here, and also judge for yourselves who is primarily to blame for this mess. Just use a ten-point must system, no standing eight-counts, and no being saved by the bell including in the 12th and final round.

INTERVIEW WITH MARK TAFFET

EG: This fight obviously stands on its own merit. But I don't have to tell you this, being top guy in the pay-per-view business, usually boxing tries to avoid even events like WWE and other major events. How did this end up that there are two pay-per-view boxing shows on at the same night?

MT: Well, you know, it's a long story. It's a complicated story. And suffice it to say that I've had a lot of discussions with Bob Arum and Top Rank about it. They were very civil, peaceful conversations. We tried to work through the situation as best we could. And in fact, even with two events unfortunately happening the same night, we've still worked through it extremely well and professionally together. I think we both think it's unfortunate that there are two events the same night. There were alternatives presented. But with due respect to Bob, he didn't think that what we offered was enough for him, and as a result he opted to go the same night on pay-per-view as Tarver and Hopkins. We respect that. We wish it didn't happen. But it is, and we're fine with it. The fans are going to have a choice that night. And the fans will make the choice. And that's what pay-per-view is all about. It's not for everybody. Not everybody buys it. The fans that want to pay for it buy it and watch it. And that's exactly what's going to happen Saturday night.

EG: He said he had the date. I imagine you were at the Garden last year with the Cotto show where they said that they want to come back the Saturday of the Puerto Rican Day Parade, which is June 10th.

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MT: Right, right. Yeah, well, it's not that simple. And we know he was there a year ago. And we know at some point he was interested in going there again this year. But there were lots of talks about other fights with Miguel Cotto that we entertained doing live on HBO. We had a long planning discussion with Top Rank to discuss Miguel's plan for the year. It didn't include this fight on this date. But I'm not blaming anyone. That's just a matter of circumstances that took place. Arturo Gatti got a hand injury. Ricky Hatton wasn't ready to fight within the date that they were looking at. There were just other issues that always take place in boxing. No one's fault. Corrales and Castillo were supposed to fight, and as Kery [Davis of HBO] just pointed out, there was an injury there. That took time again to be rescheduled. These things happen. A number of unforeseen circumstances took place which resulted in Bob going to a plan with Malignaggi on June 10th that he himself didn't originally intend to do. And by the time that plan came around, we had already been deep into discussions about Tarver and Hopkins, and we just couldn't hook up and make it all happen on the same day. We offered him what we thought was a very generous opportunity to fight live on HBO, a special night of "World Championship Boxing", Friday night, June 9th. We got our scheduling department to precede the prospective Miguel Cotto fight, which would have been live on HBO, with a replay of the final episode of "Sopranos", a big night, and a great movie, "I, Robot" featuring Will Smith. We thought it would have been a special Friday night. But again, it's Bob's prerogative, and he said that wasn't enough and just didn't work for him. So we wished him the best. And we love Miguel Cotto. And we really hope that we'll be doing Miguel Cotto's next fight after this one, provided he comes out victorious.

EG: So you're saying you locked in the June 10th date for pay-per-view before they had this date locked in?

MT: Well, I don't know who did what, when, and who locked in what, because there were a lot of conversations. Once we realized that we had two fights potentially going on the same night or on the same weekend, at that point we weren't speaking with one another because we were each out pursuing the business we needed to for our respective fights. So I spoke to the pay-per-view distributors in the industry. Bob did. I don't know when he did or what he said to them. But he's been in this business a long time as have I. And we just went on each to pursue our business, but peacefully and with an understanding that it was unfortunate but we were going to respect one other and go down the road.

EG: All right, OK, thank you.

MT: Thanks.

INTERVIEW WITH BOB ARUM

BA: We made the announcement last year after the Abdullaev fight with Cotto that we were coming back here again on June 10th for a Cotto fight. That's all I can say. We reserved the date. The Garden told HBO that the date was reserved by us.

EG: That was last June?

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BA: And that was last June. The date has no magic for Hopkins-Tarver. It has magic for us, obviously. It's the night before the Puerto Rican Day Parade. So I'm – a little doubletalk coming from HBO.

EG: Well, that's not surprising. Also, not everybody knows that when you reserve a date at the Garden, it's not like you decide Friday night, oh, let's go to the movies, let's see what's playing at seven o'clock. You have to do it well, well in advance for obvious reasons. It's a very prestigious building.

BA: We did it a YEAR in advance. We saw how successful it was last year and we booked the Garden to do it again. And these people knew that we did, because when they went to the Garden, the Garden told them that Top Rank had it booked. And then they tried to get the Garden to shitcan us. So they really should say, if they were honest, 'We don't give a damn. We're HBO, and we can do whatever the hell we want.' Because in effect, that's what's happened.

EG: Now, you know Don King had been talking about doing a Boxing Channel. He even raised it at the press conference before the Rahman-Toney fight that you had together. In baseball, the Yankees and the Mets each have their own networks. Is there any real movement beyond talk of people like yourself and King to create their own Boxing Channel now with digital cable and so many channels and the Internet also available?

BA: No, but we are making an arrangement with Comcast OLN Network. We're going to have a series on OLN. It's going to be both live and our great Top Rank "Legends of the Ring" series, the great fights from the past. So we're very optimistic that we'll be able to function well with Comcast.

EG: It's basic, non-pay cable. It used to be called the Outdoor Life [Network] but they changed it to OLN. Do you have a start date and know when that's going to come?

BA: July 27th.

EG: Is that going to be live show?

BA: A live show.

EG: All right. I hope it works out. We need this.

BA: Thank you.

EG: Thanks.

POSTSCRIPT:

During Wednesday's Garden press conference, Joel Fisher, Senior Vice President of Madison Square Garden Sports Properties, stated, "We've got the same date on hold next year." For

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those who can't wait, that date is Saturday, June 9, 2007.