

Holyfield Stuck In Promotional, Financial Quagmire

Written by Michael Woods

Wednesday, 27 December 2006 19:00

None of us thought that Evander Holyfield would come within sniffing distance of a heavyweight championship again. In 2004, his career, glorious and rewarding, had come to a grinding, pathetic halt.

He looked positively geriatric against Larry Donald at Madison Square Garden.

Donald, no Hall of Fame talent, made The Real Deal look like a done deal.

At that point, we all waited for some years to pass, so we could install Holyfield, with his undersized body and supersized heart, into the Boxing Hall of Fame.

But the man persevered, and let some nagging injuries heal, and lo and behold, he's a win away from getting a crack at a belt. He's 44 years old, and were he to pull off this an improbable feat, and win a heavyweight title for the fifth occasion, the praise heaped on the Christian warrior would be unrelenting.

While we're on the subject of perseverance, however, it is unfortunate that I must report some people who did business with the promoter Holyfield aligned himself with in his last outing, Murad Muhammad, are being forced to persevere in their quest to get paid what they were promised. In fact, Holyfield himself may have been misled by the promoter, as a source tells TSS that the boxer hasn't received the bulk of his purse for the bout.

On November 10, Holyfield won a unanimous decision against 33-year-old Fres Oquendo (26-4) in San Antonio. Against Oquendo, Holyfield (40-8-2, 26 KOs) didn't look great, but he looked more than acceptable for a 44-year-old.

He'd agreed to a \$2 million purse for the bout, which was presented on pay-per-view by Fox Sports Net. The card was available for \$44.95, but despite what Barnum said, there weren't enough suckers available to make much of a dent towards paying Holyfield's purse.

Really, it doesn't take an especially sharp mind to comprehend that putting Holyfield (who had just fought on free TV two months before) on a PPV offering might not be the right course of action. In fact, no more than 40,000 people bought the card on PPV, a source close to the promotion tells TSS.

Muhammad, Holyfield's representative, likely will derive around \$500,000 when the PPV take is tallied and paid out. If he was hoping that a strong live gate would bail him out, he thought wrong. (Note: Typically, the local cable systems take around 60% for providing the platform to show the event, and for promoting it. Then the fight promoter and the distributing network, which in this case was Fox, split the other 40% or so of the pie. In this case, a source tells TSS that Muhammad enjoyed something like a 70/30 split of the remaining 40% of revenue generated.)

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The San Antonio Express News said that an estimated 4,000 people paid to get in to the Alamodome on fight night, and about 6,000 were allowed in for free. That, in an arena built to seat about 23,000 people for an event of this sort, or more than 35,000 if an upper deck is put to use, was a woeful turnout.

The Nov. 10 gate probably netted Muhammad \$400,000, the paper said. Again, common sense would indicate that perhaps many Texans' desire to see the Real Deal in the flesh may have been sated by his appearance in Dallas, a scant two months earlier. Also, there was no advertising for the event started until two weeks before the card.

It is assumed that Muhammad also took in some monies for international TV rights and sponsorships, which may have brought him another \$200,000. Those revenue streams add up to perhaps \$1,400,000. Considering Holyfield was supposed to get \$2 million, Muhammad is in the red right there, without factoring in payments to the other fighters and other miscellany expenses, which likely total another \$400,000-500,000.

Ouch.

TSS called Muhammad's office and left a message on afternoon of Dec. 27 to delve in to specifics on the matter, and allow the promoter to have his say, but Muhammad didn't respond.

We also know the boxers, such as undercard fighters Oscar Diaz and Golden Johnson, were given checks for their performances that bounced. Subsequently, however, they were compensated properly almost a week after the event. And Oquendo's promoter, Lou DiBella, is still playing the waiting game.

He fronted Oquendo most his \$100,000 purse, as Muhammad promised the former head of HBO boxing that he'd pay him back ASAP. It hasn't happened, and DiBella is irked.

"Murad scammed me," he said to TSS. DiBella told TSS that he'd give Muhammad a bit more time to make good, as he's been assured by one of Muhammad's associates that payment would be arriving in a timely fashion, but his patience, he said, is wearing thin.

Soon, he says, he will sic lawyers on Muhammad to recover the \$85,000 the promoter owes him. He may have to stand in line behind Holyfield himself, though, if the fighter is indeed waiting on the majority of his promised purse.

The fighters and DiBella weren't the only people involved with the promotion who were touched by Muhammad's financial distress. The Radisson Downtown Market Square in San Antonio is still waiting to get paid for rooms they rented to Muhammad for use during the show, to the tune of about \$25,000. The GM of the facility, David DeSimone, told TSS that he didn't want to talk about the specifics of the matter, but did acknowledge that Muhammad hasn't paid up, and said "it has become a legal matter."

It didn't have to be this way.

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In the first leg of his comeback, Holyfield was being advised by Texas event marketer Lester Bedford, who advised him to set up his own promotional entity, so he could run the show the way he saw fit, and not be reduced to ticket-selling cameos to pad out big-named promoters' cards.

Holyfield responded to that wisdom, but allowed a boxing neophyte named George Hutson* (see Aug. 26 TSS piece by Woods for more on Hutson) representing a Texas law firm, to head up the business side of Real Deal Events.

As Hutson took over more and more control of Holyfield's career resurrection, Bedford was shunted aside, and Holyfield's choices worsened noticeably. Instead of taking incremental steps to rebuild his credibility, as Bedford advised, Holyfield leapt right from journeyman Jeremy Bates on Aug. 18 to awkward vet Fres Oquendo. Instead of pursuing a slow, steady buildup to rebuild Holyfield's aura, Hutson listened to Muhammad, who talked up Holyfield's PPV potential.

Muhammad had come on the scene during the Bates promotion, and worked to dislocate Bedford from the mix. He succeeded, and Bedford was told that his services were no longer needed. His realistic outlook, and years of expertise in the field were jettisoned, and Hutson relied instead on Muhammad. Bedford, in a heated back-and-forth with Hutson after the Bates fight, warned Hutson that Muhammad's business record wasn't free from controversy; he had been sued for \$33 million by Manny Pacquiao in 2005, and had been forced to settle the case with an \$800,000 settlement check.

Hutson didn't heed the warning.

But the point was soon made moot, because not long after that, Hutson himself was dislodged from the scene. As the Holyfield/Oquendo promotion heated up, he became more and more scarce, and Muhammad's persona was front and center.

As of Dec. 27, it looks like Hutson is no longer associated with Bond, Hunt & French, and all calls to his line are redirected to a partner in the firm. TSS called the law firm, and left a message with one of the partners to determine if Hutson was still an employee at the firm, but didn't hear back.

After Holyfield and Oquendo battled, Muhammad went on the record as saying that he'd like to see Holyfield fight Wladimir Klitschko, and that he would hand Klitschko \$20 million for the task of bludgeoning the aged warrior. There was no interest shown by Team Klitschko, which some might find surprising. After all, that sort of payday for a simple demolition job seems enticing on the outside. But if Klitschko were interested, where would Muhammad, who'd just written a bunch of bad checks, come up with any up front money if he weren't able to pay DiBella what he owed him? Or the Radisson?

But then again, Holyfield could be waiting to get paid himself. TSS has been told that Holyfield was paid an advance of \$250,000 and has lawyers looking into securing the remaining \$1,750,000. TSS has been unable to confirm this development.

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On Dec. 28, TSS contacted the Texas boxing commission, and was put in touch with spokesman Jeff Hill.

Hill said that the commission has forwarded complaints on bounced checks to an enforcement division, which will gather the facts in the case. Muhammad did have to post a bond in order to maintain a license to promote in Texas, but that is a modest \$10,000. That bond wouldn't do much to make a dent into Holyfield's purse, for sure, and if other persons or businesses are owed money by Muhammad from the bout, money from the bond will be distributed on a pro rata basis.

As of now, Muhammad still holds his license to promote in Texas, and the whole process of gathering facts, and of holding a hearing that will provide a ruling on whether or not Muhammad acted improperly, will likely take months, Hill said.

Bottom line—if there is one vocation where a man deserves honest pay for an honest effort, it's boxing.

So c'mon, Murad, do what you have to do, within the bounds of the law, and make good on your IOUs. Presumably, you still want to take part in this business that you have graced with your presence for parts of four decades. Making good on your debts will enable you to keep in the game.

Evander, I'm certain that there is a line in the Bible that talks about loyalty, and not being swayed by promises of excessive riches, but that is your department, not mine. But Evander, if for no other reason than to keep your legacy from being further tarnished, please be aware of the entirety of this financial quagmire that threatens to drag you down by association.