

## Oscar who? The solitary life of a boxing fan

Written by David Payne

Thursday, 01 February 2007 19:00

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Striking up conversation, as a stranger or local in the pubs and bars of England, is a simple task, providing the conversation sticks rigidly to the two permissible subjects for such interaction; today's weather and football. The former the result of the Island's inclement and changeable climate, the latter due to over a century of social and media programming.

On football, even the uninterested will venture an opinion, their hackneyed views emboldened and informed by the leading television networks and tabloid press' 24/7, 365 obsession with the 'national game.' Paraphrasing barely coherent retired Scottish footballers, employed by Sky Sports to guide the unwashed through Saturday afternoons, bar stool pundits add insight and terminology they don't truly understand to their otherwise untrained opinion.

As the player-manager of a local village team, I am not without sin. Football represents a physical cornerstone of my life and, in truth, is the glue that bonds my social framework together. Providing structure and meaning to the escape from obligated shopping center trips and D.I.Y. on any given Saturday, the curse of the married man in this age of equality and consumerism, football—for all its factions, rivalries and tribalism—is a unifying topic.

By contrast, boxing's demise is never more apparent than in those same pubs and bars. Amongst the diehards and the 'anoraks' in the virtual world of Internet forums and message boards it is possible to eschew reality and believe that everyone is a follower of boxing. Detached from that likeminded community and back in the real world, watching or discussing boxing with those lost to the sport or, worse, still those to whom the sport has never been properly introduced, is a painstaking and onerous task. I've previously compared it to offering directions to a foreign tourist who has a treasure map and with whom you share no spoken language. It's an excruciating occupation and most crushing of all is the knowledge that the 'tourist,' one corner turned, will be as lost as before you met.

Explaining the significance of a bout, the standing of one sanctioning belt over another, or why two fighters are so obviously unevenly matched, coupled with the plethora of weight classes, ensures a prohibitive knowledge barrier for casual fans. All these hindrances and obstacles extinguish the flicker of recognition amongst the generation that preceded my own. Those who spent adolescence marvelling at the beauty and courage of Muhammad Ali, the spirit and will of Joe Frazier or the brooding malevolence of George Foreman cannot name a heavyweight after Mike Tyson, or—at a push—Lennox Lewis. The mantra chanted by all preceding generations on any subject: "it was better in my day," is hard to rebuke when it comes to boxing, particularly as the lone voice for the current era. Your argument a forlorn whisper in the face of overwhelming evidence.

For the generation that follow me, who lack the memories of a prime Mike Tyson, the brutality of Nigel Benn versus Gerald McClellan or the knockout fists and showmanship of Naseem Hamed, even that precious flicker does not exist. Asking for 'the boxing' to be screened in the pub is a brave undertaking these days too, either left, as I was the night Clinton Woods fought Glen

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Johnson the third time, to nod and comment on a solitary chair as if overcome by some bewitching cult or stand as a lone advocate, desperate to enthuse the surrounding throng or inform those fleetingly curious enough to ask “who is fighting?”

The level of desperation I feel explaining why there are four heavyweight champions or revealing against whom Ricky Hatton should really be fighting often leaves me exasperated. Better to be back on the forums, amongst the warmth of the outcasts, the marginalized hardcore fan to whom explanatory notes are not required and with whom I've deliberated most of the fundamental discussion points already. Simply put, conversation with casual fans begins at Ground Zero and there never feels sufficient time, or the requisite reserves of enthusiasm, to educate from such an uninformed base—but rather like Jehovah's Witnesses, perhaps if we all 'saved' somebody, boxing may survive long enough to cleanse itself?

In the emerging UFC model, boxing faces a genuine threat to its sovereignty as the premier fistic pursuit but could, if it can find the humility, also realize the UFC's success is due only to the adoption of boxing's core values. Even fights, frequently made.

Fewer weight classes and one single sanctioning body would also immediately rarefy competition and identify the true world champion at the various weights much more plainly. From recognition comes respect, from respect grows interest and enthusiasm and with just a single championship to contend, the best fighters meet the best challengers more frequently. But I know, though I wrestle with my acceptance of the fact, this will never happen. A central, independent federation will never emerge, nor will the Muhammad Ali Act prove to be more than a nice idea.

It's an isolated world, the world of the boxing fan. In the search for hope and a bid to emerge, personally at least, from this sombre outlook perhaps the Oscar De La Hoya vs. Floyd Mayweather contest is a fight to lap over the sport's claustrophobic boundaries. Oscar, as the last great crossover star of the sport Stateside, can generate the type of audience and interest to which all others aspire.

Sadly, despite this huge following in America, he remains essentially anonymous in England and the result of his clash with the most gifted fighter of his day, will garner few lines in the British media. A Tyson, an Ali or even a Hamed he is not.

Most sports fans know of Manchester's quintessential boy next door, Ricky Hatton, but they would be unilaterally unable to name more than one of his opponents or for that matter his weight class. His departure to Satellite television, and recently to HBO and America, just as his then-promoter Frank Warren negotiated an exclusive contract with terrestrial broadcaster ITV, could have been boxing's last chance to reclaim lost fans.

But Hatton keeps winning, and with his clash against Jose Luis Castillo on the horizon hope remains that support can still be galvanized. Historically, the blue ribbon division provides a thermometer on the health of the sport and in Samuel Peter a glint of optimism still shines. A knockout puncher in the heavyweight class holding one portion of the fractured title would certainly entice some toward a sport so marginalised in the past decade. As always, there is

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more hope than expectation and more 'ifs,' 'buts' and 'maybes' than fact.

However, though the isolation is frustrating, I do quite like the notoriety and individualism attached to being the only practising boxing fan anybody knows.

And if you're honest, you do to don't you?