

Juan Diaz Fights In, And Out Of The Ring

Written by Robert Mladinich
Wednesday, 05 March 2008 19:00

When Don King announced that he would no longer promote Juan Diaz, who holds three versions of the lightweight title, after his HBO-televized fight against Nate "The Galaxy Warrior" Campbell on March 8 in Cancun, many boxing insiders were perplexed.

It is not often that the wild-haired promoter releases anyone, especially someone as easily promotable as the exciting Diaz.

Even more eyebrows were raised when the well-respected attorney Fred Levin washed his hands of Diaz. Both King and Levin stated emphatically that they had nothing against Diaz the fighter, but could no longer deal with his manager, Willie Savannah.

It was obvious that there was another side to the story that wasn't being told in the press release issued by DKP Productions. TSS tracked down Savannah, who was in Cancun, by phone to get his side of the story.

It is preceded by a little history about Diaz's ascent to his championship reign.

Since winning the WBA lightweight title from Lavka Sim in his hometown of Houston, Texas, in 2004, Diaz, who is nicknamed "The Baby Bull," has been on a roll. Besides making seven defenses of that title, he has also captured the WBO and IBF crowns.

Although he had not been known as a knockout puncher for most of his career, the 24-year-old Diaz has scored sensational stoppages in his last two fights, against then reigning champions Acelino Freitas and Julio Diaz.

When Diaz puts his three titles and his 33-0 (17 KOS) record on the line against Campbell, 31-5-1 (25 KOS) as HBO's lead-in to the Oleg Maskaev-Samuel Peter heavyweight title bout, everything points to him scoring yet another stirring victory.

All should be well in Diaz's life. Not only has he taken the boxing world by storm in the past few years, he is also immersed in law school studies at the University of Houston where he maintains a B average.

He still lives home with his tight-knit family, who help him manage the challenging endeavors that keep him so busy. By all accounts, his all-action style and sterling reputation outside of the ring should have made him an HBO superstar by now.

"He's got no entourage, no record of beating people in the streets, no hanging out in clubs," said HBO commentator Larry Merchant. "What kind of fighter can he be?"

The answer to Merchant's rhetorical question is simple. Diaz, whose qualities as a human being seem as resolute and admirable as his boxing abilities, is not just a darn good fighter right

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now, he just keeps getting better and better.

Instead, said Savannah, life has never been more challenging than it is right now. And fighting Campbell is the least of his and Diaz's sources of stress.

"Nate will be 36 on the day before the fight," said Savannah. "We expect him to come on fast and strong and shoot his load. This is his last hurrah, so we trained for the tough Nate Campbell. We expect a tough fight, but we also expect to win."

Things are not so simple when it comes to Savannah's troubled relationship with King. As far as he's concerned, the end can't come soon enough.

"When we signed with Don, we wanted to close out our career with him," an obviously frazzled Savannah said. "The fights we've had with Don before the fights (in the ring) were worse than the actual fights."

Savannah then discussed a common lament among many fighters who have had dealings with King. Since arriving in Mexico, Savannah said that he received a notice stating that King had promised the government that all of the boxers fighting on the show would agree to donate 4 percent of their purses to a local charity.

"No one ever agreed to this," fumed Savannah. "I already told my lawyer that there is no way I'm going to pay on what Don King promised somebody."

Moreover, said Savannah, he said he just learned that it was expected that he and Diaz would be responsible for paying all of the expenses related to the WBO and WBA sanctioning bodies. This includes sanctioning fees, as well as costs associated with housing and feeding the inspectors. No such demand was made for the IBF expenses.

"Hotels here are \$400 a night," said Savannah. "Regardless, those costs are not supposed to be the responsibility of the fighter. They are the promoter's responsibility."

Savannah said that Diaz had already agreed to a \$250,000 cut from his original purse "just to get this over with." He was speaking, of course, about the promotional agreement with King.

"I have continuous fights with King," he added. "If he would just follow what it says in the contracts, we'd have no problem. With (another promoter) you would just read the contract, skip over to the highlights and sign with no problems."

Savannah concedes that signing with King was what he now describes as "a big disaster." The reason, he says, is because he believes that "King doesn't know how to treat people with respect. He's treating people now the same way he treated people 30 years ago."

What makes things worse, said Savannah, is the fact that Diaz is such an upstanding young man whose loyalty is unyielding.

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“So many boxers have to ask their parole officers if they can leave town to fight,” he said. “Juan has to ask his law professors. That’s the kind of kid we’re dealing with.”

For the most part Savannah has been able to keep the stress of the unpleasant situation from Diaz, but says that over the past few months the fighter’s intuitiveness had given him more than inkling about what was going on.

Diaz has told Savannah on numerous occasions that he (Diaz) doesn’t have to fight; that nothing is the worth risk of Savannah having a heart attack or a stroke.

A day prior to Diaz’s last fight, a ninth round HBO-televised TKO of Julio Diaz in Chicago in October, Savannah said King was threatening to pull the plug on the whole show if the Diaz camp did not agree to certain last-minute demands.

Savannah refused to do so, and after Juan beat Julio, he and Juan hoped to fight interim WBO champion Michael Katsidis of Australia. Like Diaz, Katsidis is an offensive whirlwind and a joy to watch.

Savannah said that King ignored all of his phone calls, as well as the calls of others who were trying to make that ultra-appealing matchup happen.

Out of frustration, he began making efforts on his own until King’s lawyers put the kibosh on that fight.

Now, Savannah and Diaz find themselves deep in Mexico, with Savannah curious as to whether they’ll even be able to depart the country without any more snags.

“Everything is so topsy-turvy down here,” said Savannah.

Savannah’s worries about not being able to leave Mexico are based on a previous unpleasant experience. In 1981, he took Ronnie Shields to Mexico City to fight Guillermo Miranda. Upon entering the country the whole team was forced to hand over their passports to Immigration personnel.

When they tried to depart on the day after the fight, a Sunday, they were told that Immigration was closed and they could not leave until Monday. They were able to leave on Monday, but only after careful scrutiny was made about monies that might be owed to the government.

Savannah is not suggesting that any chicanery was afoot back then, but he remembers the government being resolute in demanding every penny that was owed to them. Savannah is fearful that this rumored “promise” that King made about the fighters’ donating 4 percent of their purses to charity will come back to bite them in the butt when it is time to go home.

“I’ve spoken to my lawyer and he said HBO can’t pay taxes for us and Don King can’t pay taxes for us,” said Savannah. “In the end we are responsible for our own taxes. I hope that there are no problems when the fights are all over and everyone is at the airport trying to go home.”

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Perhaps the ultimate compliment ever paid to Diaz comes from Hall of Fame trainer and HBO commentator Emanuel Steward. He said Diaz's abundance of talent belied his young age.

"He fights like a veteran," said Steward. "A good, solid veteran."

Law school is not the only place that Diaz will be getting a higher education. The fights he has in the ring are probably the easiest he will ever engage in. Now that he's reached the pinnacle of his profession, the nuances and politics of the boxing business will undoubtedly prove to be tougher than any opponent he'll ever face in the ring.

NOTE: King sent out a release on Wednesday afternoon, announcing that he would part ways with Diaz. Here is the release:

CANCUN, MEXICO—Boxing promoter Don King made a surprise announcement on Wednesday that he will no longer represent undefeated unified lightweight world champion Juan "Baby Bull" Diaz after his match on Saturday with Nate "Galaxy Warrior" Campbell in Cancun, Mexico.

King has represented Diaz since September 2006, and it is highly unusual for the world's greatest promoter to give up on a star client without an attempt to keep him in his stable of fighters.

King is in Cancun presenting a world championship doubleheader on Saturday featuring the first world heavyweight championship ever staged in Mexico when World Boxing Council champion Oleg Maskaev defends his title against WBC interim champion Samuel "The Nigerian Nightmare" Peter as well as Diaz facing Campbell, the International Boxing Federation No. 1-ranked mandatory challenger.

King made the announcement at the final press conference for the event, named "History in Cancun." With principals from Saturday's fight card assembled in front of the media, King read passages from a February resignation letter from Diaz's attorney Fred Levin addressed to Diaz's manager Willie Savannah.

"It has come to the point where I can no longer in good conscience represent Juan Diaz," Levin wrote, lamenting the fact that he had only spoken to Diaz on one occasion.

The highly respected and successful lawyer added: "Willie, I've been practicing law for almost 47 years. I have never had a client complain about anything that I have done in the practice of law until now."

King echoed Levin's sentiments, noting that he, too, is enduring a barrage of complaints from Savannah while Diaz's career continues to skyrocket.

"Juan Diaz and Willie Savannah seem to be doing just fine," King said. "Juan was lucky to make \$100,000 for a fight before he came to me. He made \$2 million in his first year with me and I arranged for him to fight for two more world titles, which he won. He'll make another \$800,000

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on Saturday night.

“It seems to me that Juan has been doing his job inside the ring and I’ve been doing my job as his promoter outside the ring. I’m still trying to figure out what it is Willie’s not getting when looking back upon one of the best financed and most successful career progressions I have ever been part of.”

King then announced his resignation.

“I bring this up to you today because, like Fred Levin, I have made a decision to no longer promote Juan Diaz after Saturday’s fight. And it’s not because I wouldn’t like to continue to work with Juan. It’s for the same reason the esteemed Fred Levin quit. I will no longer work with Juan’s manager Willie Savannah.”