

Promoter Wald Lobbied Commish For Timely Stop

Written by Ron Borges
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According to Hall of Fame trainer and HBO commentator Emanuel Steward, Jeff Wald knew what was coming Saturday night at Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City and he wanted to protect Alfonso Gomez from it.

Steward reported during the broadcast of the former "Contender" hero's one-sided loss to WBA welterweight champion Miguel Cotto that Wald, one of the reality boxing show's producers and Gomez's promoter, put the New Jersey State Athletic Commission on notice before the fight that he was concerned referee Randy Neumann might allow Gomez to take too much punishment. He apparently sought assurances from the commission that if necessary it would be ready to step in, as one of its doctors ultimately did after the fifth round, in case Neumann did not seem inclined to end any one-sided carnage.

This caused raised eyebrows in some corners but all it really said was that for all their public statements about the scrappy Gomez's chances, his handlers were well aware of what he was truly facing – which, simply put, was an impossible task. As Cotto's uncle and trainer, Evangelista, said after the ringside physician did not allow Gomez to answer the bell for Round 6, "Usually you are concerned before a fight. This time we knew we had the superior fighter."

Far superior, as Wald's pre-fight actions made clear.

Neumann, a former heavyweight contender who now works as a financial advisor when not officiating some of New Jersey's biggest fights, was a guy who willingly accepted a lot of punishment during his fighting days and is inclined to let the boxers he oversees do the same. One assumes he works under the theory that if one chooses to enter the hurt business then it stands to reason that some pain will be involved. This does not make Neumann a bad referee. As a matter of fact, he is one of the most competent ones in the sport.

In the case of the game Gomez, he was braver than he was talented, which when Neumann is the third man in the ring opens you up to some dire possibilities. Gomez's right eye was badly swollen and his face was lumping up by the end of the fifth round, during which he had been knocked down for the third time. Neumann had been watching Gomez closely for several rounds by then but he was clearly not yet inclined to stop the fight, in large part because despite all the abuse he was taking Gomez kept coming forward and fighting back.

There is a slaughter rule in boxing but to be invoked it usually requires the beaten upon man stop retaliating. This Gomez refused to do, despite being out hit three to one according to Compubox statistics and having taken no end of painful punches to the head and body almost at the whim of Cotto.

That the outcome was never in doubt was as clear as an HD TV broadcast. But one-sidedness, in and of itself, is not grounds to stop a fight. Neither are three knockdowns nor an obvious lack of competitiveness on one man's side. So Neumann did as Wald feared and said, "See you in a

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minute” after the bell ended Round 5, at which point the commission took matters into their own hands.

Whether at the direction of the Commission or on his own accord, one of the ringside physicians came into the ring almost immediately, strode to Gomez’s corner and informed him he could not see out of his right eye. This was news to Gomez, although frankly he was probably seeing double out of both eyes by then, considering how often he’d been hit.

Gomez protested briefly while on his stool before Neumann strode over as an interested observer and, after a brief discussion with the doctor, took his advice and stopped the fight, which under the rules he did not have to do.

Was that a bad thing? No. Had Neumann been wrong in not acting of his own accord? No. Was Wald out of line reminding the New Jersey Commission that it would be wise to be ready to overrule Neumann’s tendency to leave a man to his own devices as long as he’s punching back and not visibly hurt? No.

Most importantly, was this a match Wald and Gomez’s manager, Gary Gittlesohn, never should have made for him in the first place? No.

At least not if you’re a prize fighter, which Alfonso Gomez would be the first to tell you he is. Some will say that if Wald was so concerned about his fighter being damaged that he felt compelled to talk with the commission about the definition of a proper stoppage BEFORE the fight it means he never should have allowed it to happen in the first place but that would be to miss the most basic fact of the sport: prize fighting is a brutal endeavor.

A manager and promoter’s job is to help a fighter involved in such an exercise earn as much money as possible with as little risk as necessary. The reality for Gomez is that he runs the chance of losing to a lot of opponents in the welterweight division for a lot less money than he earned Saturday night for facing five rounds of hell with Miguel Cotto.

Just two years ago, for example, he drew with the limited Jesse Feliciano and despite his wins over worn out Arturo Gatti and journeyman Ben Tackie in his last two fights, Gomez was not likely to have done much better against the guy Antonio Margarito beat up in the semi main event of the evening, dethroned IBF champion Kermit Cintron, who was stopped in six one-sided rounds himself.

That being his reality, duty demanded Wald and Gittlesohn make the biggest money fight they could for Gomez (and \$650,000 for Cotto was it) and hope for the best while preparing for the worst. This is exactly what they did when Wald spoke with the commission.

In an ideal world, which boxing is far from, one would hope such a thing not be necessary. One would want all matches to be competitive and for challengers to need no more protection than they could provide for themselves. Reality, especially in this day and age, is far different. So what we had Saturday night in Atlantic City were two mismatches that very probably surprised neither of the handlers of the losers but were unavoidable if those managers were doing their

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jobs.

Did Emanuel Steward believe Cintron was going to beat Margarito this time after losing to him badly three years ago? Well, he was hoping for the best and not asking the New Jersey Commission to take special care of his fighter but he was also admitting before the fight that he was “not as comfortable” as he would have liked. What he was saying, really, was the fistic version of “Timber!!!”

Did that mean Cintron should not have been allowed to defend his title against Margarito? No.

Same applies to Gomez. One can argue that perhaps the New Jersey commission or the WBA should never have sanctioned it in the first place but once they did Wald and Gittlesohn had a fiduciary duty to Gomez to make the fight and a moral one to do what they could to limit the damage that seemed likely to follow.

Apparently they did both if Steward’s reportage was accurate. They got their man the money and then they put the New Jersey Commission on notice that while Randy Neumann and Alfonso Gomez might be too brave for the latter’s own good they’d appreciate it if the ringside physician was not.

All and all, that was the right thing to do on what was sure to be the wrong kind of night for a brave Mexican warrior whose heart was bigger than his talent.