

No Matter How You Slice It

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Saturday, 15 November 2008 19:00

Now that his involvement with mixed martial arts is over, at least for the moment, Gary Shaw has gone back to his first and best love.

No, not boxing, although the time he spends on the original combat sport has increased significantly since he stepped down as president of the now-defunct EliteXC, which had a brief, successful run on prime-time network television before it flamed out amid allegations of, if not fight fixing, then at least fight-influencing. What really pleases Shaw these days is that he has rediscovered the joys of sticking close to home and just kicking back with his wife and grandchildren.

Hey, Shaw is a big guy, but he learned the hard way that even a super heavyweight of the fight industry can spread himself too thin.

“There are only so many hours in a day,” Shaw said of his dual gigs as president of EliteXC Live Events and head of his own boxing promotional company, Gary Shaw Productions. “My health was suffering. My marriage was suffering. Nor that I was about to get a divorce or anything like that, but I was spending almost no time at home. I was on the road 40-something weeks this past year.

“Look, I had an apartment in California, a nice one overlooking the beach. But I’m a Jersey guy; that wasn’t my home. Trying to do what I was doing, I had stopped being a good father, a good grandparent. It was taking a toll on me.”

Shaw was able to jump off the merry-go-round that seemingly never stopped or even slowed down when EliteXC, which made a major splash earlier this year with the announcement of its affiliation with CBS-TV, shut down and filed for bankruptcy after the guy who brought down its marquee attraction alleged that he was “encouraged” to fight in a manner that would aid his opponent.

Seth Petruzelli, a last-minute fill-in for the injured Ken Shamrock in the main event of a CBS-televised card in Sunrise, Fla., on Oct. 4, exposed headliner Kimbo Slice (real name: Kevin Ferguson) by scoring a first-round knockout after an elapsed time of only 14 seconds. That would have been bad enough, given the fact that EliteXC and CBS had relentlessly hyped Slice, a menacing-looking onetime street fighter whose YouTube videos had made him a cult sensation. But when Petruzelli said afterward that he was pressured to stand up and trade shots with Kimbo, instead of taking the fight to the ground where his ju-jitsu skills might give him an edge, that made a bad situation far worse. MMA is not professional wrestling, where the outcome of bouts is scripted, and any suggestion that the bouts were not fully on the up-and-up stained EliteXC as surely as the revelation of rigged ratings for the Don King-promoted “U.S. national championship” tournament stained King’s embarrassed broadcast partner, ABC-TV, in 1977.

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Shaw, who had been at the forefront of the Kimbo-as-superstar marketing campaign, claimed to have had no knowledge of Petruzelli's allegations. But he said he wasn't surprised that, given the circumstances, Kimbo – a former bodyguard for a porno production company -- got caught with, um, his pants down.

"In retrospect, I wouldn't have allowed Kimbo to fight on Oct. 4," Shaw said. "He wasn't experienced enough to prepare for one opponent and switch to another on such short notice."

So what, if anything, does Shaw know about Petruzelli's claims that pressure was brought to bear for him to fight in such a manner that was supposed to help Kimbo?

"I don't know anything about that and I can't make any comment," Shaw said. "I wasn't there. I was doing an HBO fight on that date. But I'm sure it didn't help public perception of the brand."

Shaw still likes mixed martial arts and wouldn't mind getting involved in it again, although he said the likelihood of that depends on whether Dana White, who rules MMA's dominant organization, Ultimate Fighting Championship, with an iron fist, ever decides to loosen his grip.

Shaw and others who have tried and failed to challenge UFC's supremacy, like Jay Larkin, who recently resigned as president and CEO of the International Fight League, have characterized White as the biggest impediment to the growth and full acceptance of MMA.

"I still believe very strongly in MMA," Shaw said. "It's a very good sport, a very exciting sport, very fan-friendly. The demographics are terrific. But I don't think it will ever be as successful as it can be if there's only going to be one brand."

"Think about it. Years ago, Miller Lite and Bud Light had all these tremendous commercials on TV around the time of the Super Bowl. They were competing hard against each other. But if there's only one beer available to consumers, why bother to advertise at all if nobody has a choice?"

"If MMA wants to elevate itself to Super Bowl status, it has to have UFC fighters fighting people from outside its organization. Competition only makes for a better product. What's wrong with having the best fighting the best? I don't know why Dana or his people could be against that. I mean, think about it. If you have one restaurant on a street, it's only a restaurant. If you have 20 restaurants on that street, it becomes 'Restaurant Row.' And they'd all be trying like hell to get and keep your business."

To its detriment, boxing might be fragmented, but not so much that accommodations can't be occasionally reached. When it suits his purpose, Don King does business with Bob Arum, who does business with Richard Schaefer, who does business with Shaw. Rare as they might be, there have been at least a few unification bouts involving champions of the WBC, WBA, IBF and WBO. OK, so HBO and Showtime still are the equivalent of warring factions in the Middle East. Maybe someday they, too, can be involved in some sort of peace talks.

Being able to forge periodic alliances is one of the reasons Shaw has moved easily back into

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full-time boxing promotion, which, he admits, seems like a breath of fresh air after his failed attempts to break down the UFC-constructed walls that keep lesser MMA factions on the outside.

“None of my boxers ever said a word to me about my involvement in MMA,” Shaw said. “None of their managers did, either. But do I feel more involved in boxing now? Oh, sure. Because it’s all I’m doing.”

“I have a lot of bright, young prospects in boxing. In a way, I guess you can say I’ve gone back to my roots.”

Among the boxers in Shaw’s ever-enlarging promotional stable are IBF light heavyweight champion Chad Dawson, WBC/WBA/IBF super flyweight titlist Vic Darchinyan, former bantamweight and super bantamweight champ Rafael Marquez, super middleweight contender Andre Dirrell, lightweight contender Antonio DeMarco and bantamweight contender Yonhhy Perez.

Those, and other fighters, figure to keep Shaw busy as he arranges the sort of attractive matchups that clearly have reinvigorated his ardor for boxing.

“Chad Dawson is the man at light heavyweight,” Shaw said. “Hopefully, he’ll get a chance to fight (Joe) Calzaghe. If not, we want to clean out the senior citizens that are left, whether that’s Roy Jones, Bernard Hopkins or Winky Wright.”

“I’m trying to make a fourth fight between Rafael Marquez and Israel Vazquez, and Darchinyan is hot right now, coming off his unification knockout of Cristian Mijares.”

Shaw also envisions a continuing relationship with Kimbo Slice, a 34-year-old married father of six whom he insists still can become a major force in either MMA or boxing if he receives the proper training.

“I said it before and I meant it: I believe he has superstar potential,” Shaw insisted. “Whenever Mike Tyson walked into a room, everybody stopped what they were doing, got up and looked. Why? Because he was Tyson. I was with Kimbo the other night, and it was pretty much the same thing. We were in a four-star restaurant and even the chef wanted to come over and meet him.”

“In today’s era of heavyweights, do I believe he’d have a shot at some version of a heavyweight championship? Absolutely. He’d have to get a good trainer, a good strength and conditioning coach to help him get limber, but I definitely can see him becoming a factor in a heavyweight division that is as decimated as my 401k. This guy can punch, and punch really hard. He does certain things that are natural, things even he doesn’t realize he’s doing.”

“If he ever learned to sit down on his punches, to plant his feet, how to get proper spacing, how to turn his punches over ... look, I admit he’s a novice. But he’s got what I call the ‘It’ factor. I’m not sure if you can explain it to anyone, but people know it when they see it. And Kimbo has it.”

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If not in boxing, Shaw said he can see Kimbo going to Japan and becoming the same sort of monster hit that 6'5", 375-pound former NFL lineman Bob Sapp became with Asian MMA audiences.

"He looks menacing, that that isn't necessarily a drawback in this business," Shaw offered. "And Kimbo is intelligent. He *gets* it. Yet he's 100 percent street. He doesn't have to pretend to be street; he *is* street."

What Shaw won't miss, if he never becomes involved in MMA again, is the "haters" who he said infest the sport.

"MMA has a lot of haters. Boxing doesn't," he said. "When I'm around boxing people, they never talk about MMA, or at least they never talk about hating MMA. But MMA people hate boxing and everybody connected with boxing.

"Why do they do that? What is there to gain by being that way? When it comes to haters and hating, MMA is like nothing I've ever seen. It's a whole different world."