

## Evander Fighting Isn't Just About Free Will

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 16 December 2008 19:00

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Fightwriters get into the business for different reasons. By and large, it is because we enjoy watching boxing, and when offered the honor of following a sport we'd be following anyway, and getting paid to do so, we jump at the chance. It's a no brainer.

But there are other reasons some of us get into fightwriting. We might not consider them before we get into this biz, or even consciously ponder it much while we're active. But as journalists following and dissecting and analyzing and commenting on the sport to which all others aspire, many of us realized from early on that boxing, being a sport in which fatalities and long-term brain damage are the norm, could always use an extra watchdog or two.

Our duty is not only to watch and report on the matches and personalities that make up the sport, but also analyze what has happened, and try to make sense of it all, and pass that on to you. But some of us—again, to varying degrees, believe that we have a duty of oversight. Boxing has no commissioner overseeing the sport, making sure that people, like promoters, and managers and programmers, are adhering to standards and practices that serve and protect the sport and the athletes who put themselves on the line to entertain us. Yes, there are athletic commissions which hold powers of oversight, and some fairly toothless federal regulations that were enacted to improve some of the lax conditions and standards that frequently do next to nothing to serve and protect the people who quite literally put their lives on the line to earn a paycheck and entertain us.

But often, in the absence of a boxing czar, someone disposed to act in the best interest of the fighters and the sport as a whole, it is left to the fightwriters to fill the breach.

On Monday, Ron Borges wrote a column called "He Was Once The Real Deal, A Long Time Ago." In his typical pull-no-punches style, the veteran fightwriter skewered the Dec. 20 Evander Holyfield-Nikolay Valuev title fight, and saved his choicest phrases for the Real Deal. Borges doesn't believe that at age 46, his prime far, far away in the rear view mirror, Holyfield should be fighting professionally. Borges offers ample evidence that Holyfield's desire to stay active in the sport is a flawed folly, stemming from stubbornness, and a bleeding bank account. Fellow master fightwriter Bernie Fernandez has also weighed in on the subject, with a similar level of dismay bleeding into his copy.

Many commenters have flurried furiously at Borges, and vehemently defended Holyfield's right to keep on punching for pay. "John Bobbitt" says the issue boils down the free will, and says that Holy should fight on til age 70 if he so desires. The lionhearted "Anonymous User" asks Borges if he will consider retiring if Holyfield pulls off the upset. "Gerard" believes the sanctioning bodies are there to protect the fighters, while "Pete Steward" calls Borges out for stating that Holyfield has next to no chance to defeat Valuev. "Robert Curtis" and "Pylar" both weigh in with their belief that Holyfield's decision to box is his choice. As always, we appreciate TSS readers taking the time to contribute.

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But with all due respect to anyone sizing up Evander's decision to keep on fighting solely as a matter of freedom of choice, you are dead wrong. Holyfield continuing to fight, at age 46, affects all of us fight fans. It speaks to the credibility of our sport. It speaks to the standards, or lack thereof, that the sport has in place, when a man who has shown in recent years to be a sad shell of his former self, is offered a title fight. It speaks to the adherence to the over-riding principal of profits over people in the fight game, which has been and will continue to be a PR drag on the sweet science. It speaks to the lack of imagination and depressed state of the heavyweight division, and to an extent the sport as a whole, that the best challenge that the promoters of the event can come up to challenge their monstrous champion, the 7 footer Valuev is the beyond-faded Holyfield, a loooong decade removed from his best days.

Human beings, left to their own devices, free from rules and regulations and other pesky, onerous restrictions placed upon them by the government and other entities designed to maintain order, have an inclination to enrich themselves, to the detriment of their fellow man. Sometimes, even with regulations (even minimal, easily evaded ones) in place, someone like New York hedge fund fraud Bernie Madoff can game the system, and act like the Grinch on a meth binge, stealing every damn dime in his line of sight, consequences be damned. In the US we've seen, and now felt the scorpion sting, of the result when regulations and oversight are junked, and "the free market" and "free will" have free reign. Wall Street does a Grinch imitation, and when their stomach explodes, and they need stitching up, they sop up the money of taxpayers, most of whom play by the rules, to stem their losses, and keep the bonus train rollin.'

At times, it seems like there are a precious few voices of reason speaking up, pointing out the holes in the system, pointing out all the greedmongers who enrich themselves to an obscene level, with outlandish bonuses and sweetheart stock option deals, while they sign off on massive layoffs. But in the fightwrite business, without guys like Borges, who speak up, and say what some people are thinking but are too fearful to say, have you pondered what the game would look like?

There is a really remote chance that Holyfield is able to pull off a Valuev-sized upset on Saturday. If that happens, I'd lobby any of you readers out there who are tempted to write Borges, and tell him to call it a day, and retire, to reconsider. Because he is fighting for the long term health of the sport, so all of us are not as frequently pressed into defending the sweet science, and forced to vainly try to explain why a statue like Holyfield is fighting for a title in his current state.

Borges is also fighting for the rights of fighters, believe it or not, by forcing promoters and programmers to consider, if not answer, the charge that they may be pimping out a man who could very likely be suffering considerable brain damage down the line from the punishment he absorbs...all in the name of selling tickets, and fattening their bottom line. On Monday, with his column, Borges "afflicted the comfortable" and I offer that we can't have too much of that from our press.

Fightwriters, more in boxing than any other sport because of the way it is set up, without any central power looking out for the best interest of the sport, or any substantial union to attend to

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the fighters' well-being, should function as watchdogs, and muckrakers and checks to power. Is it a slippery slope, when we publicly call for a man to hang up the gloves, and find another vocation? Sure it is. It's a judgment call. But Borges was motivated, I'd offer, with the health and well being of the sport and the fighter in mind. Even if you don't agree with his call, you can't disagree with the validity and inherent worth of his reason for writing it.