

ZURICH - Boxing may be dying in the United States, but anyone doing any squawking about the sport's immediate demise in the wake of Nikolai Valuev - Evander Holyfield most likely hasn't been around the European fight scene lately.

Pugilism for pay is a global enterprise, much more so than the NFL at this point, and the same goes for baseball here. And believe me, very few of the millions of fanatic followers in numerous nations are basing soccer allegiances or budgets on how well that game does in the States.

While those who complain about poor quality in the pay-per-view attraction of Valuev versus Holyfield being the final nail in boxing's coffin may have a point regarding the USA, once again their perspective is, to put it kindly, limited.

The fight, like every big fight here, was broadcast on "free tv" throughout many regions, this one on German network "Das Erste / 1". From what I could gather the last couple days in Switzerland and Germany, just about everybody with a television was tuned in and excited by what transpired, despite the lackluster action.

Like most patrons inside the Hallenstadion, it seemed the general population felt Holyfield deserved the decision. There was more detailed fight talk on the streets than I've seen since Vegas in the days of Mike Tyson or Sugar Ray Leonard.

I wore a Holyfield - Moorer II sweatshirt and got stopped so many dozen times on the street or at airports or train stations with positive comments I quit counting. Officers at all four of the passport check stations I went through talked about the fight.

If you witnessed the live scene, you'd know it wasn't a special slugfest but still a spectacular event. The assembled swarm disapproved of the result and booed Valuev heartily, but no one acted like they'd been ripped off in entertainment value, and I checked with plenty of people.

I remember talking to Christian Meyer, one of the brains behind the Sauerland promotional outfit, after the Arthur Abraham- Raul Marquez card about whether the rumored Valuev-Holyfield affair was a hard sell. At that time, initial media response was a mixed bag of negatives. Don't try and tell Sauerland Events the sport is dying. I've seen them put on fine cards in front of packed houses throughout Germany, and I think Holyfield and the promoters proved a lot of naysayers wrong.

Before and after, the fight got major news coverage in many postal zones. I saw plenty of front page stories when I checked the international news stands. When was the last time boxing was on page one in North America?

Until Amy Winehouse did her topless oceanside flashdance, Holyfield had by far the most publicized peccs of the week in this hemisphere.

The Whole, Wide, Real Deal World

Written by Phil Woolever

Monday, 22 December 2008 19:00

Which brings us back to the pertinent points of boxing in the USA.

There's plenty of evidence that the general theory of pay-per-view hurting the sport is indeed valid.

There's also a smoking gun that says if boxing is dying, some of the folks who claim to love it are helping to speed the demise.

That includes those I see in the boxing media who can't seem to find anything good to say. Candid honesty is one thing, but being unable to list optimistic observations about almost any situation amongst all sorts of admirable athletes is either a lack of fair focus or reporting capability.

Maybe the powers at be should have canceled spring training because the World Series ratings went down, or cut back on the number of NFL games during the years of weak Super Bowls.

The Holyfield - Valuev bout definitely wasn't a classic brawl but in terms of duke out drama, there was plenty.

There wasn't the same fistic finesse, but for me the aesthetic result was like the Marco Antonio Barrera - Johnny Tapia or Winky Wright - Shane Mosley fights. Few great punches, but a lot of fine character.

The resulting howls of outrage and disgust about Valuev and Holfield's skills seem hollow to me, but maybe something changed on TV across the ocean.

Holyfield's entrance was electrifying. In some ways the night was a mutated version of the Tyson - Trevor Berbick fight I saw in Vegas, where the man everyone came to see was performing against a limited champion, though Holyfield came through in a very different way. Could the late Berbick have taken Valuev? We'll never know. Berbick is no Hall of Famer but on good nights he was very solid. Valuev is no Lennox Lewis, but he's no complete slouch either.

Valuev was satisfied using his jab to score points, Holyfield was satisfied darting in and out to score points. Both looked prepared to trade inside if they had to, but by reflection they never really had to.

Styles make fights, and so do game plans. This wasn't an explosive mix, but that doesn't shame either man. Nobody should have considered this the real heavyweight championship in the first place.

The officials could only agree on three rounds. It was exactly that kind of fight.

For the record, I had it 115-113 Valuev. My informal postfight media poll of around thirty observers favored a draw by around 75%, with the other quarter split, but at the postfight press conference there were outbursts favoring Holyfield and protesting the verdict.

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"I thought I won more rounds and felt I won," said an unfazed Holyfield. "I kept him off balance. Usually I'll go toe to toe with anybody but that wasn't our plan so I had to concentrate on not doing that. I thought I did everything necessary. I was surprised, his hand speed is pretty good and he has a good defense. It was hard when he stepped up close, the way he positioned his body. His hips are so high I didn't want to hit him low, and it was hard to get past his arms."

"To those who say Holyfield is old, I can only advise them to be careful to guard your head and your stomach," said an equally unfazed Valuev. "I'll say what I said before the fight. I'm very honored to have fought him. It was a lot of pressure."

"Valuev had to adjust to Holyfield's experience," said Valuev trainer Alexander Zimin. "Holyfield kept moving and using the whole ring, we didn't expect that so we had to find a different style for five rounds then we could use the pressure tactics we planned more."

"Our thing was not to get hit," said Holyfield trainer Tommy Brooks, sounding more disappointed than anyone. "We didn't fail. I have respect for Valuev now but I think we pulled it off and anyone who saw the fight knows we won."

It seems certain either of tonight's principals would have big trouble lasting the distance with either Klitschko, though from my recent observations Alexander Dimetrenko holds the keys to the future of the division after 2009.

An encore was mentioned but Team Valuev said they'd do anything possible to force a match with Ruslan Chagaev first. Holyfield mused about tomorrow in vague terms.

"My future plans, I don't know," said Holyfield. "It's Christmas time, I'll go home and think about it. If a title fight comes along I may do it because I still want all the titles, but I'm not going to keep fighting just to fight. So I don't know what I'll do next."

Whatever Holyfield decides, anyone in this part of Switzerland Saturday night knows the old boy did pretty well for himself. They showed a career retrospective feature prior to his entrance. It included Olympic moments from the DQ loss to carrying the torch later as multiple champion, with vastly varied highs and lows, bitten ears and fan men featuring professional engagements against the very best heavyweights of three decades.

The ovation Holyfield received before and after the Valuev bout wouldn't be out of place as a postscript to that highlight reel.

Evander looked bone-weary at the press conference, aging and tired like the critics say he's looked for a long time. Most of them have never been anywhere near the heights he reached again around the Alps.

Holyfield didn't fly back home with the belt he wanted, but he kept hope alive.

Now, he'll always have Zurich.