Until the Antonio Margarito hand-wrap controversy is resolved (and it might never really be, given skepticism on both sides of the issue), everyone in boxing is apt to have their own take on what has become a hot-button issue.

When does “gamesmanship,” the little tricks many fighters employ to gain any kind of an edge they can, cross the line into illegality and, just maybe, criminality? The names of disgraced trainer Panama Lewis and his fighter, Luis Resto, have been tossed around like Nerf footballs by those convinced that Margarito and his trainer, Javier Capetillo, not only crossed that line, but enthusiastically bounded over it.

Others -- for the most part, fans of the “Tijuana Tornado” – are insistent that this brouhaha is much ado about nothing, a minor controversy magnified for purposes of advancing someone else’s agenda.

But, to me and to others, the question is not whether Capetillo and Margarito knowingly cheated. (I think they did, although I reserve judgment as to whether their transgressions approach Panama Lewis despicability.) It’s whether state commissions are manned by qualified individuals who know what the hell they’re supposed to do and do it, and not by political hacks appointed solely or at least mostly because they contributed to the reelection campaigns of their state’s sitting governor.

Remember, the Titanic didn’t sink because it was struck by the tip of that iceberg; it went to the bottom because of a large gash in its hull below the water line, inflicted by the larger, unseen portion of the submerged threat.

I know more than a few employees of state commissions who are informed, dedicated individuals, who take their jobs seriously and follow every step necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of the fighters entrusted to their care. I also know others who wouldn’t know a legal hand wrap from the Saran Wrap their wives use to preserve last night’s dinner leftovers. And, even though they might not realize it, ignorance on the part of someone in their position is not bliss. It’s potentially lethal.

The Professional boxing Safety Act of 1996 and Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 co-authored by Senators John McCain and Richard Bryan are well-intentioned, but they lack teeth in that enforcement is ceded to the Association of Boxing Commissions, which in turn relegates it to a particular state’s commission. And, as we have unfortunately discovered, some states hand out commission positions like candy because to political contributors to the “right” party or to friends of a person with high-enough connections.

Boxing these days is like a ship crossing the North Atlantic at night in 1912 and the lookout is calling out that he spots an iceberg dead ahead. But it’s what the lookout doesn’t see that can most hurt us, or more specifically the fighters who enter the ring a bit less secure than they

should be that their opponents don't have the equivalent of brass knuckles inside or under their gloves.

After Wrapgate reared its ugly head the night of Shane Mosley's thrashing of Margarito, I dug through my voluminous clip file to find whatever I could concerning Naazim Richardson's upheld assertation that Felix Trinidad's hands were illegally wrapped prior to Tito's Sept. 29, 2001, middleweight unification bout with Bernard Hopkins.

Prior to Trinidad's May 11, 2002, fight with Hacine Cherifi in San Juan, Puerto Rico, I revisited the matter with Hopkins, the presumed beneficiary of Richardson's observations, who dominated Trinidad en route to stopping him in the 12th round 7½ months earlier.

"If you put on tape, then gauze, then tape, then gauze, it's like a (plaster) cast," Hopkins told me. "It's like being hit with a baseball bat.

"I'm giving out some secrets here, but you can dip your hands in ice water and that tape will, like, marinate and become harder. But it's only cheating if you get caught. Personally, I think (Fernando) Vargas' and (David) Reid's people dropped the ball. Naazim did a brilliant job in spotting what (Felix Trinidad Sr.) was doing with the wraps."

Boxing commissions have been – or at least should have been – more diligent in the enforcement of regulations designed to restrict unfair competitive advantages since the notorious incident in 1983 when Panama Lewis used tweezers to remove much of the horsehair padding from Resto's gloves. Resto administered a horrific beating to Billy Collins, ending Collins' career, and Lewis received a prison sentence and a lifetime ban from boxing.

Only last year, Resto came clean and admitted that he did in fact know that he went into the Madison Square Garden ring that night with rocks for fists.

Richardson wonders why the commissioner who oversaw Capetillo's wrapping of Margarito's hands allowed it to proceed prior to Richardson's arrival on the scene. When Richardson protested, and the hard plaster-like substance was cut out of the left hand wrap, the on-scene commissioner insisted that the wraps to the right hand were A-OK and that he personally would vouch for them. Except, of course, that they weren't.

I don't know the identity of that commissioner, but this smacks of something more than incompetence. It has the taint of collusion, and if that is proven he should be dealt more than a lifetime ban from boxing. He should be criminally prosecuted.

Richardson himself has adopted a less forgiving stance over the years. After Hopkins schooled Trinidad, a fight in which Richardson worked B-Hop's corner as an assistant trainer, he downplayed the fact that William Joppy had claimed he had been victimized in his fifth-round, middleweight unification stoppage loss a few months earlier.

"I think (the hand wraps) gave Joppy and some of the other guys Trinidad knocked out an excuse," Richardson said at the time. "I mean, the kid can punch. Trinidad could punch before,

he can punch now.

“Bernard just didn’t get hit a lot. If Trinidad had bricks in there, he still wouldn’t have beaten Bernard that night.”

So what does Richardson think now? He said he has had other conversations with Joppy, who continues to maintain that Trinidad’s power on the night they fought was something beyond all-natural.

“You know me, Naz,” Richardson said in relating what Joppy told him. “I take a good shot. I’ve sparred with heavyweights and gotten nailed. But nobody ever hit me like that before. It just didn’t seem right.”

Noted trainer and ESPN2 “Friday Night Fights” color analyst Teddy Atlas said the lack of proper oversight by various commissions is a matter that must be addressed, and soon, if boxing is to become as unsullied as it needs to be in order to maintain public confidence.

“This is why I’ve been calling for a national commission for the last 11 years,” Atlas said of the Margarito hand-wrap flap. “I’ve had this platform at ESPN where I can say something that I think needs to be said.

“We’re not going to get a national commission and even if we did, it probably wouldn’t be run the right way, anyway. I know I’m being cynical, but I have a reason for cynicism, unfortunately.

“We need uniform standards across the board and the possibility of actually administering those standards is low.”

Perhaps because Mosley has his own skeletons in the closet – he now admits that that “flaxseed oil” he thought was being rubbed on him by a personal trainer before his Sept. 13, 2003, rematch with Oscar De La Hoya probably was a designer steroid supplied by the infamous BALCO laboratory – he initially tried to downplay the hand-wrap issue and Margarito’s possible culpability.

“I don’t think Margarito was trying to do anything illegal,” Mosley said immediately after the fight. “I am sure it was a misunderstanding.”

Yeah, and Barry Bonds’ head grew two hat sizes larger because his skull was a late bloomer.

Atlas hears the excuses and the explanations and they ring as hollow as ever. What does the cheating husband tell his wife when she catches him in bed with another woman? He innocently asks “What woman?” as the naked lady gathers up her clothes and skedaddles out the side door For some, the best way out of an embarrassing situation is to deny, deny, deny.

“I don’t think it was a misunderstanding,” Atlas said of Margarito’s hand wraps. “I think he and his trainer understood exactly what was being put in there.

“Look, the California commission has not been the most glorious, to tell you the truth. They need to take some of the mystery out of this and tell us, at the earliest possible date, exactly what the device was. I’ve heard it was anything from a plastic shield to something that, if wet, acted like plaster of Paris.

“Identify it so we can know what the intentions were. Then we can go from there.”

Atlas said his cynicism is rooted in legitimate concerns. He’s seen commission members around the country who hadn’t enough sense to come in out of the rain, much less spot an illegal hand wrap if they saw it being applied before their very eyes.

“Look, nobody travels around the country to see boxing as much as I do,” he said.
For the last four years I’ve doing two shows a week on `Wednesday Night Fights’ and `Friday Night Fights,’ although we aren’t running on Wednesdays anymore. I’ve been to places in the middle of nowhere, wherever an Indian casino pops up – and believe me, they pop up everywhere. Iowa, Wisconsin, Oklahoma. You think those places have stable, knowledgable commissions? No, they don’t.

“Sometimes I have to instruct my guys, the guys who go to weigh-ins and stuff like that, not just to tell me the weights supplied by the commission. I tell them to see if the fighters actually get on the scales. There have been times when a weight was announced and the fighter never stepped on the scales.”

The International Boxing Hall of Fame is located in Canastota, N.Y., about an hour’s drive from the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y. Baseball’s high level of personal accountability has kept Pete Rose (gambling) and, to date, Mark McGwire (suspected steroid use) from the enshrinement their statistics on the field would otherwise merit. It’ll be interesting to see how Bonds, Rafael Palmeiro, Sammy Sosa and Roger Clemens, all of whom are believed to have used performance-enhancing drugs, fare when their names appear on the ballot.

Boxing, meanwhile, winks at its bad boys because it holds itself to a lower level of accountability. You say Sonny Liston was arrested 19 times? No problem! That Jake La Motta threw a fight? So what? Their plaques and those of numerous other semi-shady characters hang in the IBHOF because, hey, it’s boxing. If the doors to Canastota were open only to knights in shining armor, there wouldn’t even be any doors to open in the first place.

Just remember that l’affaire Margarito might only be the tip of an iceberg of a scandal whose effects potentially are more far-reaching than any of us would care to admit. If Bonds and McGwire hit more and longer home runs because of injections in their buttocks, isn’t it reasonable to assume that at least some of the more spectacular butt-kickings we have witnessed in the ring were the result of doctored gloves and hand wraps?

Like Hopkins said, it’s only cheating if you get caught. For boxing, the unfortunate reality is that too often Inspector Clouseau, not Lt. Columbo, is on the case.