

A Battle of Dueling Proverbs

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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When Poland's Tomasz Adamek wrested the IBF cruiserweight championship from U.S. Navy veteran Steve "USS" Cunningham on a rousing split decision on Dec. 11, in one of the best fights of 2008 or any other year, everyone – well, those of us who actually saw them engage in 12 rounds of give-and-take action – figured a second installment would be forthcoming sooner rather than later.

In a world where rematch clauses in boxing contracts are routinely exercised following fights that weren't such attention-grabbers the first time around (see Chad Dawson-Antonio Tarver I), the seemingly logical notion of pairing Adamek and Cunningham back-to-back was put on pause, like the DVD you were watching when the telephone rang or someone pressed your doorbell.

Cunningham, who has fought only once in the past 17 months, which will oblige him to scrape off a certain amount of rust when he does re-enter the ring – rust-scraping is a familiar complaint of sailors aboard warships when there's no actual battles being waged – figures Adamek and his promotional company, Main Events, have left him in drydock too long. The former bosun's mate and his manager-wife, Livvy, sense ulterior motives behind Team Adamek's decision to proceed with not one, but two less-compelling bouts while Cunningham has had to stand by for his marching orders, another familiar complaint of military personnel.

What's that old proverb? Oh, yeah, He who hesitates is lost.

"It's very frustrating for myself and for Steve," Livvy said. "Immediately after the (Dec. 11) fight, a rematch seemed like both camps were interested in. But nothing has materialized.

"It seems like every week Adamek's people came up with a different name for an opponent, then, when that falls through, they find somebody else. They consider everybody but Steve. It's like they're searching for the big fight, and we feel like we are the big fight."

Don King, who promotes Cunningham, also is of the belief that Adamek-Cunningham II should have happened already.

"I thought that there should have been an immediate rematch," said King, his jaw still sore a day after he underwent oral surgery earlier this week. "Cunningham would have won that fight if he hadn't gone down on those three flash knockdowns. But that's the way it goes in boxing."

So is King concerned that Cunningham (21-2, 11 KOs), who is scheduled to end his hiatus on July 11 when he takes on former WBC cruiserweight champ Wayne "Big Truck" Braithwaite (23-3, 19 KOs), probably in Sunrise, Fla., although the site has yet to be finalized, has been idle too long to achieve maximum effectiveness?

"Could be," His Hairness said. "That's always a concern. But remember, some heavyweight

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champions used to fight once a year.

“It comes down to the way a guy handles himself out of the ring as well as in the ring. Steve is a dedicated, committed fighter. He’s in the gym all the time. You know what they say: a rolling stone gathers no moss. Steve don’t sit around long enough to gather moss.”

Again with the proverbs. And here’s another: All good things come to those who wait.

That’s the stance adopted by Main Events president Kathy Duva, who has put Adamek (37-1, 25 KOs) in a title defense against unheralded Bobby Gunn (21-3-1, 18 KOs), also on July 11 and again at the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J., which is becoming the Pole’s American home-away-from-home.

Like the Cunninghams and King, Duva would love to see her guy and the ex-sailor from Philadelphia in a do-over. Their first fight simply was too entertaining to be put on the back-burner indefinitely. But that didn’t mean it didn’t need at least a little time to simmer, to percolate, so that the audience for Part II would far exceed that for the inaugural, which was televised to a miniscule audience on Versus.

“They have to fight again,” Duva said of the groundswell beginning to build for Adamek-Cunningham II. “It’s inevitable. Well, almost. On July 11, Tomasz is fighting Bobby Gunn. Cunningham is fighting Braithwaite at a different site. If they win, and I think they will, the rematch will happen, but for a whole lot more money this time.”

Patience is a virtue, so the saying goes, and if there’s one thing Duva, a former publicist for Main Events, learned from her late husband Dan, the company’s first president, it is that, like those wines Orson Welles used to pitch on television, no fight should be served before it’s time.

“Right after Tomasz and Cunningham fought the first time, people were saying, ‘immediate rematch, immediate rematch,’” Duva said. “But there was no market for it at that time. I knew we were going to have to take some time to build interest.

“I strenuously disagree with the idea that as soon as there’s a good fight, there always should be a rematch right away. It never used to be that way. Now, in some cases it’s called for. We did it with (Arturo) Gatti and (Micky) Ward. Their first fight was in a bingo hall in Connecticut. The second fight sold out Boardwalk Hall in Atlantic City. But those guys were known commodities, late in their careers. Waiting would not have made the rematch bigger.

“I knew we were going to have to take some time to build interest (in a possible Adamek-Cunningham II). The way to do it, I believe, is to do what we’ve been doing. HBO and Showtime are at least listening now. If I had gone in there in January, they wouldn’t have. Sometimes you just have to be patient.”

Duva, of course, has no control over what King and the Cunninghams do. But she said that Adamek – who followed his hellacious scrap with Cunningham with an eighth-round stoppage of Johnathon Banks on Feb. 27 – is establishing both a U.S. home base (the defense against

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Gunn will be his third straight in the Prudential Center, the first in the streak being his war with Cunningham) and a dedicated following in the close-knit Polish-American community in Northern Jersey and the New York metropolitan area. King, of course, is well aware of the zealousness of Polish fight fans, having promoted heavyweight loose cannon Andrew “The Foul Pole” Golota for a number of years, during which his bouts were packed with flag-waving countrymen who frequently left the arena disappointed.

“He’s as big in the Prudential Center and to Newark as Gatti was to Boardwalk Hall and Atlantic City,” Duva said of Adamek’s skyrocketing popularity among people of Polish descent and, she hopes, among fight fans of any extraction.

“Tomasz is smart enough to want to fight frequently. He’s getting the exposure, and giving us the opportunity to develop an audience for him. In Poland, he’s a rock star. He’s like Muhammad Ali and Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods all rolled into one. When he comes here (to the U.S.), people of Polish descent and heritage are, like, starstruck. As well they should. He’s charming as hell.”

With the development of American stars no longer as much of an imperative as it was with the premium-cable outlets – witness the enlarging followings of the Phillipines’ Manny Pacquiao and Ukraine’s Vitali and Wladimir Klitschko on these shores – Duva believes HBO and Showtime will be more receptive to Adamek as a possible ratings-booster in this country. The hard fact of the matter is that Oscar De La Hoya is retired and Roy Jones Jr. is sliding on the downhill side of his career as if on a toboggan.

It’s a sound business plan, on the face of it, although there are pitfalls to looking too far ahead and planning to reap future benefits that never come about. Remember Mexican-American heavyweight Alex Garcia? He was offered a career-high \$1 million to take on George Foreman, but his manager, Norm Kaplan, figured there was a \$5 million payday to be had against Foreman, or one of the other top heavyweights of the day, if Garcia was to hold off until he racked up another couple of victories. He wound up being stopped in two rounds by journeyman Mike Dixon on June 8, 1993, a supposed tuneup fight for which Garcia was paid just \$15,000.

Sometimes all good things do not come to those who wait.

Should Adamek stumble against Gunn, a 35-year-old plugger from Hackensack, N.J., whose credentials for getting a world title shot are thin at best, it would be the biggest upset in boxing since Buster Douglas made Japan the land of the sinking sun for an overconfident, underprepared Mike Tyson. But Cunningham is in tough with Braithwaite, who gives it all that he has for as long as he has it, although the gas tank of this Big Truck is more subcompact-sized.

“Braithwaite is a real fighter,” King said. “He gives it his all. His all might not last but three or four rounds, but for that three or four rounds, you’re going to know he’s there. And if he’s in superb condition, maybe he can go eight strong rounds. If he loses, he loses swinging.”

If Cunningham is sunk by one of Braithwaite’s bombs – remember, he was on the canvas three times against Adamek – that rematch with Adamek is likely to go the way of the

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Foreman-Garcia fight that never was.

All of which explains why the Cunninghams are antsy, and maybe a bit resentful, that Gunn is getting a dream shot they feel he doesn't deserve when a real Navy cruiser is anchored in the harbor and rarin' to put out to sea.

"It's a good come-up for Bobby Gunn, but how can anybody sanction him to fight for the belt?" Steve Cunningham asked, rhetorically. "I just can't believe it. It's impossible to even imagine.

"They can say it's a business move, but if you want to make money, the money match is me and Adamek in a rematch. When people ask Adamek about us fighting again, he always says, 'That's up to my manager, my promoter.' But that's a copout. The fighter is the boss, not that he shouldn't have input from his advisers.

"Adamek knows we put on a great fight, a fight people want to see again. I'm a little disappointed because he's not giving people what they want."

Added Livvy Cunningham: "If it's about Main Events adding to its bottom line, I kind of get it. If they think that getting in there with Steve again is too risky for their marquee fighter, I guess I can understand that, too. But this is the business we're in. You don't go down in history for taking safe fights. I mean, who is Bobby Gunn?"

Duva said the Cunninghams and King doth complain too much. The Cunningham-Braithwaite bout is for designation as the IBF's mandatory cruiserweight contender, and with Adamek due for a mandatory after he disposes of Gunn as expected, Cunningham will share the ring with her guy in the fall should both survive their July 11 tests.

And, no, she insists, she hasn't kept Adamek away from Cunningham for any reason other than it was the financially prudent thing to do.

"Taking a little break has made an Adamek-Cunningham rematch bigger," Duva said. "It's bigger for a lot of reasons. Tomasz has made a home at the Prudential Center, which is a huge key in building a fighter. That is a big part of the fighter's success. It always has worked for us."