

Adamek On Eve Of Playing The Field?

Written by Bernard Fernandez
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Kathy Duva has gone back to the future by revisiting the tried-and-true Main Events formula for conquering the world by staying close to home. Hey, if it worked for such Main Events staples as Pernell Whitaker and Arturo Gatti, it ought to work for Tomasz Adamek, right?

Except that Adamek, the IBF cruiserweight champion who has readily consented to Part 1 of the Duva master strategy by relocating from his native Poland to Jersey City, N.J., is reluctant to adhere to the rest of the Duva-envisioned script. Oh, sure, the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J. – where Adamek (37-1, 25 KOs) fights for the third consecutive time when he puts his title on the line Saturday night against Bobby Gunn (21-3-1, 18 KOs) – is a very nice venue and a neat place to hang out a while longer, but there are other boxing jurisdictions where Adamek would like to ply his trade. Pardon the pun, but you might say that Adamek and Duva, Main Events' chief executive officer, are poles apart when it comes to how they foresee the rest of his tenure with the Totowa, N.J.-based promotional company.

"I know all about Arturo Gatti and how he was basically the house fighter in Atlantic City," Adamek, speaking through an interpreter although his English is semi-passable, replied when I asked if he was prepared to do for the Prudential Center what Gatti did for Boardwalk Hall. "But I don't want to be limited in that way. I am fighting in the Prudential Center now, but I have no problem with fighting in Las Vegas, in Madison Square Garden. I want to fight in those places.

"If I have to go to Las Vegas to fight Bernard Hopkins, I for sure will go to Las Vegas. I don't want to be perceived as just a local boxer. I want to be an American star, for all of America."

But what of the constituency Adamek seems to be building among the large and fanatically loyal Polish-American community in North Jersey and the New York metropolitan area?

"I fought in Germany, I fought in Poland, I fought in Sweden," said the 32-year-old Adamek, who signed with Main Events in February 2008. "It was not my intention to come to America and be known as a local or regional boxer. I want to fight all over the United States. I want my name to be a household name everywhere in this country, not just in New Jersey or on the East Coast."

The 6-1½ Adamek, who said his "natural" weight is 207 pounds, also indicated that his days at cruiserweight are numbered, that he hopes to bulk up to 215 or so and try his hand at the heavyweight division no later than the fall of 2010.

"I am naturally bigger than Eddie Chambers (the 6-1, 208¼ -pound American heavyweight who is coming off a 12-round, majority decision over 6-7, 253½-pound Ukrainian Alexander Dimitrenko)," Adamek noted. "I am sure I hit harder than Eddie Chambers. If he can beat a big man like Dimitrenko, why shouldn't I?"

Kathy Duva, who was a publicist for Main Events when her late husband, Dan, was running the

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show and overseeing the hugely successful step up to heavyweight by undisputed cruiserweight champion Evander Holyfield, presumably would not object too strenuously with that part of Adamek's plan for seizing greater control of his career. Yes, Duva has gone on record saying that the cruisers are more athletic, competitive and just plain fun to watch than those massive dancing bears who have taken over the heavyweight landscape as might dandelions and crabgrass in an ill-tended garden. But she knows, as does Adamek, that the heavyweights are where the real money is, whether the payoff is in dollars, Euros, pounds sterling, deutschmarks, krona or Polish zlotys.

What's that old saying? There is boxing, and then there's heavyweight boxing. If Adamek believes he can be successful doing battle with significantly taller and heavier opponents, why not give it a try? Is he any different than such former cruiserweight champions as Holyfield, Al "Ice" Cole and David Haye, who dreamed of mixing it up with the big boys and made those dreams reality? Or even Chambers, who probably could campaign very productively as a cruiser if he made some moderate adjustments to his diet and workout schedule?

"At 215 pounds, with my speed and iron chin, I absolutely have an advantage over all those big, lumbering heavyweights," Adamek said through the interpreter, who seemed almost giddy about outlining the fighter's blueprint for out-Holyfielding Holyfield.

But the part about taking his show on the road, about yearning for fights along the Vegas Strip or in the Garden ... clearly, Adamek and Duva are going to need a sit-down to discuss their disparate strategies as how to maximize Adamek's career success.

"We'd been having discussions about doing fights at the Prudential Center going back maybe 12 years, long before there actually was a building there," Duva said in recalling her long-term strategy for finding exactly the right fighter to become the then-unbuilt Newark facility's regular fistic attraction. "Once the Prudential Center was up and running, we all knew it was just a matter of time before we took fights there. We also knew we couldn't go there with just anybody. It was going to have to be something that would work, and establishing a home base for Tomasz seemed like the perfect situation."

To be frank, Duva's flagging operation needed a perfect situation, and a major marquee attraction. It has been a long time since Main Events, which began in the 1970s as a mom-and-pop operation at Ice World in Totowa, went big-time with the mass signing of 1984 Olympic medalists Holyfield, Whitaker, Meldrick Taylor, Mark Breland and Tyrell Biggs. Just like that, Main Events became a player important enough to nudge perennials Don King and Bob Arum for space at boxing's head table.

But Main Events' golden stable of superstars began to tarnish and fade with age. Dan Duva left this world too soon, only 45 when he died of a brain tumor on Jan. 30, 1996. Newcomers under the Main Events promotional umbrella came and went, but, in some cases, the additions did not have the stature of the subtractions. One of the departees, vice president and matchmaker Carl Moretti, now vice president of operations for Top Rank, was one of the most respected administrators in boxing, a steady hand at the keel of the ship constructed in part by the bombast of patriarch Lou Duva and more extensively by the decision-making of Lou's

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lawyer-son, Dan.

There was an acrimonious family split that saw Lou Duva, son Dino and daughter Donna break away from Main Events, which Dan had bequeathed in his will to Kathy and their children. Eventually, Gatti, who sold out each of his last eight appearances in Boardwalk Hall, was the only Main Events main-eventer who still mattered. But the blood-and-guts warrior retired after back-to-back beatdowns by Carlos Baldomir and Alfonso Gomez, leaving Duva's once-thriving empire so threadbare that even full-time publicist Donald Tremblay had to be let go in a cost-cutting move.

Main Events rallied somewhat with the signing of Adamek, who had been the WBC light-heavyweight champion before he moved up to cruiserweight. Adamek was something of an unknown entity in America, but Duva saw something in him that suggested he had star potential here. Or maybe it was just a fervent hope, a prayer offered up that a Polish spark could rekindle past glories.

Adamek's first bout under the aegis of Main Events, an eighth-round stoppage of former IBF cruiser champ O'Neil Bell in Katowice, Poland, was a concession to practicality; having a Pole fight in Poland certainly seemed the course of least resistance in terms of doing a respectable box-office. Duva next paired Adamek with Gary Gomez in the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago, another fiscally prudent decision in that Chicago has a substantial Polish-American community and Main Events had done well handling the early career of Polish heavyweight Andrew Golota, at least until Golota revealed himself to be a psychological jumble of frayed nerves, insecurities and a proclivity for neck-bites and low blows.

What's a CEO to do when the walls feel like they're closing in? Tear a page out of the playbook from happier times, when everything on the bottom line was written in black ink. Tomasz Adamek, who grew up an ocean away, of necessity would become Newark's boxing hometown hero and Main Events' savior.

Adamek, who brought his wife and two daughters from Poland to live with him in Jersey City, made a profitable and aesthetically pleasing debut in the Prudential Center on Dec. 11 when he registered three knockdowns of Steve "USS" Cunningham en route to wresting Cunningham's IBF cruiser title on a split decision. He has since added an eighth-round technical knockout of Johnathan Banks on Feb. 27, with the likely successful defense against Gunn constituting what hockey fans would call a natural hat trick.

"It's growing with every fight," Duva said of Adamek's soaring popularity at the Prudential Center. "Our box office gets bigger each time. The interest from the premium cable outlets seems to be getting greater. Once you create a buzz around somebody locally, the more interesting they become, even on a national scale."

Even Gatti, Duva noted, is not a native-born New Jersey guy. He's from Montreal. But he sowed the seeds for his massive Jersey fan base by punching for pay in the state 30 times, including 23 times in Atlantic City, most notably those last eight bouts in which he elevated himself to the status of that town's franchise fighter. More important, the biggest step Gatti took in becoming

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accepted among Jersey boxing fans was to move to Hoboken and to assume an active role in community affairs.

"It's all happening for Tomasz very much like it did with Gatti," Duva said. "Gatti was always exciting. He fought in Atlantic City many times before he started filling up Boardwalk Hall. But once we gave him a home and were able to keep him there, that's when his career took off.

"When Tomasz came with us, we told him where we were going to anchor him. He was very receptive to the idea. He wanted to establish a home base in the U.S. That's kind of been our strategy for a long time. We put many of Fernando Vargas' fights at Mandalay Bay. We were involved with a lot of Tony Lopez's fights in Sacramento. And we kept bringing Pernell Whitaker back to The Scope in Norfolk, Va. I remember asking my husband, 'Why don't we take Whitaker to Las Vegas?' And Dan would say, 'No, no, he needs a home.' So wherever and whenever we could do that, we did it.

"Russell (Peltz) is our matchmaker now. He's certainly done it for years in Philadelphia. That's the model, that's how you do it. And if somebody isn't from a particular place, you make him of that particular place. But when you embark on something like this, you have to know who you can do it with, and how to do it. You can't necessarily take a guy from Ohio and make him into a Jersey fighter."

That is an obvious and pointed reference to Harrah's executive Ken Condon's quest to make WBC/WBO middleweight champion Kelly Pavlik, who is from Youngstown, Ohio, and promoted by Top Rank, into a reasonable facsimile of Gatti, a guarantor of Boardwalk Hall sellouts.

Adamek seems pleased to have established his primary residence in Jersey City. Whenever there is a Polish festival or some such social gathering in the area, he is only too glad to appear and sign autographs until he develops a case of writer's cramp.

"To the Polish people, Tomasz is like a rock star," Duva said. "But it's not enough to just get out and about. You can't fake sincerity. It has to be genuine."

Which begs a question. If there are as many Polish partisans in North Jersey and New York as there appears to be, you'd have to figure Adamek could transfer his flag to Madison Square Garden without any appreciable loss of support. But what happens if he informs Duva he wants to fight amid the neon wonderland of Las Vegas? Cruise the Hollywood hills and mingle with the movie glitterati during a working trip to the Staples Center?

Regardless of the big bucks shelled out for the Prudential Center's naming rights, there is no insurance policy that can indefinitely protect against a resident homeowner's desire to see what's on the other side of the hill. Even the now-retired Gatti has moved back to Montreal.

But it does seem to be easier to bring Poland to the United States than the other way around. Maybe that's the key for unraveling this Gordian's knot.

"One of my proudest moments was when one U.S. writer referred to Lennox Lewis as an

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`African-American,'" Duva said. "I just had to laugh. But you do have to Americanize your foreign-born fighters to some degree – even a guy like Lennox, with his clipped British accent.

"There are ways to take a foreign fighter and make him feel at home. Because America is such a melting pot, people here are very receptive to immigrants. But they have to assimilate into the community. We at Main Events have always worked very hard to make that happen."