

Future Champs From China? Dino Duva Dives Into The Export Business

Written by George Kimball
Wednesday, 19 August 2009 19:00

NEW YORK -- "The Chinese athlete," Richard Davimos was saying, "was tailor-made to become a great boxer."

Barely a week after his relationship with his business partner in Duva Boxing appeared to implode as a result of Don King's poaching of Texas welterweight James De La Rosa, Dino Duva showed up at an asian-themed restaurant in Manhattan Wednesday, where he unveiled his new business partner -- Davimos -- and his latest boxing acquisition, 6'7" Chinese superheavyweight Zhang Zhilei, who surprised the world of amateur boxing by reaching the final of last year's Beijing Olympics.

Zhang, who paid an obligatory visit to the Empire State Building the same day, has actually been in this country for the past three weeks, where he has been undergoing a crash course in boxing fundamentals from Hall of Famer Lou Duva, along with former US Olympic coach Al Mitchell and trainer Charley Mooney, at the Fernwood resort in the Poconos.

Next stop for Zhang, boxing coach Gu Jinhua, and the rest of a Chinese squad that won an unprecedented four medals in Beijing will be September's World Championships in Milan.

The last time Dino Duva had a serious case of the shorts it was resolved by selling a half-interest in Duva Boxing to longtime rival Don King. That this might be an exercise akin to inviting the fox into the henhouse was apparent to most, and it became apparent to Duva earlier this month when De La Rosa filed for bankruptcy and then, using the bankruptcy as a pretext for declaring his promotional contract null and void, proclaimed himself a free agent and promptly signed with the highest bidder -- who turned out to be King.

"And he's supposed to be my partner," wailed Duva, who announced that he would file a protest with the Association of Boxing Promoters -- an organization he and King, among others, had established less than two weeks before DK inked De La Rosa.

But even then Duva had other matters on his plate. He had banded together with Davimos to form a new company, this one known as D&D Global. And let it be said that while Dino's new partner might have even deeper pockets than his old one, this Davimos makes Don King seem modest and reflective by comparison.

At Wednesday's lunchtime outing he sported a rumpled baseball cap advertising a China-based, Buick-sponsored golf tournament. The chapeau was worn slightly askew in he manner of Jackie Gleason's old sidekick, Crazy Guggenheim. And when he spoke, which was often, you'd think he'd done more to open up the Chinese markets to western business enterprise than Commodore Perry had for Japan a century and a half earlier.

To hear Davimos tell it, this process has been largely a matter of educating Chinese leadership on sports marketing matters, but in any case, D&D has negotiated a joint venture agreement

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with the China Olympic Sports Initiative that gives it exclusive marketing rights to a number of sports. The Chinese wanted boxing to be the first project on that agenda, which is where Duva's expertise came in.

According to Davimos, D&D's sports marketing deal makes it the exclusive representative of Chinese sports to the western world.

"It took me years to educate the Chinese about the advantages of exclusivity," said Davimos. "When I first went over there [to China], Yao Ming had five or six agents."

Not only will D&D be the deal-maker for the Chinese Boxing Federation (arrangements have already been tentatively brokered with shoe companies and credit card firms) at the World Championships and the London Olympics, but, claimed Davimos, "if any of [the Chinese boxers] decide to turn pro, they're ours."

Considering that we're talking about the country that gave the world the Boxer Rebellion, this seemed to a fairly far-reaching assumption. Should Zhang Zhilei, who confesses to harboring aspirations of one day becoming the heavyweight champion of the world, decide to go pro after the 2012 Games, doesn't it seem possible that he might want to pick his own promoter?

The human rights angle appears to have occurred to Duva, if not to Davimos. In fact, when he heard that his new partner had boasted of having locked up the pro careers of every boxer in China, Dino seemed a bit uneasy.

"Maybe," he said, "you ought to strike that."

Okay. So maybe D&D won't enjoy the monopoly Davimos envisions, but, said the Smith Barney scion, his links to the seats of power in Chinese boxing circles are well established.

"Mr. Gu is a personal friend of mine," said Davimos of the Chinese coach. "He's stayed in my house nine times!"

Mr. Gu smiled inscrutably from the other end of the table. He presumably doesn't know Davimos is keeping a running count.

Davimos claims that Zhang is "the third or fourth-most famous athlete in China." Whether that will translate to name recognition in this country and elsewhere is another matter entirely. An ancient cavil trotted out at each February holds that "five billion Chinese don't give a spit" about the Super Bowl." The apothegm might also be applied to Chinese boxing.

Even though U.S. audiences haven't exactly broken down the doors to watch our domestic variety of amateurs, Dino Duva said he expects that "American fans will embrace [the Chinese] with open arms."

Al Mitchell seemed to agree. "You got Pacquiao. Everybody like him. You got two Russian heavyweight champions. And remember Azumah Nelson? If they can fight, they'll all come."

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The coaching triumvirate of Duva pere, Mitchell, and Mooney all seemed to agree that Zhang had shown considerable improvement even after his brief exposure to American-style (or at least Lou Duva-style) training methods.

"When you look at the tapes, in the fights he lost (including the Olympic final) it wasn't that the other guy beat him, but what he didn't do," said Mitchell of Zhang. "He's 6'7", but he was boxing like he was 5'8". You'd see him leaning in, and he didn't jab enough, but those are all things that can be taught. Heavyweights are late bloomers anyway.

"Besides," added Mitchell, "he's a athlete. If he played basketball, he'd be a great basketball player. Right now he's a good puncher but just a fair boxer, but we're working on his technique and skills. Me and Charlie been trying to get him to show more discipline in the ring."

Since, from all appearances Wednesday, Zhang doesn't speak English, since even Americans have trouble understanding Lou Duva, how did Zhang communicate with his new team?

"My father," joked Dino Duva, "has always spoken Chinese."