

No Drinking Of Strange Yellow Substances At Yankee Stadium

Written by George Kimball

Wednesday, 09 September 2009 19:00

NEW YORK --- The megafight between Manny Pacquiao and Miguel Cotto is more than two months away, so even though it was advertised as a "press conference," we had no anticipation that Thursday's affair at Yankee Stadium would produce anything that might be construed as newsworthy.

Rather, we found ourselves drawn to the House that George Built (with a little help from New York taxpayers) out of curiosity over the timing of the event.

Promoter Bob Arum has shown himself to be a pretty shrewd marketing guy over the years, so you had to wonder why he'd be kicking off a five-city press tour (one that includes three major league ballparks) literally days before Floyd Mayweather and Juan Manuel Marquez take to the ring in this fall's other big pay-per-view extravaganza.

We don't know about you, but we've found it difficult to get all that excited about Mayweather-Marquez. The whole idea seems so cynically contrived -- a guy who hasn't fought in 21 months against an opponent who's fighting almost ten pounds above anything he's ever weighed before -- that it strikes us as barely one step removed from Oscar vs. Shaq. And ABC didn't ask anybody to pay \$50 a pop to watch Oscar vs. Shaq.

Cotto-Pacquiao, on the other hand, is a real fight, for a bona fide title, and while we've watched Manny slay way too many giants to go picking against him, neither would we be shocked by a Cotto win.

Judging from the early returns, the public seems to agree. This is not to say Mayweather-Marquez is going to lay a big fat egg, but neither does it appear destined to become the box-office smash its promoters anticipated when they put it together. That's why you can barely turn on your television set of late without being subjected to a 24/7 bombardment of 24/7 and 24/7 reruns. The only surprise is that Golden Boy hasn't roped Court TV into the process by getting them to run weekly installments of Mayweather Family arraignments.

So you had to wonder why Arum, knowing that he had the whip hand, would stir things up by dispatching Pacquiao and Cotto around the country now, unleashing a process that could only call attention to the Sept. 19 fight by initiating comparisons. When you have the superior product, after all, isn't the more sensible approach to simply ignore the competition?

Then, of course, there was the added fact that this was another one of those "public" press conferences, a media event in which the media is literally the last consideration. Not only did the publicists pull out all the stops in an effort to produce a backdrop of screaming, fist-pumping fans by inviting them to occupy, for free, what are normally \$350 seats, but irresponsibly encouraged New York Public School pupils to skip classes for the day to do join the throng.

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You might say Top Rank looked as if they were trying to out-Golden Boy Golden Boy with this one, but the truth of the matter is that Oscar De La Hoya -- the guy who pioneered "public" press conferences at the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty -- learned this stuff at the feet of the master. Arum invented these things back when he was the promoter and the Golden Boy was a fighter, and the announcement of each new De La Hoya fight could routinely expect to draw hundreds and sometimes thousands of shrieking teenage girls, some of whom could be counted upon to shower the shyly grinning Oscar with their freshly-removed undergarments.

These demonstrations were supposed to convey the impression that De La Hoya's popularity transcended the sport itself, but the schtick did appear to have been stage-managed. Boxing writers never actually caught Top Rank publicists in the act of handing out training bras back in those days, but the alleged spontaneity of the lingerie-tossing was none too convincing.

Arum, of course, had promoted the last boxing event to take place at the old Yankee Stadium -- the 1976 third fight between Muhammad Ali and Ken Norton -- and makes no secret of his desire to be the guy who promotes the first in the new incarnation. (Pacquiao-Mayweather I, anyone?)

But one couldn't help wondering about the wisdom of throwing the gates open and inviting partisans of both fighters to jointly occupy seats above the first base line, not to mention announcing the event with a press release headline;

YANKEE STADIUM TO LAUNCH PACQUIAO-COTTO MEDIA TOUR!

FANS URGED TO PLAY HOOKEY AND ATTEND

FREE PUBLIC PRESS CONFERENCE

The first paragraph also included the notation "Truant Officers will be banned."

Hadn't these people ever seen the literacy figures for New York schools? (And, judging from their correspondence, some boxing fans seem particularly afflicted.)

Bob Arum seemed genuinely surprised that Thursday's gathering had been touted with a "skip school" message.

"It said what?" asked he incredulous promoter.

Assured that the announcement specifically included the "play hookey" line, Arum shook his head.

"They shouldn't have done that," he muttered.

And as it turned out, the promoter himself questioned the wisdom of taking Pacquiao and Cotto on the road this week. He'd have preferred to wait until after Mayweather and Marquez have

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concluded their business.

"The problem is," explained Arum, "there's a limit to how long we can keep Pacquiao in the country on his present visa, so that forced us to do the tour now."

Cotto and Pacquiao were trotted out in matching Yankee pinstripes, and each had been assigned a jersey numbered 09 -- close, but not precisely matching Roger Maris' retired number 9.

Judging from the response of the crowd at the Stadium Thursday, the truants appeared to be equally divided in their loyalties. That will not be the case on the second stop on the "Fire Power" tour, which takes place Saturday at the Centro de Bellas Artes de Caguas in Cotto's home town.

From there it's on to AT&T Park in San Francisco (Monday), Beverly Hills (Tuesday) and San Diego's PETCO Park on Wednesday. (By the purest of coincidences, Mayweather and Marquez are also scheduled to be in L.A. this weekend.)

When the World Boxing Council announced the establishment of its "Diamond Belt" this past summer, it was immediately and widely assumed that the title was being created to confer some sort of legitimacy on Mayweather-Pacquiao, but in what must be considered a major coup, the WBC then revealed that its first diamond belt would go the "Fire Power" winner, even though Los Bandidos already have a welterweight champion, and Cotto-Pacquiao is a WBO title fight.

Transportation of the bling was entrusted to the WBC's Prince Regent, Mauricio Sulaiman, who personally brought it to New York for Thursday's show-and-tell session at Yankee Stadium. Although it is similar in design to the traditional WBC green plastic belt, the plaque fronting the super-version is made of 18-carat gold, and contains "598 diamonds, 196 emeralds, six rubies, and 150 Swarovski semi-precious stones."

That's how many it had when it left Mexico City, anyway.