

King Mellows, Cardinale Bellows On Behalf Of Ruiz

Written by Ron Borges

Sunday, 29 November 2009 18:00

In the end it was a mistake, the kind a 77-year-old man just might make. That it was assumed to be more than that is understandable considering Don King's history of hijinks, but this time at least that's what it looks like – the kind of mistake he would not have made 10 or 20 years ago.

For years, King signed fighters to endless three-year extensions, often using a rollover clause that kept those contracts enforceable in perpetuity because every time the poor fighter won another title fight the contract was automatically renewed. Thankfully, this practice has been banned of late but when John Ruiz got himself back into the mandatory title mix following David Haye's lackluster victory over WBA heavyweight champion Nikolai Valuev, King was quick to claim he still had promotional control of the two-time former WBA champion.

As it turns out he did not and the fact that King waited less than 24 hours to publicly admit it is perhaps a better sign than many of the other positive things going on in boxing lately that the sport has finally decided to conduct itself like a professional sport.

Not long after Haye's victory Ruiz announced he was a free agent in search of a promoter. This was almost immediately followed by King announcing, as he often does, "Oh, no you're not."

Ruiz's manager, Boston attorney Tony Cardinale, immediately went into a public blitzkrieg, insisting King was full of turkey stuffings and a few things less attractive than that. He, unlike King, had his facts and his dates right.

For once instead of threatening a lawsuit or running to the WBA's board of banditos, King went to his file cabinet, checked what he had been told by one of his employees was a three-year contract extension signed by Ruiz and found, lo and behold, it was only for two years. Rather than do what has been done in boxing for the past 40 years – which would be trying to find some way to tie the whole matter up until everyone was in a knot – King told his PR man, Alan Hopper, to issue a release saying something that is seldom said: "Sorry, my bad."

King should not get a gold star for this but with the way promoters, managers, fighters, TV executives and sanctioning organizations generally handle their business, it was refreshing to for once have a guy simply say the other guy had a point. Not to mention, a validly legal one.

"My boxing department had advised me my contract was still active, which turned out to be incorrect," King said in a statement. "I apologize to John, his representatives, boxing fans and members of the media for making this mistake.

"When I was told this morning of this error, I immediately wanted to get the correct information out. John had been with me since 1998, and I would prefer to see him stay with me, but he is free to do as he sees fit. I wish him well."

If the latter point is a fib, by boxing's standards it is a small one. The fact is Ruiz was a free

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agent and for once someone in the sport didn't try to wrap a fighter in a cocoon of frivolous lawsuits to prevent him from auctioning off his services.

At the same time, King had also announced he had a letter from the WBA mandating an "interim" title fight between former champion Ruslan Chagaev and his fighter, Kali Meehan, who supposedly had been waiting quite some time for his own shot at the WBA title. How Meehan would have ever earned that shot is difficult to fathom but some problems cannot be explained away by a simple press release of apology.

It now seems that too was not quite right, although more accurate than King's claim of a hold on Ruiz. King did receive a letter from the WBA asserting that claim but it was so filled with wherefores, as tos, maybes and maybe nots as to be worthless, which it soon proved to be.

There may be a Chagaev-Meehan fight but if so it will only be to establish the WBA's next mandatory contender following the Ruiz-Haye fight next spring. Now you could debate how Meehan ever thought he was in the mandatory position when Ruiz already was there or you could argue all night whether or not Ruiz has done anything worthy of getting himself into that position as well, but the fact of the matter is, for once at least, the system avoided being clogged by lawsuits, legal threats and boxing politricks, as Lennox Lewis used to call the business end of the sport.

In the end, early next year Ruiz will be given a chance to win the WBA title for a third time in what will be his 12th heavyweight title fight. The winner may well have to make a mandatory defense against a Chagaev-Meehan winner but who cares? More than likely the winner will instead take on one of the Klitschko brothers and if so boxing fans might actually see the heavyweight title as close to unified as it's going to be for the foreseeable future.

King has now stepped aside and who knows who might come forward to sign Ruiz. Maybe no one. Maybe Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions, which already is the American representative of Haye. If Golden Boy were to sign Ruiz that would be in the lowest tradition of the boxing business because they would now be the promoter having both sides of the fight, which has long been King's modus operandi in such matters.

Prior to King's retraction of his claim, Cardinale issued a stinging rebuke. One can understand his quick response and his anger at what he knew was a false claim but late in that release Cardinale did what has for so long been a staple of the boxing business, which is he bit the hand that had been feeding his fighter often undeserved title fights for years.

"Ruiz' contract with Don King Productions (DKP) expired last month, prior to his Nov. 7 fight against Adnan Serin, legally allowing Ruiz to become a promotional free agent," a statement from Ruiz's publicist said.

It went on to claim King was "seeking retribution against Team Ruiz for its successful blocking of King's bid at the recent WBA convention in Colombia to create an "Interim" title fight involving one of his fighters. King also failed to have Chagaev, promoted by a different company, dropped in the WBA ratings behind three other King-promoted heavyweights."

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That seemed fair enough as well considering the circumstances and the history but what was the point of the following quote attributed to Cardinale?

“It’s a shame that Don King’s influence in the boxing industry has diminished so much that he has stooped to this level,” it said. “The fact is John Ruiz’ contract expired, by its own terms, Oct. 9, 2009. Apparently, Don has lost his ability to read or count as well...

“This is the nature of the beast we have been dealing with for the past 10 years. In every title fight John has engaged in under the DKP banner, King actively rooted for and supported John’s opponent, excluding only one fight (Ruiz vs. Kirk Johnson), in which he had no promotional interest in the opponent.”

Considering the enmity HBO had for televising Ruiz’ fights, he may well have been rooting against him but the fact is he worked for him for quite some time, getting Ruiz an unprecedented three straight title fights with the same guy, a far more saleable Evander Holyfield.

He also used his influence to get him a fight for the same kind of “interim” title Cardinale now finds reprehensible nine months after he’d lost in lopsided fashion to Roy Jones, Jr. Ruiz all but made Hasim Rahman quit that night and within four months King’s maneuverings with the WBA had worked to Ruiz’ advantage again, getting him the regular title without a fight.

After his one-sided loss to James Toney was ruled a no contest when Toney tested positive for steroids, Ruiz lost the title to Valuev. Somehow, without an intervening fight, Ruiz found himself 11 months later in a title eliminator against, lo and behold, Chagaev. He lost that fight by split decision but after two more wins against middling opponents arranged by King, Ruiz had himself another title shot against Valuev for the now vacant WBA title.

Ruiz lost a split decision and that was his last fight under his contract with King. He is now a free agent and earned the right to be one. But the fact of the matter is during much of those 10 years Ruiz was associated with King he was getting title shots he would never have gotten without that association.

That King was working against Ruiz’s best interests in Columbia this year at the WBA convention is likely but whatever he was doing then was no different than what he had been doing on Ruiz’ behalf earlier in his career. At that time, no member of Team Ruiz was complaining that some other fighter was getting screwed, which quite often was the case.

The point in all this is simple. As Rodney King once said, “Can’t we all get along?”