

Bottom Line, Arthur Mercante Jr. Adhered To The Rulebook

Written by Michael Woods
Sunday, 06 June 2010 15:00

The fight itself was no classic, as Yuri Foreman found out right quick that wed pulled a Mark Twain deal on him and you, that the press had decided prematurely that 29-year-old Miguel Cotto was stick-a-fork-in-him done.

Not so, it looked like in minute one, as Cottos hand speed was there, and his legs were sturdy underneath him. And if his power didnt exactly overwhelm at 154, and he looked a bit more like his brother Jose than the Miguel whod won three titles, it was still enough to get the better of Foreman.

Yuri, as wed posited on ESPNNewYork.com (heres the link, check the seventh-to-last paragraph... sports.espn.go.com/new-york/news/story), was perhaps the beneficiary of an avalanche of pre-fight hype. We focused excessively on his superlative backstory, the rabbi-to-be angle, and neglected to examine the resume, and compare it to Cottos, as much as was warranted. And guess what? I more than played a part in that.

LOL.

Cotto sized up Foremans lack of pop immediately and as Frank Lotierzo will point out in a column that goes up tonight, that lack of firepower made Cotto infinitely bolder. Its much easier to stick to your agenda when you know the other guy has to catch you totally unawares with a perfectly placed shot to hurt you.

So the scorecards, two of which gave Yuri just one round, another gave him two, hinted at the lack of drama in the bout. But no one on the New York fight scene will soon forget this main event, because of what went down in the eighth round. Foreman trainer Joe Grier didnt like the way his fighter was looking, as hed slipped twice and was favoring his right knee, which hed hurt as a teen in Israel. So, responding to his own eyes, and the lobbying of Foremans wife Leyla, a few rows away from the corner, he lobbed a towel into the ring. This, in his mind, signaled a surrender. In the mind of referee Arthur Mercante, that towel did no such thing.

From my seat in press row, I howled in protest as Mercante blew off the towel, refused to accept the flag of surrender. After a delay in which Mercante, Grier, Foreman and the New York State Athletic Commission conferred, the action re-commenced. We heard a message of supposed clarification from a well meaning Michael Buffer, who said that Mercante had refused to acknowledge the towel because he didnt know its origin, and said it came from an outside source. On fight night, I heard that, and howled louder. Because I was pretty damned sure Id seen Grier lob the towel. It didnt come from some hot dog vendor, or whatever.

So my Irish was up. I was heated.

Then the eighth round ended. Foreman went to his corner. He was looked at by Grier, and by a ring doc. He said he wanted to continue. His knee was hurting him, but he wanted to go on. He

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wanted to be the brave warrior, represent himself, and his nation of origin, with valor. We always ask the combatants we most revere to do just that, right?

Cotto knew he had a wounded animal in front of him to start the ninth, and he bore in for the kill. This was no Andrey Tsurkan, or James Moore and David Santos coming in to finish the deal. This was Miguel Cotto, a veteran of the very highest levels battles. Was this A grade Cotto, classic Cotto? No, but it was still B+ grade, better than anything Foreman has ever had to contend with. I'd been muttering to myself, and Tweeting, that Cotto should go to the body, take something from Yuris legs. He did, with a Micky Ward special.

Foreman went down, in agony, and now Mercante pulled the plug. He gave the kid every chance to pull the miracle upset, but Cotto, and his limitations as a boxer, were too much for him. It was over, less than a minute into the ninth round.

But the controversy lingered. TowelGate, I referred to the incident in my ESPNNewYork column that went up that night. At the Stadium we debated the issue. We wondered why Mercante hadn't accepted the towel. We saw a hurt warrior, on a gimpy leg, we didn't want him to take unnecessary punishment. We heard Mercante's explanation after the bout, heard him say, "The towel came in, in the heat of battle. There was a good exchange going at that moment. And the towel came in and I felt it wasn't necessary... and I didn't know where it came from. About ten seconds prior to that, someone from the corner stepped up and said, "Stop the fight, stop the fight. I looked and there was no one in the corner. There was no need to stop the fight. They were just in the middle of a good fight, a great fight. That's what the fans came to see. It was a shame...

That last part stood out for me, at the time. Why, I wondered, is that even part of the equation to Mercante? You all know I lobby all the time for fighters to see themselves as entertainer-athletes, if they wish to maximize their earnings, and lean towards being offensive minded pugilists if they want to be seen as fan-friendly boxers. But a ref can't let that factor into his decision-making, in my mind.

So I wasn't all pro Mercante on Saturday night, for sure. But I must make this admission--that is because I wasn't in possession of all the facts. Fact is, NY rules say that he did the right thing. Here's Rule 210.17 from their rulebook. It's been in there since the 1930s, I believe.

No one shall throw any towel into the ring as a signal of defeat or for any other reason.

There you go. Only the ref or the doctor can stop a fight, according to commission rules. Though a cornerman can stop the bout by walking up onto the apron, and getting his fighter disqualified.

Mercante knew that on that night. In the stands, I didn't. In press row, we weren't sure if the refusal to honor the cornerman's signal of submission was part of the unified rules, or a NY-centric rule. The fans, most of them, didn't know the rule. Buffer tried to do the right thing by offering clarity, but his effort fell short, as the towel didn't get thrown from any grassy knoll.

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NYSAC chief Melvina Lathan talked to TSS on Monday. I do think Arthur did what he was supposed to do. I always tell the referees, Be aware of the fighter, and if you feel he is not defending himself properly, and you feel the need to stop it, Ill back you one hundred percent. I much prefer that the fight be stopped sooner rather than later.

NYSAC director of boxing Ralph Petrillo told TSS that Mercante did the right thing in the eighth as well. There was no way for him to ascertain where the towel came from. He did the right thing, and went to the corner. (Mercante said after that Grier denied throwing the white towel when Mercante asked him about it. But upon watching the HBO telecast, you can see Mercante asking the corner after the eighth, and asking who threw the towel in. Grier said, I did. So that portion of the whole muddle still isnt clear.) Now, the trainer could have come up to the apron with a commissioner to stop it, by disqualification. And Grier could have stopped the fight in between rounds, by telling the doctor or ref. And the fighter wanted to continue.

Foremans a fighter, a champion, he came to fight, to defend himself, and his belt, and his people, Lathan continued. There were some great exchanges still. I think Arthur did a remarkable job, he did what he was supposed to do. He knows the rules, he responded appropriately. All in all, it was a magical evening of boxing. We had full cooperation from all forces, the NYPD, MTA, State Police, Yankee Stadium security, our office. No one was hurt. It was a great evening, for the families, for the people in the Bronx, for boxing.

FYI Lathans tenure as chief was just extended, by three years. As far as we can discern, the refs and judges underneath her umbrella appreciate the fact that she backs them up, and doesnt second guess them. If Im Mercante, Im appreciative, because in this day and age, cover your ass is the prime motivator for too many people in power. But Lathan is in his corner, full on, and seems to understand that critics will rail from the sidelines, expecting perfection during a period of disarray.

Could he or should he have pulled the plug, because Foremans leg compromised his mobility? Maybe. But as I said before, dont we revere those fighters who keep on competing, even though they broke their hand, or their eye is closed? Dont the fighters themselves enter the ring with eyes wide open? Didnt Foreman desire to keep battling, and was he not defending himself and answering back with offense?

Bottom line, Mercante did indeed adhere to the rulebook. Should we look hard at the rule as it exists in the rulebook? Maybe so. But on June 5, Mercante did indeed act in accordance with the rulebook.