

Once A Week, He Wants To Leave, But Lou's A Lifer

Written by Ron Borges

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In May, Lou DiBella will mark his 10th anniversary as a boxing promoter. In light of some of the disappointments he's faced, it is astounding he's still in the sport because, frankly, he could do without it...except that he can't live without it.

DiBella could do without the backbiting, the short-sighted business practices, the greed, the sport's seemingly endless efforts at self-immolation, the lousy judging, the politics and the unscrupulous business practices of some of his competitors to name a few things he could do without. What he can't do without is boxing itself.

Boxing has been in DiBella's blood since he was a kid in Brooklyn watching Nino Benvenuti with his grandfather and cheering he knew not why except that Benvenuti was Italian and so was he and his grandfather loved both... so what other reason did he need?

He is, it seems, a boxing lifer although he would be loath to admit it. He wants out about once a week but stays in for 10 years. Go figure.

DiBella has led a number of fighters to world titles, the most recent being Paulie Malignaggi and Andre Berto but what he is proudest of, he says, is the kind of thing that goes unnoticed by everyone but the people it impacts most.

"The one thing I'll say I'm proudest of is if you go talk to any undercard fighter we used as an opponent or a guy on the B side of a show and asked them how they were treated by me and my company they'll tell you they were treated well and fairly," DiBella said recently.

"They stay at the same hotels, with the same level of comfort, the same transportation. I know most of those kids. We try and do right by them."

Long-time matchmaker Carl Moretti, who now works for Top Rank but once worked for DiBella, backed that up. He said DiBella insists more than most promoters that matches be fair and mismatches be avoided even in places where the commissions might turn a blind eye to such a thing.

"It's cost Lou money," Moretti said, "but he feels strongly about that."

"To throw a kid in with someone who is world class is shameful," DiBella said. "I'm not saying you put your fighters in a war every fight. I'm just saying you don't litter an undercard with one-round knockouts and ass beatings. You won't find many times I made a death match. If it costs you a few bucks more it costs you a few bucks more. It's savage not to pay attention to that."

DiBella is ever mindful of that but even more so since the death of former IBF lightweight world champion Leavander Johnson. Johnson died after collapsing in his locker room on Sept. 17,

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2005 following a 11th round TKO loss of his title to Jesus Chavez.

It was not a mismatch. It was not a result of anything but bad luck and God's will. Yet DiBella was in the locker room when Johnson collapsed, dying later from head injuries, and it is a moment that changed his life.

"Here was a world champion, a guy who had undergone proper medical testing, who was in great shape, but was a victim of his own bravery," DiBella said. "I'll never forget that night.

"He apologized to me for not winning. Then he hit the ground. He died a week later. If you are a human being and you go through something like that you have to be changed by it.

"I came pretty close to quitting the business after that. I'm glad I didn't. I'm grateful to Leavander's family for urging me to keep doing what I was doing. Leavander's dream was to be a world champion. He knew the risks. I am thankful I could help him live that dream but he died doing what he loved.

"I didn't go to a fight for a long time and the first time I did I ended up in the back of an ambulance with one of my fighters, Jaidon Codrington, after he got knocked out. All I could think was 'Not again!'

"Fortunately, he came back and fought and he was able to get out and be OK. He's studying to be an accountant now. That makes me feel good."

Everything in boxing does not but some things hurt more than others. The first and maybe worst was what DiBella sees as Bernard Hopkins' betrayal. When DiBella left HBO it was with the then middleweight champion as the cornerstone of his new business.

He helped steer Hopkins through Don King's middleweight tournament and the night Hopkins destroyed Felix Trinidad to win it all, DiBella believed he had too.

He had one of the hottest names in boxing and the cornerstone for a growing business. Not long after the fight he thought he also had the gloves Hopkins used that night, a present the fighter made to him.

Turns out he had neither. Not the gloves and not the cornerstone because soon he was in a courtroom, suing Hopkins for defamation after the fighter accused him of demanding a bribe from him before he left HBO. The court ruled in DiBella's favor and it cost Hopkins over \$600,000. What it cost DiBella is what was left of his innocence.

"Had Hopkins stayed with me the trajectory would have been the same for his career but where would my company be now?" DiBella said. "If Bernard had any degree of loyalty and I didn't lose a year of my life and more legal fees than I care to recall my company would be in far better shape today.

"I've managed to steer us through some hard times in boxing and we're in the black but it would

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have been far different. It was a lesson to me. I was naïve. He was a guy who'd always had problems. I should have been more open-minded about who he is. Now I know better."

Yet even that knowledge could not insulate DiBella from his most recent hurt. When the fighter he'd promoted from the moment he came out of the Olympics – Jermain Taylor – announced his retirement after DiBella told him he no longer felt it was safe for him to box and so he would not promote him any longer, Taylor made a point of not mentioning DiBella by name when he thanked those who helped him become a world champion and a millionaire.

It was a slight that hurt DiBella deeply in part because he believed fervently he was doing the right thing by telling Taylor he had taken too much punishment in boxing and it was time to leave after being knocked out three times in his last five fights.

"My company made a lot of money with Jermain Taylor," DiBella said. "He beat Hopkins twice. He did great things. He has a wonderful family. When (Arthur) Abraham knocked him out the way he did it was like a replay of the (Carl) Froch knockout but more stunning. I heard his head hit the canvas.

"I saw him in the locker room later in a fog. It was two fights in a row. His eyes were dull. I promised myself that night I'd tell him to stop and if he wouldn't I couldn't be party to it.

"Jermain is my friend. He'll always be my friend but the statement he put out when he retired, not even mentioning me, that hurt. I'm not angry about it. It's not the kind of thing you get angry about. I was hurt."

Yet DiBella has had just as many high notes as off-key ones in boxing. He staged the trilogy between Micky Ward and Arturo Gatti that will live on in the annals of boxing as three of the greatest wars ever staged.

He has developed a number of fighters from scratch to become champions, something many top promoters avoid because of the difficulty and cost of it. He saw Ward make \$1 million in one night at a time when he thought his career was over. He had Leavander Johnson when it was good and Berto on the rise and he saw Malignaggi come back from a terrible beating against Miguel Cotto to win a world title against long odds. He has seen much in boxing and a lot of it has made him smile.

"He told the world he was going to be robbed in Texas and he was robbed and I couldn't protect him but we got him a second shot (against Juan Diaz) and Paulie came back and won," DiBella said. "That's what keeps you in this business."

In an effort to keep the business viable, DiBella has been instrumental in trying to create a promoters association that will promote working together rather than slitting each other's throats. Some long-time promoters look at the idea the way old politicians look at Barack Obama when he talks about bi-partisanship.

DiBella knows it's a long shot but he accepts that most things in boxing are. You don't get into

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this business looking for a sure thing because the only sure thing in boxing is a broken heart. So you just try your best, hope for the best and do your best. After 10 years in the fight game, Lou DiBella knows he can safely say he's done that. So what else is there?

"We've had some ups and downs but I've been blessed for the most part," DiBella said. "I've learned a lot, had a lot of laughs and been able to do other things outside of boxing to keep my sanity, such as it is. What more can you ask for?"

Good question.