

Boxing, The Healthiest Zombie In The Sports World

Written by Ron Borges

Sunday, 28 February 2010 18:00

Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian media theorist who coined the phrase “the medium is the message.” Hall of Fame promoter Bob Arum believes these days the venue is the message. If he’s right about that then the message is clear – boxing lives!

For decades now the death of boxing has been widely lamented.

It was dead from overexposure.

It was dead from shoddy and sometimes shady decisions.

It was dead because there were too many champions and too few fighters worth of those titles.

It was dead because of inept commissions and corrupt ratings organizations.

It was dead because there were no new stars and few places to develop them.

It was dead because of the Mike Tyson Effect.

Boxing was dead because of the rise of MMA and the UFC phenomenon.

It was dead because it was absent from free TV and mostly missing from the pages of the old media, once known as the newspaper business back when it was a business and not a sinkhole of broken finances.

In sum, boxing has been declared dead more times than Lazarus, yet it remains on its feet and Arum contended last week that the deals he has cut to put on Manny Pacquiao vs. Joshua Clottey at Cowboys Stadium outside of Dallas on March 13 and Miguel Cotto vs. Yuri Foreman in Yankee Stadium on June 5 are a declaration that despite the constant handwringing and predictions that boxing is your grandfather’s sport it is poised to rejoin the debate over how sports fans spend their dollars.

“If we believe- and I certainly believe it - that boxing is a big-time sport, boxing is on a crest,” Arum argued forcefully. “Boxing isn’t a niche sport or a dying sport, but it’s a big-time sport and putting it in big stadiums like Cowboys Stadium, like Yankees Stadium, like the new stadium in the Meadowlands, proves that point because when you put your product in venues like that, what you’re saying to the world is that boxing is a big-time sport and can hold its own past any other sport.

“We know what’s happening in Mexico...boxing is getting higher ratings than soccer and certainly any other sport going on regularly on terrestrial TV on a Saturday night. We know it from Germany where arenas are constantly sold out and the ratings are through the roof. We know it from England and the Philippines and Japan. We don’t know it yet from the United

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States but I'm telling you, it's like the sleeping giant that is there.

"Boxing in the U.S. will take its place the same way that it is doing in the rest of the world - like a big-time sport. Putting these events in these stadiums will prove that and demonstrate that."

The first step in that direction is that the Clottey-Pacquiao fight is close to a 45,000-seat sellout at Cowboy Stadium despite the fact one fighter is from Ghana and the other from the Philippines. Although Pacquiao is considered the pound-for-pound best fighter in the world and hence a huge attraction on his own, Arum is drawing primarily from a Hispanic fan base in Texas so he has created a heavily Hispanic undercard to interest a loyal following for the sport within the Latino community.

That is called marketing, something most promoters think is what you do when you go shopping for groceries but Arum has always embraced. He has long been at the top of that end of the field and unlike many of his competitors he has shifted with the times.

Once he wanted to rule the heavyweights. When they slipped toward Don King and then slipped out of view (and out of the country), he shifted to the welterweights and middleweights and in recent years has gone both to even smaller fighters and to the Latino community, where boxing is a leading attraction.

He has adjusted to changing times and circumstances while others have not, and because of it he's back at the top of his sport over 30 years after starting there with Muhammad Ali as his main attraction. It's harder now than it was when Arum first cracked the business but clearly he has done it with the unlikely combination of a Filipino superstar and a primarily Hispanic fan base that he caters to.

In the end, regardless of how he figures to pack more than 40,000 fight fans into a football stadium in Texas and another large crowd into Yankee Stadium in June it is, he believes - and boxing fans should hope - it is all testament to the rebirth of the greatest one-on-one competition in sport - boxing.

"As you will see on March 13, there is no stadium or arena in the world like Cowboys Stadium," Arum said. "What makes the event super exciting is that screen that goes from one 20 yard line to the other and is super high definition. The screen will be 30 feet above the ring. Every replay and every punch in the fight will be seen in really high definition. Indeed, as pretty as the Cowboy cheerleaders are, wait until you see them on that big screen, it is something really special.

"We didn't set the stadium up for 40,000, we set it up for 45,000 and we are on our way to selling out. There are a lot of Hispanics in Dallas. We are selling a lot of tickets to Hispanics. On the principal undercard bouts we have Hispanics. We have Jose Luis Castillo fighting Alfonso Gomez, John Duddy, who is Irish, fighting Michael Medina, a Mexican from Monterey, middleweight, and David Diaz against Humberto Soto for the WBC lightweight title.

"(The size of the crowd) that's up to Jerry (Jones, the owner of the Cowboys who offered a \$25

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million site fee for the failed Pacquiao-Mayweather fight). Right now everyone would have a tremendous view of the fight. We could expand but right now we are on target to sell the 45,000 tickets and we'd be very happy doing that. By the time the fighters get into town, we would have sold well over 40,000 tickets. We would then have 3,000 or 4,000 tickets to go and it would be up to Jerry to expand.

“On the non-televised portion of the card, it is loaded with Hispanics like Roberto Marroquin of Dallas – the Hispanics and Mexicans will be well-represented. Manny Pacquiao has fought many Mexicans and when I was down in Mexico identified Manny as a Filipino/Mexican and the Mexicans in California feel that Manny is one of them.”

That latter point is typical Arum hyperbole but the larger one he is making is not. Boxing once held many of its biggest fights outdoors because of the crowd demand, but there has been no major outdoor fight at Yankee Stadium since Arum put on Ali vs. Ken Norton in 1976. To return there over 30 years later with Cotto-Foreman is a leap of faith not so much by Arum but by the people who run the new Yankee Stadium and the fans who have been loyal to boxing for so many years, even when the greed and short-sightedness of many of the people running the sport made that difficult.

Yet because of its primal beauty, compelling action when at its best and fundamental appeal, it seems the sport is growing once again in the United States to the point where major stadium fights can now be staged with confidence fans will come. What this all adds up to is one word – hope.

Hope for a sport that has always deserved better than its gotten from the media, from general sports fans and, frankly, from many of the men who have made millions off it.