

Two Nice Consolation Prizes

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 03 March 2010 18:00

It is the age-old question, one that has puzzled mankind for what seems like forever.

All right, so maybe the foremost such puzzler is “Why did the chicken cross the road?,” but right behind it is the little matter of whether 'tis better to have a bird in the hand or two in the bush.

Boxers, their managers and promoters have contemplated that perplexing choice ever since men first determined that they could earn a living by tugging on padded gloves and punching one another for fame and profit. You'd think by now that some sort of pattern would have emerged, but every year someone in the pugilistic arts is required to determine a course of action that could severely affect their bottom line, in addition to satisfying or thwarting the cravings of a public that is notoriously impatient when its will is circumvented.

Not so very long ago, fight fans had a bird in the hand, and it was ostrich-sized and as majestic as a bald eagle in flight. Welterweight superstars Manny Pacquiao and Floyd Mayweather Jr., generally acknowledged to be the top two pound-for-pound boxers on the planet, had agreed to a megabout that almost certainly would have been the sport's highest-grossing showdown. Each combatant would have earned in excess of \$25 million, with some estimates topping out in the \$40 million range. Cleveland Cavaliers icon LeBron James would have to play back-to-back, 82-game NBA seasons to earn a comparable bonanza.

With such a ridiculous amount money on the line, and with a rare opportunity to steer boxing back into the mainstream, it seemed impossible that the powers-that-be would do anything to unravel what initially appeared to be a done deal. But boxing being what it is, the opposing sides found a sticking point upon which they could agree to disagree, transforming the Fight of the Century into still another war or words, with each camp claiming to hold the moral high ground.

In short order, the fight that would have had the whole world buzzing with anticipation had split into a couple of still-attractive but lesser events, with the headline attractions digging in for a possible court fight instead of the one we all wanted to see in the ring.

When in doubt, call in the lawyers.

“It causes chaos and it's wrong for one fighter to try to impose his own rules and regulations on the sport and on another fighter,” Top Rank founder and CEO Bob Arum, who has paired Filipino national hero Pacquiao (50-3-2, 38 KOs), the WBO 147-pound champion, with Ghana's Joshua Clottey (35-3, 20 KOs) on March 13 in Cowboys Stadium, said of Mayweather's demands that “Pac-Man” consent to random, Olympic-style blood-testing as a prerequisite for their matchup to be made. “It's as silly as, say, Alex Rodriguez getting struck out four times by a Boston Red Sox pitcher and saying he's not going to face him again until the pitcher takes a blood test.

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“We have commissions to (make rules). You can make any request you want of a commission and if the commission feels there’s any validity to what’s being petitioned, it will then dictate what it feels is best. The proper procedure for Mayweather, if he wanted extra testing, was to go before the Nevada commission and request it. He didn’t do that.

“For Mayweather to try to bully another fighter into additional testing simply because he demanded it is preposterous. The Nevada commission has in place random testing, and that’s urinalysis. Nobody (with Team Pacquiao) is against random testing. But urinalysis is not invasive; blood-testing is.

“You don’t have to be a genius to figure out what (Mayweather) is trying to do. It’s an attempt to get into Manny’s head, to get him completely discombobulated so he would be easy pickings for Mayweather. But Manny didn’t put up with the bullying, so Mayweather is getting his wish to not have to fight him. Mayweather vs. Manny is a no-contest. Manny would wipe up the ring with Floyd Mayweather.”

Arum’s indignant protestations represent one side of the dispute, and they are reasonably compelling when viewed a certain way. If Pacquiao-Mayweather was to take place in Nevada, as was originally scheduled, the NSAC’s current rules and regulations should be the standard, right?

But Mayweather and Golden Boy Promotions, which is working in concert with Mayweather Promotions to stage the May 1 matchup of WBA welterweight champion “Sugar” Shane Mosley (46-5, 39 KOs) and Mayweather (40-0, 25 KOs) at Las Vegas’ MGM Grand, take the position that rules fraught with loopholes through which a drug cheat could wiggle is as bad as no rules at all, and that “Money” is a crusading knight whose noble quest for a more even playing field should be enacted forthwith.

“Floyd feels very strongly about bringing Olympic-type testing to boxing,” said Richard Schaefer, Golden Boy CEO. “I don’t think Floyd’s position on this is to be belittled or criticized. To the contrary, I think it is something to be applauded.”

Mayweather, at a Tuesday press conference at the Nokia Theater in New York to hype his scrap with Mosley, alternated between the roles of boxing’s would-be cleanup man and character assassin.

“I want to show the world that my sport is clean,” Mayweather said with the earnestness of Jimmy Stewart’s Mr. Smith going to Washington. “I think we should take a stand in all sports to show that. We have to separate the average from the good from the great.”

But although Mayweather said “I never said Pacquiao was on nothing,” he soon turned from the suggestion of impropriety to something that sounded more like outright accusations that Pacquiao’s rapid rise has been something less than all-natural.

“I never seen a fighter go from ordinary once he reached, like, 25 to extraordinary,” Mayweather said in taking another verbal jab at Pacquiao. “It just don’t work like that. I don’t like to throw no

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nails, but they all cheaters.”

Among the rules-benders and rules-breakers, Mayweather continued, is Mosley, who admitted to a grand jury that he had once taken performance-enhancing drugs on the suggestion of an employee, but that he did not know the substances were controlled and illegal.

“Mayweather just blurts things out he really doesn’t know about,” Mosley said, seemingly bemused by his upcoming opponent’s latest tirade. “That can be dangerous. People have filed lawsuits over that kind of stuff.”

Arum and Pacquiao, in fact, already have taken legal action against Mayweather, his father Floyd Sr., adviser Leonard Ellerbee, Schaefer and Golden Boy front man Oscar De La Hoya for defamation of Pacquiao’s character. Pacquiao has never failed a drug test, although those he has taken and passed are not as stringent as those preferred by Mayweather and insisted upon by the International Olympic Committee.

When asked if he still thought his fighter would someday mix it up with Mayweather, Freddie Roach, Pacquiao’s trainer, said, “Manny really wants to fight Floyd in the future, and he will knock him out.” Arum, who also was participating in the conference court, immediately chimed in that “We’ll knock him out in the court, too.”

Somewhat obfuscated amid the intrigue is the fact that the two consolation-prize bouts that arose from the ashes of Pacquiao-Mayweather are, upon closer inspection, fairly attractive as stand-alone events.

Pacquiao is the crossover star and reason Cowboys Stadium, scaled to a capacity of nearly 42,000, should sell out before the opening bell. Clotey is simply the other guy, the opponent, and someone few believe has much chance of pulling off the upset, but insiders know that he is tough, resilient and the naturally larger man. No, Pacquiao-Clotey isn’t the “Super Bowl of boxing,” as Roach boldly stated, but it ain’t chopped liver, either.

“People were looking forward to a Pacquiao-Mayweather fight, that’s clear,” Arum conceded. “But Manny Pacquiao has a huge, huge fan base now. He’s crossed over. Every sports fan knows Manny Pacquiao.

“You cannot say there’s two household names fighting on March 13. That would be ridiculous. But there’s excitement in Dallas. It should be a great show.”

Also lending substance to Pacquiao-Clotey is the fact that Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who offered a record \$25 million site fee for Cowboys Stadium to host Pacquiao-Mayweather (which Schaefer rejected out of hand), has made it clear that he wants his new, \$1.2 billion stadium to be the Southwest’s answer to Madison Square Garden, a Mecca for boxing with a Tex-Mex flavor. If the pay-per-view buy rate is anywhere near as impressive as what figures to be a sellout crowd at the live venue, Jones could emerge as a latter-day Donald J. Trump, reminiscent of a time when The Donald was pouring millions into his Atlantic City fight operation, with Pacquiao the sort of draw that Mike Tyson once was on the boardwalk.

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Schaefer, De La Hoya, Ellerbee and those involved in putting on Mayweather-Mosley figure their fight will do better than Pacquiao-Clotley, both aesthetically and financially, because it figures to be much more competitive. In *The Ring* magazine's end-of-2009 issue, a panel of experts had Mayweather and Mosley at Nos. 2 and 3 in the pound-for-pound ratings, behind Pacquiao.

"I have no doubt that our fight is going to do substantially better (than Pacquiao-Clotley)," said Schaefer, who boldly predicted a record 3 million PPV buys for Mayweather-Mosley.

So the battle lines are drawn. Pacquiao-Clotley and Mayweather-Mosley are distinctly different, separate and perhaps unequal tests of obstinant men's wills as well as of the fighters' skills. By May 2, someone might have emerged as the possible claimant of the all-in pot in the fight game's version of the World Series of Poker.

It's a major gamble for all involved. What happens if Clotley shocks Pacquiao? Or if Mosley gets past Mayweather in a fight that, on paper at least, figures to be more closely contested than the one that takes place 19 days earlier in Arlington, Texas? Does everyone's dream of Pacquiao-Mayweather go by the boards in the same manner of other alluring bouts that never came off, like Riddick Bowe-Lennox Lewis and Tyson-George Foreman?

The guy who has the best chance of holding a winning lottery ticket when all is said and done is Mosley, who has not fought since, as an underdog, he dominated and stopped Antonio Margarito in nine rounds on Jan. 24, 2008. Mosley had been preparing for a unification fight with WBC titlist Andre Berto when Mayweather-Pacquiao fell through, again thrusting him into the conversation regarding boxing's No. 1 performer.

"It's been a long time since I had a chance to show the world that I'm the best fighter," said the 38-year-old Mosley. "But then Mayweather's fight with Pacquiao fell out and mine with Berto fell out (because Berto, who is of Haitian descent, was too emotionally spent to fight after the earthquake that devastated that country). God works in mysterious ways.

"Really, this is the best fight that can be made, unless either one of us is fighting Pacquiao. We three are the best, and we have to figure out which one of us is the very best. But that will be revealed in due time. God has a plan."

Mosley, who has agreed to the Olympic-style blood-testing demanded by Mayweather, clearly is hoping that he can ride the momentum of a victory over his supremely confident and somewhat arrogant foe into a clear-the-decks throwdown with Pac-Man.

But if the favorites clear their respective hurdles, what then? Can Pacquiao and Mayweather find enough common ground to resurrect the big fight that came tumbling down like a house of cards?

Schaefer isn't so sure. "I feel both sides are entrenched," he said. "Floyd feels very strongly about bringing Olympic-style drug-testing to boxing. He's at the forefront of that. There's a lot of pressure on sports in the United States to rise to that standard."

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You have to wonder, though, if Pacquiao and Mayweather will wake up one morning, after they're retired, having never faced each other, and wonder how the hell they could have botched the multimillion-dollar equivalent of a two-inch putt or an uncontested layup. Standing on principle is one thing, but collecting principal on a \$40 million payday is quite another.

Other fighters regrettably have been down this what-if road before. In *Four Kings*, author George Kimball notes that Sugar Ray Leonard and Thomas Hearns were nearly paired early in their professional careers, before Hearns had established himself as a legitimate threat to 1976 Olympic hero Leonard. Their first meeting years later was elevated to legendary status because the correct decision was made for them to develop into something much more than interesting prospects.

But every two-birds-in-a-bush risk taken and rewarded is countered by the failure of someone to strike when the iron is hot. Ivan Robinson's manager, Eddie Woods, once turned down a fight with De La Hoya because he determined his man "wasn't ready for it just yet," a decision that cost Robinson a handsome payday and needed exposure. In boxing, when the train leaves the station, there's a good chance it's never coming back. Just ask Mexican-American heavyweight Alex Garcia, whose management passed on a \$1 million shot at second-time-around champ George Foreman in the mistaken belief that, by waiting, \$5 million would be offered for Garcia to tangle with Big George later on. Garcia promptly went out and lost to journeyman Mike Dixon, a bout for which he was paid \$15,000.