

If the U.S. Government can sponsor a Cash for Clunkers or a Cash for Caulkers program, surely it can sponsor a Bailout for Brawlers. The South African Government did it. In 2008 Bhisho's Department of Sport bailed out boxing promoter Sipatho Handi to the tune of 1 million rand after a failed promotion. In the U.S., the feds have doled out some 787 billion dollars to everyone from bank executives to the National Cemetery Administration. If boxing were to receive a financial stimulus, how should it use the money?

Bruce Silverglade, president and owner of Gleason's Gym in New York, says boxing won't benefit from any stimulus package. "It will only help the individual receiving it." He adds, "If the government wants to give out money, sure I'll take it, but it will only help me, not boxing." Silverglade's comment shines light on perhaps the root of all ills the sport may have. When there is a scandal in other sports, there is someone who has to answer to it. Baseball has Bud Selig; football has Roger Goodell. Boxing has a mess. Matchmaker Johnny Bos has a suggestion, for a start. "Start a national commission first. Without one in place, any needed changes won't happen."

The need for a national commission was a universal sentiment among the people I spoke to. Promoter Don Elbaum concurs with Bos. "Boxing needs a leader, not a politician but someone who knows the game. It needs its own Judge Landis." A stimulus would provide the start-up funds necessary to create a national commission along with selecting a commissioner who would preside over the sport. Once a national czar is in place, then other changes can happen.

"I'd like to see a retirement home for ex boxers set up," Elbaum says. "I think it'd be great if retired boxers with no other place to turn to could at least have that for an option." If that option existed, then former champions like Rocky Lockridge wouldn't have had to find an abandoned building to sleep in each night. Nor would they be found locked up in an attic, underweight and neglected, like Jimmy Bivins was in his retirement. At the very least, boxers should have a pension, says Jacquie Richardson, Executive Director of the Retired Boxers Foundation. "We would love to see EVERY state adopt a Boxers Pension Plan like California's, only properly administered," says Richardson. With a national commission, auditing fiascos like the one unearthed in 2005 where it was discovered that no one was minding the store at the California commission and the person assigned to log all the financial items into the system, like pensions, state taxes and fines, did not know they were supposed to be logging in any financial items into the system.

The Retired Boxers Foundation, founded in 1998 by former middleweight contender Alex "The Bronx Bomber" Ramos, provides a variety of services to ex boxers, such as financial, medical, and housing. According to Richardson, 87 percent of professional boxers end their careers with some sort of damage. One of the goals of the foundation is to help retired boxers lead an independent lifestyle---something a properly administered pension plan would do.

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“The Bronx Bomber would get \$154 a month from California, but if every state he boxed in had this same pension fund, he would get \$2000 a month” added Richardson. The California Pension Fund, which is managed by Cyril Shah, is “paid for by the fans with an additional \$.89 added on to the ticket price,” says Richardson. Despite that, some “promoters think it’s another fee they have to pay and they oppose it.” At a California State Athletic Commission hearing in 2008, promoter Roy Englebrecht sought an exemption from this rule for “pre-existing club level shows.” Englebrecht stated that “profits are purely on ticket sales and some funds from the sponsors” and that the “sponsorship money and seats are reserved for people who want the true experience of a live event.” With some promoters hesitant to participate and some state commission members unsure of their duties, a country-wide pension plan would work best with a national commission in place.

As for the 89 cent fee, Richardson suggests, “make it a dollar and give 10 cents to the Retired Boxers Foundation so we can continue to take care of fighters for whom it is too late. We would hold conferences for boxers and their trainers, covering safety, finances, contracts, drugs, the laws, etc. to prevent fighters from having to contact us for help.” If the Retired Boxers Foundation, which has an all volunteer staff, were able to conduct such conferences, they believe they could make some important changes. Changes like improved safety. The N.F.L. has made several changes recently to the way they handle concussions. The league’s handling, some say mishandling, of head injuries was highlighted in a recent series of articles in the New York Times and Time Magazine. At a Congressional hearing last October, their research and practices were criticized. As a result, the co-chairman of the N.F.L.’s committee on concussions resigned one month after the hearings. Does boxing even have a committee on concussions? Concussions are a concern in boxing and one must wonder if enough is being done.

“We would love to see posters mandated in every boxing gym that provide the symptoms for concussions. If someone wants to donate a thousand dollars, we would print them and send them to every gym we can find,” says Richardson, who has become all too familiar with the Pinocchio-like gait of an ex-fighter living with the lifelong effects of head injuries.

In a 1993 study by the British Medical Association, it was concluded that damage from boxing was cumulative. X-rays of boxer’s brains showed a “separated and torn central septum.” The study goes on to say that “brain injury, both acute and chronic, is the greatest potential risk that occurs in boxing. The association cited acute subdural hematoma as the most common cause of ring deaths and mentions that “chronic traumatic brain injury (CTBI) is the most feared complication.” Also known as pugilistica dementia or punch drunk syndrome, it is the result of cumulative damage of concussive or non-concussive strikes to the head.

Some of the measures in place designed to reduce exposure to injury include reduced rounds, two minute rounds in some jurisdictions, mandatory medical examinations, weigh-ins 24-30 hours before the bout to allow boxers to rehydrate, mandatory suspension for boxers who suffered a knockout, and larger or heavier gloves to reduce impact. Closer inspection reveals some flaws with some of the above measures. Day before weigh-ins are allowing fighters to rehydrate but they also allow boxers who can “cut” more weight than others to compete against smaller opponents. They use the 24-30 hours to rehydrate to their natural weight. Boxers like

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Joshua Clottey can cut down to 147 pounds, then rehydrate to as much as 170 pounds and compete against opponents who don't cut as much weight, thus giving them as much as a ten to twenty pound advantage. Mandatory suspensions treat all knockouts the same. If a boxer was stopped by a headshot or body blow, they are still suspended for the same amount of time. In other cases, some knockouts don't get reported, such as the ones suffered in gyms during sparring. Furthermore, some state commissions don't always communicate their suspension lists to other states, making it possible for a boxer under suspension in one state to fall through the cracks and box in another. Heavier gloves come in different shapes and sizes. Some have the added weight and padding in the wrist or non-striking area which defeats the purpose of reducing the impact of a blow. In addition, the British Medical Association notes that the "introduction of measures intended to reduce the force of a blow to the head are of little practical value if the minimum force needed to sustain either chronic or acute brain damage is not known."

In part two, we'll examine some options and tweaks that could better the sport...