

Written by Charles Jay
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The 97th Round

It's readily apparent that the federal bills we've seen thus far - the Professional Boxer Safety Act, the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act, and the proposed Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2003 - are products of a consistent theme: greedy promoters, and awful, corrupt sanctioning bodies exploiting unsuspecting fighters.

There are numerous references to these supposed industry conditions in communications from Senator John McCain and others, in addressing the bill with parties both outside and inside Congress.

You don't have to go too much farther than what the Ali Act itself lists as its #1 objective:

"TO PROTECT THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF PROFESSIONAL BOXERS ON AN INTERSTATE BASIS BY PREVENTING CERTAIN EXPLOITIVE, OPPRESSIVE, AND UNETHICAL BUSINESS PRACTICES."

Certainly, from a political standpoint, one must appreciate McCain's populist point of view.

But how intellectually honest is it?

What some people, who have boosted this bill but who haven't read it too clearly, fail to understand is that this legislation could have the effect of not saving fighters, but in fact screwing them.

For example, let's start with sanctioning bodies. This is how they're initially addressed in the Ali Act:

"THE SANCTIONING ORGANIZATIONS WHICH HAVE PROLIFERATED IN THE BOXING INDUSTRY HAVE NOT ESTABLISHED CREDIBLE AND OBJECTIVE CRITERIA TO RATE PROFESSIONAL BOXERS, AND OPERATE WITH VIRTUALLY NO INDUSTRY OR PUBLIC OVERSIGHT. THEIR RATINGS ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO MANIPULATION, HAVE DEPRIVED BOXERS OF FAIR OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADVANCEMENT, AND HAVE UNDERMINED PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE INTEGRITY OF THE SPORT."

I have nothing against encouraging these organizations to act more responsibly. And there's a long way to go. But the Boxing Amendments Act gives the federal government all the ammunition it needs to take complete control over the situation. It mandates the authority to license and regulate all sanctioning bodies. Of course, when they have to be licensed to operate, that license can be taken away if the sanctioning body does something the politicians -

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or more to the point, people the politicians listen to - don't like.

Well, you just KNOW that's going to happen. If there's anything we've discovered through almost 200 chapters of OPERATION CLEANUP, it's that McCain doesn't like the sanctioning bodies. Witness this passage from the March 1997 drafted letter McCain and his collaborators on the Professional Boxer Safety Act sent to the Office of Legislative Affairs at the Department of Justice:

"These private organizations rank professional boxers and award title designations to a select group of them. Sanctioning bodies charge substantial fees to the boxers they have designated as champions of a particular weight class. They have a proprietary and financial interest in furthering the success of particular boxers, often to the detriment of others. Unfortunately, the growing number of sanctioning bodies had a confusing and counter-productive impact on the integrity of the professional boxing industry."

Ken Nahigian, the assistant counsel to McCain's sub-committee that deals with the boxing legislation, detests sanctioning bodies too, and has refused to allow them any input whatsoever during the process of putting together the new bill. Embattled Pennsylvania regulator Greg Sirb, who has Nahigian's ear, hates them with a passion and has done his best to keep them out of the procedure by which ring officials are selected for championship bouts. And in conjunction with Sirb, Tim Lueckenhoff, president of the Association of Boxing Commissions, a trade organization, has waged war on sanctioning bodies, going so far at one point as to coerce a member commission to arbitrarily deny one of them a sanctioning fee last year, because he didn't like their ratings (the fee was summarily forwarded to the sanctioned body, when it was discovered that Lueckenhoff, and the state in question, had circumvented the law).

Since we pretty much know which direction these guys are heading, we know what is eventually going to take place - there will be sufficient excuses - either real or imagined - to severely curtail the activities of sanctioning bodies in the United States, or outlaw them altogether. With this bill, they will have that power.

That's good for boxing, you say?

Well, sit back and ponder that for a moment. It certainly won't be good for BOXERS. In fact, it will, in a roundabout way, disadvantage them in the end.

While McCain, in his bill, makes the claim that sanctioning bodies "have deprived boxers of fair opportunities for advancement", the truth, which he would have discovered if he'd done any research at all, is that for every opportunity that might be denied, several opportunities are CREATED.

I remember a conversation I had with someone involved in the "union movement" in boxing. He was railing about the sanctioning bodies - his complaints centered around fighters being "rated fairly", etc., etc. And he wondered whether ultimately it might be best if the sanctioning bodies were dissolved and Ring Magazine took over the ratings.

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I explained to him that he was not thinking clearly. If he was truly embarking on an agenda to benefit the fighters themselves, he wouldn't be calling for the elimination, or even the curbing, of sanctioning bodies. In fact, quite the contrary - he'd be looking to invite as many sanctioning bodies into the market as possible.

You see, more sanctioning bodies mean more championships. When more fighters have a championship belt, more fighters get title opportunities. The greater number of fighters appearing in somebody's ratings - whether it be on a world, national, or regional basis - the greater number of opportunities there will be for fighters to make more money, by virtue of having that "credential". The bottom line - more paydays for fighters.

Whether the impartial observer thinks that is good for the integrity of boxing, or would improve its public perception, is another matter. From the perspective of someone who's taken the posture of ADVOCATING for the fighter, the more sanctioning bodies, the better.

Imagine a situation where the politicians were successful in getting rid of sanctioning bodies, and God forbid - the Ring ratings became universally "authoritative".

You would no doubt run into situations where fighters deserving of a title opportunity would be frozen out of one, for any number of reasons - maybe they didn't sign with the right promoter or network (perhaps a promoter or network that purchased advertising in Ring?). Or they wouldn't sign options. Or - as I told the union guy - the champion and/or his manager is anti-union and the prospective challenger is a union member. All of this would be the product of having only one "authority", meaning there is nowhere to turn if an injustice is done. Anything is possible when only one entity has a monopoly on the ratings. And none of it is particularly good for the fighter as a whole.

I don't know that the union people I have talked to about this really understand it. And that's a bad sign.

The point is, the framers of the federal legislation have positioned themselves as having the same objective as those sympathetic to the union movement: protecting the interests of the fighter.

Unions would seem to be advocated by McCain, on the surface anyway. Here is a direct quote from a letter he sent one of our readers, Minnesota boxing writer Lee Anderson: "You may be interested to know that S. 2550 (the previous designation - it's now S. 275) would establish a framework through which boxers can form a private union, and collectively bargain."

As part of the press release announcing the Teamsters' effort to unionize boxers, James P. Hoffa, president of the organization, is quoted as saying, "Senator McCain supports our efforts 100 percent. He is supportive because he sees this as a way to turn his legislation to clean up the sport of boxing into reality."

But you simply can't reconcile simultaneously backing the idea of a union and backing this bill. The two are simply not consistent with each other, because the fighter will ultimately get

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screwed with McCain's bill.

Let me utilize another example - that of the "unfunded mandate" that is created by this bill, as has been created with its two predecessors. There is really no mechanism in place to enforce what is in the Act when it comes to the financial "disclosure" obligations on the part of the promoter. There is just a lot of lip service. Indeed, there have been fighters who have sought to exercise their rights under that provision in the Ali Act, but have been completely unable to. Since McCain is insisting states must carry out the obligations set forth in the federal law, that kind of non-responsiveness won't change with this bill.

An adverse effect is created when you give fighters the expectation that there is going to be a degree of protection, yet you take no steps to ENSURE that protection. It just becomes a bunch of hollow political nonsense. It's like dangling a carrot in front of a horse who will never be able to reach it.

And there is a common thread running through the actions of all the phony "reformers" - the McCain disciple, Greg Sirb, fills boxers with the idea that he is going to establish a "pension fund" for them, then gives out a grand total of \$700 in three years in the way of real assistance to fighters in need. And McCain himself seeks to score political points, as cheaply as possible, by advocating "rights of the fighter", but has no idea, and probably no intention, of facilitating it. The idea is simple - pass the bill, send a press release, and let's move on to more important things.

I can assure Senator McCain that the most important thing for most professional fighters is their CAREER. They don't care about politics. They don't care about who is going to win a majority of the House or Senate in 2004. They care about fairness. And they're quickly coming to the realization that McCain shares their concerns only until the cameras turn off.

Then it's every man for himself.

Some fighters have learned this the hard way. Some are about to.

Because for a business that has operated largely in the dark, McCain is about to create an even bigger veil of secrecy.

That's next.

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