

You Can't Spell "Blame" Without "Lame"...RASKIN

Written by Eric Raskin

Monday, 03 October 2011 09:00



"The worst part is, I don't even feel bad about the days that I hated Bartman ... I know it's irrational, but I think most of us can't help it."

—Michael Wilbon

The new ESPN Films documentary *Catching Hell* spins off of the case of Steve Bartman, the Chicago Cubs fan who interfered with a foul ball and indirectly sparked the 2003 Cubs' playoff collapse, to examine the psychology behind scapegoating in sports. In an interview that was tangentially attached to the documentary, Chicago native Michael Wilbon captured the essence of the sports fan's need to find a scapegoat with one word: "irrational."

Everybody knows it wasn't really Bartman's fault that the Cubs didn't go to the World Series, not with the team holding the same 3-0 lead after that play that it held beforehand. Everybody

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knows it wasn't Bill Buckner's fault that the Red Sox lost the 1986 World Series, not with the score already tied before he infamously let a ground ball roll past his glove. Rationally, we know there's blame to be spread around. It was Bartman—along with Moises Alou and Alex Gonzalez and the pitchers who gave up the hits and the fans who let their sense of dread overcome them and spread to the players on the field. It was Buckner—along with Calvin Schiraldi and Bob Stanley and manager John McNamara. We see and understand all of this when we enter rational mode. But sports make that mode hard to locate sometimes. Sports make us irrational. And when we're irrational, we need someone to blame for what's gone wrong.

And that brings us to Oscar De La Hoya and Victor Ortiz, who drew the collective scorn of the fight fraternity last week with a teleconference that even LeBron James' image consultants could have told them was a bad idea. Defeat in the highest-profile fight of Ortiz's career made both the boxer and his mentor/promoter think and behave irrationally. They called a press conference so they could whine publicly and place the blame everywhere except on the fighter who (a) intentionally headbutted his opponent and (b) dropped his hands and looked away from that opponent while the fight was going on.

This isn't to say Floyd Mayweather isn't guilty of unsportsmanlike behavior; he most definitely is. It isn't to say that Joe Cortez's refereeing wasn't flawed; as usual, it was. But the great majority of the blame for Ortiz getting knocked out in the fourth round falls on the shoulders of Ortiz. After he launched a blatant headbutt, he, to use a baseball cliché, took his eye off the ball. He backed away from his opponent with his hands down, got hit with a left hook, then somehow didn't take the hint, kept his hands at his sides, and got knocked out with a right hand. In the immediate aftermath of the fight, he seemed to understand he'd made a mistake and insisted he would learn from it. A week later, he was able to find no fault in anything he'd done and insisted he deserves a rematch. Defeat has left him irrational. He needs someone to blame. He's turned into Bob Stanley, forgetting about the wild pitch he threw to let the tying run in and remembering only Buckner's error to allow the winning run to cross the plate.

The collapse-and-scapegoat phenomenon reared its head in baseball again in the aftermath of last Wednesday night, the final evening of the regular season. The Red Sox and Braves completed quite possibly the two most extraordinary September nosedives in the history of the game, and naturally, media members and fans of both teams have spent the last few days looking for someone to blame. The managers, Terry Francona and Fredi Gonzalez, both hit the hot seat immediately, with two-time World Series winner Francona gone two days after the season ended. In Red Sox Nation, some have pointed the finger at ESPN The Magazine for releasing "The Boston Issue" a few days before the end of the season, the latest "cover curse" to befall a player or team. In reality, both the Sox and the Braves had been depleted by injuries to the extent that neither had much chance of getting out of the first round of the postseason anyway. But that sort of rationalizing mostly took a backseat to the irrationalizing that devastating sports defeats breed: Fire the manager! Curse the magazine! Blame the Yankees!

In boxing, as with most individual sports, there isn't as much room for scapegoating. It's a one-on-one competition. Most of the time, the loser loses because he either made mistakes or wasn't good enough to win in the first place. But for some reason, in 2011, excuse-making is at an all-time high in our sport.

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It was all David Haye could do back on July 2 to wait for the 12th round to end before removing his shoe and showing the world his pinkie toe. There was no "I should have done more, I should have taken more chances." Just "look at my toe, with 10 good toes I'd be the greatest of all-time."

Three weeks later, Zab Judah got dropped by a barely legal bodyslot from Amir Khan, acted as if it was a low blow, and then blamed the referee after he'd been counted out. Never mind that Judah was getting dominated for all five rounds that the fight lasted or that Vic Drakulich made the correct ruling. Never mind that it looked from the outside like Judah could have gotten up but used the borderline punch as an excuse to quit. A month after the fight, Judah, apparently stuck in irrational mode, lodged a formal protest.

But De La Hoya and Ortiz are the leaders in the clubhouse in the 2011 pugilistic expostulation competition. On their conference call, Ortiz said the headbutt he launched was retaliation for elbows thrown by Mayweather. He said Mayweather's punches were "like getting slapped by a girl," which would be fine to allege if one of those slaps hadn't knocked him out. De La Hoya went to town on Cortez, pointing all the fingers he could while proving just how out of sync he is with reality by also declaring that Cortez is usually "one of the best refs out there."

I don't believe professional poker player Daniel Negreanu is a boxing fan, so I don't think this was directed at De La Hoya or Ortiz, but Negreanu tweeted last week, "I always have way more respect for people who just admit 'It's my fault I'm a idiot' rather than look for creative ways to deflect blame." It's hard to find anyone who thinks Ortiz wouldn't have been better off sticking with the smiling, aw-shucks, "I'll learn from this" approach that he used on the night of the defeat.

But like most people with an emotional investment in a sport, Ortiz needed to place blame. It was an irrepressible urge. He turned Cortez into Buckner. He turned Mayweather into Bartman. He needed his scapegoats.

Maybe Ortiz sounded like a fool on the teleconference last week. But every sports fan should be able to understand why he felt compelled to go that route. We all do it. We all look for someone to blame. We all think the refs are out to get our favorite teams. We're all irrational.

Oscar De La Hoya and Victor Ortiz simply made the mistake of using their access to a public platform to disseminate their irrational feelings in ways that most of us can't. And now, quite deservedly, they're catching hell for it.

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Radam G says:

Wow! Life is such a bytch, then you die. While you are living, you are in your own little mudhole world being a mud sucka when you cannot get over jive. Vicious Vic O and Big Money O oughta quit being a pair of twin bytches and move on. Enough said! Holla!

brownsugar says:

Victor Ortiz made 8 or 9 times more than his previous biggest purse when he fought the Money Man,... .. going from \$350,000 a fight to making \$2.5mill in exchange for receiving a thrashing over 4 rounds has got to be a major epiphany (or at least a minor revelation)....you can believe Ortiz's perspective has changed immensely. Oscar, who probably thought Floyd was at or extremely near the end of the road probably feels slightly guilty for putting double AA batteries in Ortiz's back and marching him to his Doom..... Never underestimate Mayweather as long as he's willing to climb into the ring... Floyds level of conceit and vanity will never let him come into the ring at anything less than ready for the task. Oscar can certainly make it right by matching him with another GoldenBoy,.. surely he's got somebody on contract whom Vic can be matched with. All he needs is one good fight to put him back in contention. I think he could best Amir Khan or Berto again right now... Suck it up son...you've filed your grievance..... now get back to the drawing board.

brownsugar says:

Floyd on the other hand will be facing his toughest battle to date... with the Nevada State Prosecutor. Can we get some TSS support for Floyd as he faces the most challenging battle of his career?