The first fight televised on Epix was Vitali Klitschko vs. Odlanier Solis on March 19, 2011. The network now hosts boxing on a regular basis. Fights are shown live approximately once a month on a Saturday afternoon (usually around 4:30 PM east coast time). That's a throwback to the era when the sweet science was an anchor for Saturday afternoon sports programming.

"Our budget is a small fraction of what HBO and Showtime spend on fights," Epix acquisitions consultant Roy Langbord says. "But by focussing on the Klitschkos and Europe, we've been able to buy good fights that have been overlooked in the U.S. market."

Epix takes the European feed for its telecasts. Fights are called from a three-man studio desk in New York. For the past year, Bruce Beck has handled blow-by-blow duties. The number-two seat has been filled by Dan Rafael. The industry-insider role has fallen at various times to Lennox Lewis, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Freddie Roach.

This past Saturday (November 10th), Epix embarked on a grand experiment. It brought in promoter Lou DiBella to do commentary as the industry insider for its telecast of Wladimir Klitschko vs. Mariusz Wach and Robert Helenius vs. Sherman Williams.

In the past, DiBella has done spot commentary on telecasts of his own *Broadway Boxing* shows. Earlier this year, he sent a video of his work to Travis Pomposello (executive producer of Epix Sports). Travis took it from there. Before long, DiBella was slated for his Epix debut.

Inquiring minds wanted to know: “Could Lou sit still through two fights? Could Lou cope with turning his cell phone off for the two hours that he would be on the air? Could Lou control his emotions without stifling his emotional appeal?”

Seth Abraham was the architect of HBO’s boxing program. He and DiBella presided over the network’s sports department during its glory years.

“Wow!” Abraham exclaimed when apprised of DiBella’s pending engagement. “I’m rarely speechless, but this is one of those times. Lou obviously knows boxing as a sport and a business. I think his biggest challenge will be to impose moderation and control on himself. People in boxing know Lou, and they’ll be looking for one set of things from him for entertainment. But the average viewer will be looking for something else. For the average viewer, this will be about the fights, not about Lou. Will he know when to shut up? Will he explain and complement the visual or overwhelm it? It will be interesting; that’s for sure. It’s a fascinating choice.”

The commentating team that DiBella coordinated with at HBO was similarly intrigued.

“This should be fun,” Larry Merchant said enthusiastically.

“Lou always has something to say,” Harold Lederman offered. “I can’t wait to hear what it is.”

Jim Lampley was effusive in his praise.

“If anything can double Epix’s subscription rate in one night, this is it,” Lampley posited. “Lou has common-man appeal. He’s in psychological harmony with the sport. He looks and feels like a boxing guy the same way that John Madden looks and feels like football. He’s one of my favorite conversationalists, whether he’s ranting or philosophizing. He knows the sport and he knows the business. I can’t imagine that he won’t be great on the air. I think it’s fantastic.”

Steve Farhood was behind the microphone when DiBella commentated on a handful of *Broadway Boxing* fights.

“When one of Lou’s fighters scores a knockout,” Farhood noted, “Lou forgets that he’s an analyst on a TV show. He jumps up and down and his headset falls off. So it’s an interesting situation with Epix. On *Broadway Boxing*, Lou can be Lou. But the higher a commentator goes, the more filters there are and the more he’s expected to be politically correct within the context of boxing. I think it will work out. I do know that it’s enervating when Lou joins us on *Broadway Boxing* because his energy is contagious.”

Steve Albert looked to the past and recalled, “This brings back memories of when I was announcing hockey for the Cleveland Crusaders in the old World Hockey Association. My color commentator was the coach’s wife. Every time Cleveland scored, she got so excited that she punched me in the arm. By the end of the season, I needed a sling. So knowing Lou, my advice to Bruce Beck and Dan Rafael would be to wear some sort of protective device.”

“But seriously,” Albert added. “Lou is charismatic and colorful. He knows the sport inside and out. Be honest, respect the viewer, and he’ll do a great job.”

Al Bernstein proclaimed, “I’m certainly more curious about this telecast than I was before. The one piece of advice I’d offer Lou is that he give serious thought to avoiding the ‘F’ word on the air. I know it’s an organic part of his speech. But it wouldn’t be appropriate under these circumstances.”

Craig Hamilton spoke for boxing fans everywhere when he observed, “There’s a school of thought that the last thing Lou DiBella needs is a microphone. And let’s face it; putting Lou behind a microphone is a gamble because, as smart as Lou is, he’s all emotion. But I’m sure that Lou isn’t doing this to be part of a circus. He’ll try to do the job right. John McEnroe on the tennis court behaved one way. But behind the microphone, McEnroe is very analytical and controlled. Lou could be very good at this. I’m glad they hired him.”

Meanwhile, Lou declared, “I’m taking this very seriously. I won’t just mail it in. I’ve watched eleven of Mariusz Wach’s fights. Obviously, I’m familiar with Klitschko. I’ve done my homework on Helenius and Williams and read the Epix briefing book. I’ll be going to the pre-production meetings. I assume I won’t fuck up. And whatever happens, I can’t be as bad as some of the guys who are commentating on fights today.”

At 4:30 PM, after a final rehearsal, DiBella and company were on the air. Because of European television commitments, Klitschko-Wach was the first fight on tap.

Klitschko, age thirty-six, was written off as an elite heavyweight in 2004 after being knocked out twice within the span of thirteen months. Corrie Sanders stopped him in two rounds. Lamon Brewster did the deed in five. But Wladimir prevailed in sixteen consecutive fights after that en route to a 58-and-3 record with fifty knockouts

As David Greisman wrote, “Long gone is the deer-in-the-headlights look that took over Klitschko’s face as Sanders sent him down again and again. Now Klitschko looks like a lion presiding over his jungle, swatting powerfully at whomever dares enter his kingdom. Much of that has to do with the teachings of trainer Emanuel Steward. Much of that has to do with the way Klitschko has put those lessons into practice. He’s gone from heavyweight scrap heap to heavyweight champion. He has learned to use distance and height; learned to work behind a powerful jab and not to lower himself by over-extending with his right cross. He has incorporated simple but deft footwork to take himself out of range of his opponent’s attacks. He has learned how to avoid trouble. It isn’t flashy. But it works.”

Wladimir is now widely accepted as boxing’s heavyweight king. Brother Vitali is the sport’s crown prince.

Wach, age thirty-two, was born in Poland, lives in New Jersey, and (for unexplained reasons) is nicknamed “The Viking”. His 27-and-0 record was devoid of quality opponents. Kevin McBride (who weighed in at a blubbery 296 pounds), Jason Gavern (a career opponent on a four-fight losing streak), and Tye Fields (a three-time first-round knockout victim) were the most recognizable names on his ledger. Against Klitschko, Mariusz was a 20-to-1 underdog.

Most of the pre-fight talk on the Epix telecast was devoted the fact that this would be Wladimir’s first fight in more than eight years without Emanuel Steward in his corner.

When the moment of reckoning came, Klitschko and DiBella both started fast.

At the opening bell, Lou declared, “The first jab that hits Wach will probably be the best jab that hit him in his life.” Seconds later, DiBella observed, “You can see the difference in their jabs. Klitschko’s jab snaps. Wach’s jab pushes.”

Wladimir outlanded Mariusz 19-to-3 in the first stanza, which was a harbinger of things to come. As the fight progressed, Wach’s game plan seemed to be to stand directly in front of Klitschko without applying pressure or moving his head. He showed an incredible chin (DiBella called it “the chin of God”), great heart, and not much more. Round after round, he absorbed hellacious right hands without going down.

The most brutal moments in the fight came in round eight, when Klitschko landed crushing blow after crushing blow (a 44-to-3 edge in punches landed in those three minutes alone). That led DiBella to opine, “I’d like to see the corner jump in here.”

That would have been the sensible thing to do, but it didn’t happen. Wach continued to take as much punishment as any fighter in recent memory. His courage gave the fight drama. The 120-107, 120-107, 119-109 decision in Klitschko’s favor was a formality.

Then the scene shifted from Germany to Finland, where Robert Helenius faced off against

Sherman Williams.

Helenius, age twenty-eight, entered the ring with a 17-and-0 record and a handful of victories over badly faded heavyweights like Sergei Liakhovich and Samuel Peter.

Williams has won once since 2008. He's forty years old, 5-feet-11-inches tall (seven inches shorter than Helenius), and weighed in at a career-high 266 pounds.

Helenius and Williams both looked awful. Williams fought to survive, and Helenius turned in a drab dull plodding performance.

In round five, DiBella took stock of the situation, turned fan, and said of Helenius, "Right now, he's boring the hell out of me." Later, referencing Helenius's nickname ("The Nordic Nightmare"), Lou opined, "He might be The Nightmare; but right now, he's NyQuil."

It was a long ten rounds, with the fighters landing an average of seven punches per fighter per stanza. Helenius won a unanimous decision.

"It's harder to call a bad fight than a good one," DiBella said when the telecast was over. "But I'm satisfied with the job I did."

The feedback so far has been complimentary. It's hard to assess a commentator's performance on the basis of one telecast. But Lou is off to a promising start.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that one of the problems the Klitschkos have had in gaining worldwide acceptance is that their whole is less than the sum of their parts. If there were just one of them, people would be more inclined to say, "He's a great heavyweight champion."

There's something special about "one." Two of anything tends to devalue its worth.

There's only one Lou DiBella.

Thomas Hauser can be reached by email at thauser@rcn.com. His most recent book (*And the New: An Inside Look at Another Year in Boxing*) was published by the University of Arkansas Press.

Comment on this article

mortcola says:

Good article. DiBella was surprisingly entertaining and informative; he fit in with Beck and Rafael, didn't hog the mike, and had plenty of relevant and humorous things to say.

Bernie Campbell says:

Wach is called the Viking, The Vikings occupied Poland a milenium ago! It is obvious that Mariush is a clear descendant!

deepwater says:

sweet lous conscience + $1.99 = 10 cents. "I have just been informed though numerous press reports that Jermain Taylor has elected to continue his participation in The Super Six: World Boxing Classic tournament, and will face Andre Ward in April. It is with a heavy heart, but strong conviction, that I will recuse myself and DiBella Entertainment as Jermain's promoter.

"Jermain's career has been outstanding, and it has been a pleasure and honor to promote him. His victories against Bernard Hopkins remain the highlights of my career as a promoter. Jermain is not only a great fighter, but a good and decent man with a wonderful family. It is out of genuine concern for him and his family that I am compelled to make this decision.

"I informed him, as I do all my contracted fighters, that my goal was to help his secure financial stability for his family, maximize his potential, and leave our unforgiving sport with his health intact.

"It is my belief that the continuation of Jermain's career as an active fighter places him at unnecessary risk. While he is undoubtedly capable of prevailing in future bouts, I cannot, in conscience, remain involved given my assessment of such risk.

Radam G says:

Hehehe! Deepwater is no doubt doing a double in 2012. I'm calling it now. He is no doubt the comic and reader/poster of the year. But than again, the "threatre of the unexpected" may show up and start wiggling her @ss and blind Editor Mike. Hehehe! Now the Roast, hanging out in Italy with the Marvelous One, may just ditto dat. Hahaha! Holla!