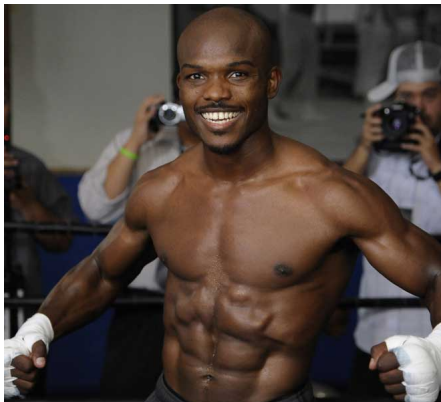


HBO Boxing Looks Back With Pride At A Year of Transition

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 17 December 2013 00:00



It's time to take pause, and ponder. The four titans of the industry, HBO, Top Rank, Showtime and Golden Boy went their separate ways, and decided nine months ago to divide, and conquer.

HBO set the so-called Cold War in motion, deciding that Floyd's ask was too grand, and that they'd rather not pay such a hefty price to roll the dice for a fighter closer to 40 than 30, even one as majestically talented as maestro Mayweather. They chose not to match the Showtime buy-in, so they bid adieu to the talents and services and pay-per-view potential of the greatest fighter of his era. One might have figured they'd be quaking, or at the very least, their braintrust would be needing the odd Ambien or two to facilitate the shutdown of brain churning, as they lay awake, pondering what their identity would be. No more Floyd, no more business with Golden Boy, and by extension, minimal interaction with uber advisor Al Haymon.

To get some clarity on the subject, I headed over to HBO headquarters in Manhattan, where ex Showtime boss Ken Hershman steers the ship, and chatted with Mark Taffet, the PPV guru now in his 20th year at the cabler. Hershman was busy dealmaking, crafting the first quarter 2014 calendar, and the foundation of the year-long slate for his crew, so I listened to Taffet synopsise the eventful year, and peppered him with some queries, looking to get some intel on what's next for the wrecking crew they are building around, in this post Floyd period.

First off, my overall takeaway perception: I didn't get the sense that I was being spun, as Taffet, who can be a persuasive salesman, in a decidedly low-key manner, told me that this was "one of the most exhilarating, exciting, rewarding years" he's had at HBO. "There's been a lot of adrenaline flowing."

Understandable, given that Mayweather jumped ship (was helped to disembark, maybe Team

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HBO would put it?) in February, and gleefully signed a six-fight megadeal with the Stephen Espinoza-led Showtime, for \$250 million. Yep, I dare say adrenaline flowed when HBO in March filed divorce papers, and stated they'd no longer buy bouts from Richard Schaefer's Golden Boy, because, after all, a re-invention would be necessitated. But, to hear Taffet describe it, it was adrenaline, it wasn't the stress hormone cortisol which flooded their collective system post split. His evidence: just look at the top 25 bouts on cable TV this year. HBO presented 21 of them. The Miguel Cotto-Delvin Rodriguez bout on Oct. 5 drew 1.6 million eyeballs, with Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. (vs. Brian Vera on 9-28), Gennady Golovkin (vs. Curtis Stevens last month), and then "Mr. HBO" Adrien Broner (vs. Gavin Rees in February) just behind the Puerto Rican drawing card.

The shift in strategy, away from Floyd, and the focus on pay-per-view, he said, has been a revitalizer for HBO, because fight fans now get to see more must-see hitters on the regular channel. HBO did just two PPVs, featuring Manny Pacquiao, and the Juan Manuel Marquez-Tim Bradley tussle. They aren't out of the business, Taffet said, but he seemed to be content with that number.

"Pay per view events are primarily an opportunity to reach a general audience which occasionally looks at boxing," he said. That windfall primarily goes to the fighter, in the boxing realm, as opposed to the MMA realm, so, the message in between the lines was, it's not like PPV is making boatloads of cash for the parent company when so much of it is diverted to the talent (and let's not forget the cut going to the cable companies which offer the staging platforms.) I was reminded at this meeting that HBO heard similar sort of talk when Mike Tyson took his talents to Showtime, in 1991, and it forced them to work harder and smarter.

(I also got the sense there is, perhaps, in some circles at HBO, a degree of respectful skepticism about the ability of Team Showtime to continue the momentum woven during the Mayweather-Canelo promotion, which did a record \$150 million in PPV revenue. I never pretend to be a master predictor, so I won't even guess how a Mayweather vs. Amir Khan fight would do, but I will say I won't demean the skillfulness at the promoters in these big leagues at whetting appetites for matches that some deride as sub-premium. I actually think Khan's speed, combined with his iffy chin, makes for a more fun fight than the last two Mayweather scraps, so there.)

Listen, contrary to what the wife occasionally tells me when I put a red shirt in with whites in the wash and turn everything pink, I'm no fool. I get it that any entity is going to put that best foot, freshly manicured with painted nails, forward. It's not like Team HBO is purely euphoric all the time post-Floyd. The man did generate 9.6 million buys and \$543 million in television revenue,

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in nine PPV appearances on HBO. And he has looked as good, or maybe better, than ever in his last two scraps. And Showtime has surged in buzz, and they love their year over year numbers. Showtime Championship Boxing is up 24 percent in 2013 and 64 percent since 2011.

Maybe the lesson, or part of it, anyway, is that this so called cold war hasn't been all bad for the fan, for the consumer. The titans are all battling hard to be the best, and yes, the rivalry sometimes veers toward the bitter. You get the sense that a Bob Arum-Richard Schaefer rumble wouldn't look out of place as a curtain jerker on a Floyd PPV...

But from that consumer perspective, I dare say we can all agree that it hasn't been a bad thing for HBO to be in that revision mode, which meant they put energy and funds into building up some fighters that we all can agree are fun to watch. Gennady Golovkin is top three in the pound for pound buzz category, and but of course you know I gave Taffet the third degree on when and if we will get that light heavyweight showdown we are craving, between Sergey Kovalev and Adonis Stevenson. "We are in conversations," is all he would really say about where that bout stands. "It's a fight every fan wants to see, and we have to talk to the fighters and promoters."

Fans are curious to know if HBO might televise the next Golovkin scrap, Feb. 1 in Monaco against Osumanu Adama. "Right now, we're not planning to show that," Taffet said. The time difference would make such a choice harder, as it's no slam dunk to spend dough on an overseas fight, when the location is in a time zone six hours ahead of EST, is my sense. I think Golovkin back on HBO in April is a better bet, fans.

You have to get the sense that HBO is casting their lot more so with traders and rumbler than cuties. It's not like cuties and slickies and technicians can't do numbers, but apart from Broner, who drew eyeballs as much probably for his personality as anything, and Bernard Hopkins, all the more popular principals in the top ten most watched bouts on cable this year were more so punchers than sweet scientists. So, if HBO continues that course, that could spell doom for a Guillermo Rigondeaux, whose fight with Joseph Agebko wasn't universally embraced by the craver of trading. When I asked Taffet about Rigo's future on HBO, he replied, "We're going to listen to the fans. That's going to be the watchword for us going into 2014."

Speaking of listening to the fans, I've been a vocal proponent for many moons of packing cards, from top to bottom, with compelling matches. Resume builder squashes, especially on PPVs, always irk me, as a consumer. I asked Taffet about that, in context of the undercard of

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Pacquiao's Macau appearance. "We listen to the fans, the fans have said they want value," he answered, "in the main event and the supporting fights. Top Rank understands that."

One thing that was clarified for me as I sat at HBO, I was under the assumption that it often takes about ten years for a fighter to get to a place where they can really reap the rewards of their name recognition. Cotto, Chavez Jr., Bradley, these guys are now at a place where their years of toil have resulted in solid name recognition. But I was surprised at the Golovkins, Broners, Stevensons, Kovalevs, and Provodnikovs topping the top ten most watched list. I do think the supporting programming, the 2 Days, the Faceoffs, etc., really helped accelerate the popularity growth of these guys, and resulted in HBO having a better year than many folks might have assumed back in February or March. Also, I was told, appetite for that support programming is growing nicely among millenials, which is a good thing for people who want to see the sport they appreciate continue to thrive.

That's me, and that's you. We want boxing to flourish. Looking forward, a lot of us will be clamoring the "give peace a chance" carol, and advocating for the titans to kiss and make up, or at least, shelve the animus long enough to make those handful of fights we all want, which can only happen if the Godzillas work together. As my sense is that isn't happening in the near future, perhaps it's best we wrap our brains around the dynamic as it presently exists. And as it presently exists, in my mind, Showtime has lifted their game, and is presenting some compelling programming, and HBO has pivoted skillfully in this year of transition, befitting their veteran status, with a 40 year history in the space, and proven that no Floyd by no means means their relevance is reduced.

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brownsugar says:

I'm glad this article got written...excellent story. Personally I like any network or promoter who can put on a good show.. I'll take my boxing from almost any source... The more the merrier. Its rather silly to get into a "ford vs chevvy" debate when we can get what we want from 2 networks..hopefully after all the in house fights are depleted the networks can develop a sort of "exchange" program.

Bernie Campbell says:

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Im very disappointed that Home Box Office, never picked up the contract of Karen Bryant!

Bernie Campbell says:

At this point Id score for Anita even!