I had the chance to talk to HBO's boxing sage Larry Merchant on Thursday afternoon where I asked him if had recovered from being ringside calling the debacle that was the WBA heavyweight title fight between John Ruiz and Kirk Johnson. I was worried, you should never be that close to anything that toxic.

" Well," said a chuckling Merchant." All I can say is, it's a great country when guys like John Ruiz can make that much money."

It's ironic, because Ruiz's promoter is none other than one Don King. And you know what King's catchphrase is: Only in America!!!! And while 'the Quiet Man' is probably the most maligned heavyweight since Primo Carnera, what Ruiz really is, is a testament to the abilities of King to move and promote a fighter. Whether it's by hook or by crook, you gotta give it to King, he's made millions for Ruiz- and I'm pretty sure a little bit for himself.

Ruiz, is a guy that you want to root for, there isn't a nicer guy in the sport. His lack of ego or pretension for a heavyweight titlist is startling. But then, he might have some self-esteem issues with how he's treated by the boxing world. And he may be deserving of some of the derision he receives. After all, it's hard to get too attached to a fighter who favorite combination is jab-right hand- clinch.

Or one that seems to have a 'glass groin', not that punches down there shouldn't hurt, but geez, some of those supposed low blows against Evander Holyfield and Johnson seemed to be either legitimate body shots or punches that landed on his hip and upper thigh region.

But I give him credit, he survived 36 rounds against Holyfield (ask Hasim Rahman if 'the Real Deal' is a dead man walking) and he defeated a highly touted challenger in Johnson that came in as a 3-1 favorite. No, it wasn't a performance that will be put into a time capsule, but it has to be mentioned that it was Johnson that had his cage rattled by a sharp counter-right from Ruiz that had him staggering off his feet twice at the end of round nine. Referee Joe Cortez, who had a terrible night in there, missed the two knockdowns, but Johnson would do a good job of knocking himself out just a round later with his fourth low blow. At the end of the day, he won. It ain't pretty, but as they say in baseball, even that blooper into left field looks like a line drive in the scorebook.

But the reality is that both fighters lost in terms of their stature this past

weekend. Johnson, will have a hard time living this down. Especially after recieving a million dollar signing bonus from Duva Boxing.

Johnson was supposed to set himself up as a possible challenger to the recognized heavyweight champion of the world Lennox Lewis and take Duva Boxing, the fledging promotional outfit of Dino and Donna Duva, to the upper echelon. He was zero-for-two.

Ruiz, on the other hand, gets to keep his title and that's about it. There's a perception(and it's probably correct) that he wins fights by not raising the level of his performance but by bringing his opponents down to his level. Anyone remember the Pete Carril coached basketball teams at Princeton in the 90's? Playing with a group of actual student-athletes(from the Ivy League no less), Carril's teams played at a molasses like tempo of a long gone era of basketball. And with this style, his teams would frustrate and defeat more than one college basketball factory come tournament time. That's John Ruiz in a nutshell. Eventually, Princeton would run into a team that wouldn't succumb to their tempo and run them out of the tourney. Lewis, would be that guy for Ruiz, but his trainer Emanuel Steward made it clear that his man would have no use for a Ruiz fight. HBO, has stated that they would bring back Ruiz if he were to fight Lewis, David Tua and fellow Puerto Rican Fres Oquendo The bout with Tua would be the most intriguing in my view for several reasons. One, Tua KO'd Ruiz in 19 seconds in 1996. Secondly, Tua, if he should down Michael Moorer on August 17th, would have his second consecutive solid victory as he downed Fres Oquendo in March. And lastly, Ruiz and his people have always stated their desire to gain revenge on the 'Tuaman'. If this doesn't induce an exciting fight from Ruiz, nothing will. As for the proposed matchup with Oquendo, something King would love to do since he promotes both heavyweights, a bout in San Juan between two Boricua's for a heavyweight title is a great storyline. But if you seen these two guys fight, you know that it's most likely a snoozer waiting to happen. But make no doubt about it, King has something up his sleeve- he always does.

You can bet he's already putting the full court press on HBO Sports president Ross Greenburg regarding a Ruiz-Oquendo promotion. Promising him a great event and more importantly, a high rating. But regardless, I gotta hand it to King, he's done more with less than any promoter in recent memory. Only in America. And yes Larry, this is quite a country. COMEBACK GRANT Michael Grant continues back on the comeback trail this Saturday against journeyman Robert Davis. After his quick KO loss last summer to Jameel McCline(which was his comeback bout after his devastating loss to Lewis), his trainer Teddy Atlas decided that the best way for Grant to begin his re-comeback was to fight low level opposition away from the glare of the television spotlight. Grant, racked up five wins, while going through some shaky moments, but then that's why Atlas didn't want him on the tube. Grant, was like

a person who was involved in a horrific auto accident who would have to relearn how to walk all over again. At first the steps were shaky and hesitant but now he can at least take a short jaunt to the corner store and not fall on his face. Now, he takes a big step this weekend, but not in taking on Davis, who has been hand-picked by Grant's management, but by performing in front of a national audience which has vivid memories of the last two times they saw him. Atlas always speaks of being a professional. This Saturday night, Grant gets another test of what it is to be one.

POPO

Later that night on Showtime, WBA-WBO 130 pound champion Acelino " " Popo" Freitas makes his return against Daniel Attah. The last we saw of 'Popo' he was downing Joel Casamoyer in a 12-rounder that was closely contested.
Attah, looks to be a decent foe, but what could be Freitas' most dangerous opponent could be his own complacency. Afterall, he was coming off a career-defining win, was welcomed back to Brazil(where he is a national hero, second only in the sporting world to it's national soccer team) with a hero's welcome, most likely spent some time celebrating his country victory in the World Cup and who knows what else. There's an old boxing proverb that states," the most serious fights sometimes, are the one's you don't take seriously." We'll see just how serious Freitas has been the past few months.

I TOLD YOU SO
I don't want to say," I told ya so", but I told ya so. Never trust a guy(in this case Kirk Johnson) who struggled twice with Al Cole and was hesitant against Larry Donald. Especially against a fighter who's been battle-tested against Holyfield. And never, ever trust him, if he just cashed a million dollar signing bonus beforehand.

A wise, old veteran trainer told me this week," They say that a hungry dog will go across a crowded street with a thousand cars to eat. A dog with a full stomach wouldn't cross the sidewalk for a steak." That in a nutshell, described the attitude in which Johnson seemed to fight against Ruiz.