

Baghdad's Friday Night Fights

Written by George Kimball

Wednesday, 21 December 2005 19:00

NEWS ITEM: Legendary promoter Don King said he would like to host a morale-boosting boxing exhibition in Iraq featuring world champion boxers he represents. King made his comments to CNN's Wolf Blitzer while appearing on 'The Situation Room' last week. Major General Thomas R. Turner II of the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division told King earlier this year he would welcome such an event.

BAGHDAD – Arabic translators monitoring the ongoing trial of Saddam Hussein report that in testimony this week the former Iraqi dictator claimed to have been tortured by his American captors. Hussein asserted that he was subjected to cruel and inhumane treatment in violation of the Geneva accords when he was forced to watch all twelve rounds of a World Boxing Association heavyweight championship fight between Nicolay Valuev and John Ruiz.

Saddam charged that President George W. Bush had entered into a conspiracy with boxing promoter Don King to beam the telecast of the Berlin fight into his jail cell.

"Bush would never do this to his own people," the erstwhile despot told the court. "The fight was banned by United States television networks. Not a single American had to watch this fight."

Hussein claimed that prison authorities, with the connivance of Bush and King, had not only secretly ordered up the German pay-per-view telecast of the bout between the plodding, 7-foot Russian giant and the US-born former champion, but had stolen the remote control from his cell to prevent him from switching it off.

In voicing his outrage, Saddam pointed out that not even Al-Jazeera, a network which routinely televises live beheadings, had been willing to subject its viewers to the King-promoted fight.

In a related development, The World's Greatest Promoter announced plans to stage a boxing exhibition, possibly including a world championship fight, in Iraq next year.

"Major General Turner and President George W. Bush are absolutely right about helping the troops," King told CNN's Wolf Blitzer. "I intend to answer the President's call and do all I can to support our troops. Our men and women in uniform around the world are defending our freedom and liberties. They need to know that we appreciate their service and sacrifices to honor their bravery and dedication."

Although King traveled to Germany in his role as Ruiz's longtime promoter, by the time the Dec. 17 fight at Berlin's Max Schmeling Halle took place he had Valuev under contract as well. Ruiz's attorneys, noting the controversial nature of the widely-booted Berlin decision, intend to petition the WBA to order an immediate rematch. While no venue in the western world is likely to offer a site fee for that bout, King, in a masterful stroke, has reportedly informed the White House of his willingness to stage Valuev-Ruiz II before the troops in Iraq.

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"I intend to stage exhibition matches in Iraq displaying the skills of many great champions from the boxing world," said the flag-waving promoter. "I want to entertain the troops, raise their morale and let our soldiers know that the American people are 100% behind them. It will be an unforgettable, historic event. I'll even stage a true championship match if I am allowed."

"Don," Blitzer reportedly sighed off-camera, "haven't they suffered enough already?"