Ya' know, there's a reason why I hate going to fancy banquets and social gatherings where people are being honored. No, not only because I'd have to wear something other than my sweat-suit, but really because there's only so much I can take when it comes to induction and acceptance speeches that drag on longer than 'War and Peace'.

Invariably, those who are up at the mike promise to 'make this as short as possible' only to go on longer than the 'Root's' mini-series. But that's understandable I guess, after all, many of these folks are receiving a great honor that humbles them.

Fine, but what's really aggravating is when those who are not being honored- and aren't even scheduled to speak- get up there and drone on.

That was the case a couple of weeks ago at the World Boxing Hall of Fame induction ceremonies in Los Angeles. On that night, names like Lupe Pintor, Mike McCallum and George Foreman would be honored for their vast achievements inside the ring. Larry Merchant of HBO Sports was being inducted for his contributions to the game as a journalist and broadcaster.

Rich Marotta, a boxing analyst for many years, was in charge of introducing Merchant and had finished quickly; but just as he was about to present Merchant with his award, Emanuel Steward, the noted trainer and HBO analyst who works with Merchant on the 'Boxing After Dark' telecasts, cut-in unexpectedly and announced that he wanted to say a few words about his broadcast partner.

Well, he certainly had a lot to say - too bad it was basically about himself. Instead of applauding the accomplishments of the dignified Merchant, he went on to pat his own back for what he had accomplished in the game. He would point out everyone that was on the dais, such as a Ronnie Shields (whom he had trained a long time ago) and tell everyone what he had meant to Shields career or how he and McCallum had worked together at the world famous Kronk Gym. Never mind that McCallum left Kronk in a huff because he felt as though Steward always favored Thomas Hearns over himself.

On and on he went. How long? According to those in attendance it seemed like years, although it was about 20 minutes. Merchant, who was standing to receive his plaque and medal, sat down in the middle of Stewards preamble. Those in the audience were getting restless as they started to bang the

tables and hit their glasses with their knives and forks and heckle Steward to get off the mike. Let's put it this way, if this was amateur night at the Apollo, 'Sand Man Simm's' would have shooed him out of their quick, fast and in a hurry.

But what's worse is that he kept going. Someone told me," He must've thought it was applause or something, geez, he kept going on and on. It was disgusting."

Finally, Steward gave up the spotlight for the guy who was actually honored- which was awfully thoughtful of him. So what was the deal with Steward? I mean, he's used to speaking in short time frames, think about it, he only gets 60 seconds to talk to his fighters between rounds, doesn't he? Was he drunk? You never know, this was a social gathering. Hopefully he was and before ripping me for saying that, let me explain. If he was drunk, at least he has an explanation for his actions. If he wasn't: well, his actions look that much worse.

Fortunately, Merchant was his usual classy self in accepting the award, although he was a bit baffled at Steward himself. But they do retain a strong relationship despite his actions. However, I get the feeling that Merchant won't be having him deliver his eulogy when the time comes. Think about it, if he did, by the time he was done, who knows how many others would still be alive?

But I'm not here to just rip Steward, who I have a great deal of respect for and maintain a good relationship with. I'm also here to offer a few solutions to rectify these types of quandaries. Hey, I'm here to solve problems, not just lampoon them.

Limit speeches to rounds- Yup, you heard that right.

If you're introducing somebody you get three minutes, tops. If you're the person receiving the award, depending on your legacy, you get between six and twelve minutes. Sounds harsh, but hey, a four round fighter doesn't get the same respect and prestige as a twelve round main eventer. That's life and that's boxing. All the fighters being hailed get the full allotted 12 minutes (basically four rounds) and guys like Merchant and publicist Bill Kaplan get between six and nine minutes depending on their stature.

And yes, an official timekeeper will be on hand to keep track of these things.

* 10 SECONDS!!!- Now, if you watch boxing, you've heard this a thousand times. As the round winds down, a person next to the timekeeper will pound the mat and give a 10 second warning to the referee and fighters to make sure that the fighting is stopped at the sound of the bell.

Well, if a guy like Kaplan, who's a six minute-man in my book, starts heading into the five-and-half minute mark, a timekeeper that was assigned by the local commission closest to whatever Hall-of-Fame is honoring him will start to look at his official time clock.

And when five minutes and fifty seconds comes, the timekeeper will yell as loudly as he can," 10 SECONDS!!!" while banging on his dinner table. See, I'm fair about this; I like to give fair warning.

* Richard Steele- Ok, if whoever is being honored doesn't get the hint and refuses to follow our rules, we bring in Steele to step in. And he would be the perfect guy; after all, doesn't he stop everything early? He was sure needed a couple of weeks ago.

* Act like boxing fans- This is only a last step measure that should be used only in the most extreme of circumstances; but if all else fails, the crowd must get involved. And in our case, the gathered throng would be boxing fans.

And at this point we would need boxing fans to act, well, like boxing fans. Which means hissing, booing and screaming as loudly as they could at the acting offender. And they would be allowed to throw their napkins at the stage- but nothing more. We can't have plates and glasses being hurled on stage, somebody could get hurt and these things are supposed to be dignified affairs, not the Olympic Auditorium.

If this doesn't do the trick, I don't know what will.

DON'T COUNT OUT TAPIA

I know not many pundits are giving Johnny Tapia a shot against Marco Antonio Barrera this weekend in Las Vegas. They point out that Tapia is a natural jr. bantamweight moving up in weight, or how bad Tapia looked in getting a fortunate decision in his last outing against Manuel Medina, or that Tapia is no spring chicken.

Which is all true, but those are the tangibles. A guy like Tapia is all about the intangibles. There's a reason why his nickname is 'Mi Vida Loca'. He's lived exactly just that, a crazy life. His story has been told a million times but one story bears repeating.

The most amazing of Tapia's stories is the fact that he's been pronounced clinically dead- three times!!! Most guys are only good for one, maybe two. This guy pulled the hat trick. They've counted him out before and his still standing.

Marco Antonio Barrera won't be nearly the toughest fight of his life. I have a

feeling this fight will be much more competitive than most think.

SLICK RICK

This Saturday night, 2000 silver medallist Ricardo Williams gets his first step-up fight as he takes on former IBF jr. welterweight titlist Terron Millett.

Millett is definitely on the downside, but he can still bang a bit and Williams only has seven pro bouts under his belt.

Seven pro bouts and Williams is already fighting ex-titlists on HBO. They sure don't develop prospects like they used to, huh? Back in the day, guys would have at least a dozen or so four-rounders before moving up to the six and eight round bouts, much less co-headline on the games biggest stages.

Yes, times have changed.

SUGAR SHANE

Shane Mosley will make his return and debut at 154 on either February 1st or 8th when he takes on Raul Marquez.

Originally, Yory Boy Campas was thought to be the cannon-fodder de jour for Shane, but HBO wasn't too keen on the idea of using Campas who has a well-earned rep as a front-runner prone to quitting when the going gets too tough.

Marquez may get cut up like paper mache, but he won't quit.