

I CAN FIND DODGE CITY IN THE ATLAS

Written by Charles Jay
Wednesday, 03 July 2002 18:00

"We need to eliminate the 'Dodge Cities' of boxing and chase out the 'gun-slingers' and create a town that can grow and flourish"

---- Teddy Atlas, in his written statement submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, concerning the improvement of boxing

I've always liked Teddy Atlas, and have in the past appreciated that he's spoken up - loudly - about doing something - ANYTHING - to bring about a little order to the landscape of boxing, preferably on a national level.

On the other hand.....

I hope no one minds me bringing up a subject that wasn't touched upon, by EITHER side, in the recent interview Atlas had with Senator John McCain which aired on ESPN - the fact that on Friday night, the opponent for Michael Grant, the heavyweight Atlas trains, just so happens to be Thomas Williams, a fighter who currently finds himself under indictment, and awaiting an August trial, for fight fixing (the official charge is Federal sports bribery) - the result of a one-round knockout he suffered at the hands of pretender Richie Melito on August 12, 2000.

Actually, it goes a little beyond that, as far as Williams is concerned. Not only is he being accused of taking the dive against Melito, he has also put himself down on record, on an audiotape which is in the possession of the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office, as having admitted to taking previous dives against Lance/Mount/Goofi Whitaker and Brian Nielsen.

Not that I'm implying Williams is going to take a dive against Grant. Or that he should be prohibited from pursuing a living.

But what I'm saying is, if putting his fighter into the ring with Thomas Williams constitutes Teddy Atlas' idea of advancing the cause of boxing reform, then I'm not buying what he's selling.

Makes you wonder WHO should have been questioning WHO in that interview.

Maybe I shouldn't be too surprised; this is something I've found to be characteristic of a lot of so-called "boxing reformers". They seem to be absolutely agreeable, even gung-ho, about the concept of reforming the sport and business of boxing - as long as it doesn't inconvenience them. And there's always a desire to enforce stronger rules and regulations - that is, if it applies to the "other guy". But invariably, there seems to be no hesitation to exploit the system, the second an opportunity arises to take advantage of all the leniency it allows.

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Reform can come later - for the time being, the most important thing is that Michael Grant gets another easy win, right?

This fight is taking place at the Menominee Bingo Casino in Wisconsin - on tribal land, where, theoretically, any boxing card has the potential to become a Wild West show. Not that it's too difficult to get an opponent passed in the state of Wisconsin anyway. I have spoken with several commissioners who would never even consider sanctioning a fight like this, at least until the Williams verdict is final.

Of course, some WOULD sanction it. Williams was scheduled to face then-unbeaten Andre Purlette last September on Miami Beach. The fight had been approved by the Florida Commission, headed up in an administrative capacity by Chris Meffert, Vice-President of the Association of Boxing Commissions. The fight never came off, but not because the commission ever took any action; it was only after I received a phone call from one of Purlette's trainers, who asked to me to recount my original Melito-Williams story and brief him on Williams' legal situation, that Purlette's camp put a halt to the match.

It's perfectly understandable - at this point, who would want their fighter associated with an opponent like that?

Well, we obviously know the answer to that now, don't we?

Sure, I've heard the line before - "the guy hasn't been convicted of anything yet". But I would think that, given some of Atlas' statements in the past, it's not unfair that he be asked to hold himself to a bit of a higher standard.

For someone who has been so vocal about tighter regulations, uniform standards, and overall boxing "integrity", this would have been a tremendously opportune time for Atlas, who should have the right to accept or reject Grant's proposed opponents (I'd be shocked if he didn't), to stand up and perhaps make a statement, even if that statement is nothing more than "We don't want to fight this guy (Williams) until we find out for sure whether he's guilty of throwing fights".

Apparently, nothing like that is forthcoming.

Therefore, no thanks - I don't think I'm going to be sucked in by any statements in WORD from him, when they aren't backed up with statements in DEED.

There's simply no way Atlas could plead ignorance on this one either - in fact, on the August 25, 2000 edition of ESPN's "Friday Night Fights", Atlas made it a point to file a report on Williams' alleged fight fixing, erroneously crediting the New York Post for nailing an "exclusive" that was to run in the paper that Sunday (of course, the story had in fact been

reported two weeks before that by TOTAL ACTION

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). This, of course, was tagged with the obligatory appeal for stricter regulation.

It seemed to be a big deal to Atlas then. Why would it be any less important now?

Also, it would be real difficult to convince me that McCain or his people don't have an idea of who Williams is and what his situation represents, since I know that Kenneth Nahigian, the special counsel for McCain's committee who deals with the boxing legislation, has read the stories about the Williams-Melito incident on our website.

Let's put it this way - if McCain, who has positioned himself as a "strong advocate" for boxing reform, doesn't know enough to have recognized that there's a real problem regarding Thomas Williams, isn't that a sad commentary?

And speaking of sad commentaries, I've read and heard Atlas' constant references to "weak commissions" who don't know what they're doing. Well, isn't Teddy taking full advantage of a weak commission NOW? And doesn't he understand that BECAUSE the commission may be so weak, it behooves him, as a "man of principle", to stand up and take some actions of his own?

Frankly, as someone who is authoring what many consider to be a relatively important piece of material on the subject of boxing reform, I take the insensitivity to this issue as a personal affront. I've pushed too hard on this series - through study, research, interviews, and simply pounding away at a keyboard - to sit back and tolerate it.

But I guess as long as the John McCains and Kenneth Nahigians of this world choose to listen only to those "reformers" who may have ulterior motives, and ignore the real problems that exist - problems we're uncovering, apparently, for the very first time - I suppose we're going to have to tolerate it all we can.

Until we get a REAL sheriff, that is.

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