

Written by Charles Jay
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On Friday night in Atlantic City, ESPN2 televised a scheduled ten-round junior welterweight fight between Michael Stewart and Brad Jensen in one of its featured slots.

It turned out to be a ridiculous farce, if what we are using as the standard is a fight's level of competitiveness.

But then again, one can only speculate as to what the boxing standards of ESPN are these days, certainly as long as boxing "coordinator" Russell Peltz is in its fold.

If watching one fighter get pounded at will and completely outclassed - by a fighter who himself is quite limited - strikes your fancy, then you probably enjoyed that fight a great deal.

If you were looking for a matchup where the "opponent" had at least a glimmer of hope of winning the fight, you were sadly disappointed.

How Jensen has found his way into the ring with Stewart in the first place would seem a curiosity to the naked eye, although when one looks below the surface, the slight of hand is easily uncovered.

Quite simply, it's this - the show was being promoted by Peltz; Stewart is Peltz' fighter, and Peltz more or less controls the product that is placed on ESPN, the network that employs him in his "coordinator" capacity, in what is one of the more outrageous conflicts of interest in the history of televised boxing.

You know, funny things have a way of taking place in this business, and at ESPN, they're getting downright hilarious at this stuff. Interestingly, just a few weeks ago, Peltz' line was that he considered Jensen unworthy of a preliminary slot in a fight that was not even part of ESPN2's main telecast, and therefore wouldn't allow the fight to be made.

Matchmaker/agent Johnny Bos certainly had a hard time figuring it out.

Bos had asked Peltz about inserting Jensen as a six-round opponent for his fighter, Paul Malignaggi, a veteran of just eight pro bouts, on the show that ESPN2 televised from West Virginia on July 26. Peltz did not want to approve the fight. According to Bos, Peltz told him "I couldn't guarantee that. This guy (Jensen) is a human punching bag."

Of course, when the shoe's on the other foot, the dynamics of a situation can change quite a bit. Now Jensen's a main event-level fighter - as far as Peltz is concerned - who was worthy of this ten-rounder against Stewart, a fighter who went into last night's fight with a 29-1-2 record.

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"You didn't think I was going to get my fighter beat, did you?" is what Bos claims Peltz told him, in explaining the curious pairing.

Jensen is game - no doubt about that. He's gone the distance with Juan Diaz and Miguel Figueroa. But "fair game" might be the more accurate description. A skilled professional fighter, he is not. Going into the bout with Stewart, there was virtually no shot for him to win, and more importantly, very little chance that he would put forth a truly competitive effort.

Certainly, when one takes a look at the fighter's resume, there is hardly any evidence to support his presence in an ESPN co-main. Jensen, who is a so-so 12-4-1 with five knockouts, has beaten only one fighter with a winning record. The composite record of the fighters he has defeated is a paltry 57-93-6. In his last outing, he won a five-round technical decision over Robert Howard, a fighter with a 5-14 mark who had lost four fights in a row. As recently as July of 2001, he scored a one-round TKO over Joseph Sanchez, who according to the online record-keeping source Boxrec.com, had never been in a professional fight.

In fact, Jensen's best results to date might actually have been a six-round draw and a disqualification win against 42-year-old Benji Marquez, a fighter who, until a run of three wins against stiffs in Colorado, had lost 12 of his previous 13 fights over the course of five years. And the shining moment of his career came last September 23, when he used a head butt to knock former lightweight champ Steve Johnston to the canvas, only to be punched silly about a minute later.

Jensen, who is wide-open defensively, was certainly punched silly by Stewart - nailed time and again by clean power shots until he went down for good in the third round. Had he possessed a better chin, there's no telling how much damage could have been inflicted in the fight. That's a scary thought, inasmuch as two fighters (Bobby Tomasello and Beetheaven Scotland) have died as a result of their appearance on ESPN's fight series in the last couple of years.

Perhaps the saving grace is that a vastly inferior fighter - like Jensen - usually gets taken out rather quickly.

Even as they have lowered their rights fees to \$52,000 per show, is a match with a lesser light such as Jensen the kind of product we are to expect from a company that refers to itself as "The Worldwide Leader in Sports"?

The answer, I suppose, is "yes", but only when it specifically furthers someone's agenda.

What you have here is another instructive example of what can go so horribly wrong with boxing. The network is in the position where its primary objective, ideally, is to put together quality programming for its viewers. That would theoretically be attained by staging the most competitive fights possible.

But as the promoter of Michael Stewart, Russell Peltz' objective is somewhat different. His

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aim is not to put his fighter in the most competitive fight possible, but in fact, to put him into a bout with THE LEAST RISK POSSIBLE, in the interest of furthering the fighter's career, something that is perfectly logical, in that the further his fighter goes, the more it will benefit HIM.

Since Peltz is the one who customarily assumes the role of "quality control", deciding which fights are acceptable for broadcast on the network, there would seem to be no real impediment to him being extra "careful" when it comes to putting his own fighter into an ESPN-televised fight. While the argument can be made that he has indeed put some of his fighters into tough fights, just as often, he has not.

The fact that Peltz is serving the interests of himself and his fighter on the one hand, and the network on the other, would seem to define the concept of "conflict of interest".

As a result of this conflict, the public can get a product that is substandard, almost by design. And to compound the problem, fighters with whom Peltz is involved - whether that involvement is "out front" or hidden - have appeared in featured bouts on an alarming number of ESPN shows.

"If this wasn't Russell Peltz' show - if this was someone else's, he would never permit this bout to take place," says one prominent promoter, who has done some business with Peltz. "That's what's so frustrating about watching this whole thing happen. What's going on over there is laughable."

One midwestern matchmaker told us, "It looks like Russell is trying to play an endgame here. It looks like he wants to squeeze every fight and every fighter out of this deal before the whole thing's over for him. It's really quite pathetic."

You know, the nickname for Peltz' fighter, Michael Stewart, is "No Joke".

It's unfortunate we can't say the same for some of the ESPN fights we've seen.

(NOTE: Russell Peltz has refused to make comment to TotalAction.com with regard to his activities with ESPN)

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