

Written by Charles Jay

Wednesday, 04 September 2002 18:00

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One thing I've noticed when I look over the Muhammad Ali Act, and the new legislation that will supplement it - the so-called "United States Boxing Amendments Act" - it's painfully obvious there is a bias toward the fighter and against the promoter.

And this bias has been confirmed during the hearings the Senate has had regarding the legislation, where there is hardly a voice present to stand up for the other side when the discussion turns to the rampant "exploitation of fighters".

I don't think I'm being unfair when I say it seems as if John McCain's staff invited Bernard Hopkins, Roy Jones, and a few other fighters into a conference room, asked them what should be in the bill, and kept everyone else in the business out of the dialogue.

Nothing wrong with the concept of protecting fighters. I'm obviously all for it.

But the result of this slanted view, as you know if you've been reading this comprehensive look inside the boxing industry, is legislation that is going to be ineffective at best, and harmful at worst. Either way, it simply doesn't properly reflect the state of affairs in this industry, because the people who have drafted it have not consulted with the kind of people who can give them a proper, objective, intelligent overview of it. And that's no one's fault but their own.

But I think, if for no other reason than so that no one goes off half-cocked, that before we go any further in exploring what should be done about promoters, that we establish something which is absolutely fundamental to the discussion.

Whether anyone likes it or not, the role of the promoter is the lifeblood of boxing. Nothing - and I mean NOTHING - in this business ever happens without a promoter somewhere deciding to take a step forward and put on a show.

So those people in Washington who have contemplated the various ways of prejudicing the promoter in favor of the boxer, whether it is justifiable or not, should keep this one fact in mind - when you cripple the promoters, you run the very real risk of crippling the business.

And I know there are a whole legion of people out there who think the networks need to be licensed as promoters. I hear it all the time - THE NETWORKS ARE PROMOTERS. An argument, I guess, can be crafted in support of this, depending on the kind of definition you want to use for "promoter". Should they be licensed? Quite possibly, yes. And that will be a subject we're to tackle later on. But are they promoters, in either the traditionally-accepted sense or the real-world sense that we outlined for you in the previous chapter? Not really.

When compared to promoters, as we look at them in terms of the traditional view, networks

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don't arrange for the box office, or the ring setup; they don't rent venues, they don't make undercard fights. They don't buy ads in the local paper. They don't depend in any way, shape, or form on a live gate to exist. And if we're comparing networks to the "promoter as packager" - they don't construct the package but in fact have the packages pitched to THEM, don't they? And networks generally don't get involved with a fighter until he is already developed to some extent - promoters are the ones who invest the money to develop the fighter.

When we explore issues regarding promoters, we are not lashing out against promoters in general; we ARE, however, going to take issue - strongly - with promoters who abuse the power they have as a result of their promotional agreements, who blatantly rob money from fighters, who don't fulfill the terms of their contracts, who participate in false advertising, who succeed in business by bribing people from the sanctioning bodies.

Other than that, I don't really have a problem with them, and I'm not being facetious. I don't really blame promoters for taking some liberties here or there - they're just playing the game within whatever conditions the current rules allow. If regulators and legislators haven't proven capable of establishing laws that would curtail certain activities and govern certain specific business practices, whose fault is that? And who can really blame a promoter for taking advantage of the overall state of chaos?

The stars you see and appreciate on television - people like Oscar De La Hoya, Shane Mosley, Fernando Vargas, Felix Trinidad, Floyd Mayweather, even Bernard Hopkins and Lennox Lewis - didn't get where they are all by themselves. No, they weren't completely manufactured, but their value has no doubt been enhanced by promoters who knew what they were doing.

The manner in which promotional contracts should be dealt with is going to be a subject for succeeding chapters in this text - you can rest assured of that. But for now, let me say that if you hinder the ability of promoters to contract with fighters, you may very well risk removing all the incentive from promoters to build, nurture, and develop the careers of fighters, many of whom will go on to become gate and TV attractions who help to feed this business.

And let me dispel another notion the general public - and fighters as well - have about promoters. I can't tell you how many times I have heard the quote, "They're making so much money off us". Well, through the years I have seen enough of the promotional end of this industry to know better. I'm sitting here thinking about all the guys who put on a show and worked their asses off for one, two, three months, only to wind up losing money at the end of it, and I'm wondering if any of you out there would like to try that on for size.

Ask yourself this question - if making money at promoting fights is such a slam dunk proposition, why doesn't every manager who wants to build a fighter's record simply find someone to "beard" for a series of promotions, rather than sign away rights to a promoter right from the start of their fighter's career? And why isn't there at least one successful fight club in every Top 100 market in the United States?

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And if you think having television constitutes such an absolute a guarantee of making money on a fight show, think again. That's not the reality - not all the time, anyway. I've seen it, so no one has to tell me differently.

Are there promoters who go into shows with no risk, who in effect have their money made irregardless of their ability to sell tickets? Absolutely.

But what gets lost in all of that is the money that is invested in the development of a fighter, during that period of time when it makes no difference to anyone but the fighter's connections and the promoter himself that he is on a fight card. Consider what the "opportunity cost" of that is.

It's clear that there is more than what can be seen on the surface, isn't there?

So doesn't it make sense to put the narrow perspective on the shelf and undertake a much more objective analysis of this whole thing?

Certainly, we'll admonish the promoter when he's wrong, but make no mistake about it - we need him, and the role he fills, and he needs to be appreciated at least to a certain degree when implementing any responsible steps in the direction of boxing reform.

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