

WHY NEUTRALITY HAS ITS PLACE

Written by Charles Jay
Monday, 14 October 2002 18:00

It was erroneously reported in one newspaper that "the WBA screened a tape of the (Ruiz-Johnson) fight for a group of 55 boxing officials and judges, every one of whom agreed that the DQ was warranted."

Actually, that's not true. What happened was that SEVEN referees were pulled off to the side at the WBA officials seminar and were asked to view the tape.

The conclusion was NOT that all seven would have disqualified Johnson. It was that there was not enough evidence, based on what was available to be seen, to overrule the way Cortez called the fight.

How they came to this conclusion was strange indeed. Basically, the determination was that a couple of low blows Cortez called MAY have been questionable, or borderline. However, at the same time, there were a couple of knockdowns that could have scored for Ruiz but in fact were not - and that pretty much evened things out.

In other words, it was decided, in effect, that Cortez had actually made MORE mistakes than Johnson's camp had even intimated, but it was okay because the mistakes were equal on both sides.

While that's not an indictment, it's certainly not a ringing endorsement.

I don't really want to construct this as overly critical of Cortez' actions - I'm sure he's done a very good job in a lot of fights. Of course, I've also seen him let Roberto Duran take a frightful beating from William Joppy for no apparent reason at all.

At any rate, let's not deify ANY official, regardless of who he is, okay?

I happen to be very concerned when I read things like Greg Sirb wrote to his ABC colleagues - referring to the implementation of neutral officials for title fights as "a problem". What the problem is, I don't have a clue. But I'm worried because I don't think he has any idea what it means to remove the APPEARANCE of any conflicts of interest, because he doesn't fully appreciate how important it is.

And as for those ABC people who agree with him - I wonder whether they even know WHY they want complete, unilateral authority in appointing judges.

Sure enough, Sirb noticed the comments I had made about the language in the federal law at the WBA convention, and immediately sprung into action, directing Ken Nahigian to change the wording of the Professional Boxing Amendments Act, which amended Section 16 of the Muhammad Ali Act, to read:

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"No person may arrange, promote, organize, produce, or fight in a professional boxing match unless all referees and judges participating in the match have been SELECTED (this previously said "certified and approved") by the boxing commission responsible for regulating the match in the State where the match is held."

Other changes:

``(c) Sanctioning Organization NOT TO INFLUENCE SELECTION PROCESS (This previously read "Sanctioning Body to Provide List").

A sanctioning organization:

``(1) MAY (previously was "shall") provide a list of judges and referees deemed qualified by that organization to a boxing commission; but

``(2) SHALL (previously was "may") not influence, or attempt to influence, a boxing commission's selection of a judge or referee for a professional boxing match except by providing such a list."

Gee, it's nice to have an impact.

I want people to understand what having a law like this would mean, and what it would allow. If these guys have their way, you could conceivably have a situation where you'd have a Bernard Hopkins defending his title in Philadelphia against someone from overseas, and you could have three judges and a referee from Philadelphia working the fight. That kind of thing could happen over and over. And there wouldn't be a damn thing anyone could do about it, save for an opponent pulling out of the fight, for which he'd probably wind up being suspended by the commission and blackballed off a network.

Any fairness or neutrality you could possibly squeeze out of this process would be completely left to the discretion of a local commission. And after reading about the ineptitude and corruption of some of them on these pages, do you really want to leave that kind of thing totally within their control?

I don't. That's because I can sense what will happen as a result.

And I must admit to something of a reversal of attitude on this, since I now realize that these people, by and large, don't want to cooperate with anybody.

They were presented with a completely workable plan, detailed in

Chapter 41

of this series. And that wasn't the only alternative. Funny thing is, the people I talked to from sanctioning bodies appeared open and willing to forge a cooperative effort, but the ABC leadership simply didn't want to hear any of it. They want control of everything in their

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hands entirely. And believe me - those are some very shaky hands to put them in.

Frankly, I don't trust their honesty, integrity, or ability any more than I do the sanctioning bodies. At least the WBC, WBA, and IBF have some boxing people in their ranks. As far as the state commissions are concerned, boxing people are few and far between.

If you've followed "Operation Cleanup", along with the other stories I've written over the past two years, you've seen the following documented misdeeds of boxing commissions, or commissioners:

- * Illegally wiretapping phone conversations for the purposes of sabotaging a fellow commissioner at an official state meeting.

- * Neglecting to have proper safety provisions at the site of a professional boxing match, contrary to the requirements of federal law, contributing to a life-threatening injury suffered by a fighter.

- * Extorting excessive free passes out of promoters, using the threat of punishment, including refusal of licensure, for non-compliance.

- * Failure to require that a contract be produced and filed in conjunction with every professional fight, a measure that would ensure that a fighter would get paid what he's supposed to.

- * Conducting phony weigh-ins for the purposes of affording one over-the-weight fighter an advantage over another.

- * Forging state documents for the purposes of favoring one side over the other in an administrative proceeding.

- * Allowing physicians who are not duly licensed or qualified to work professional fights.

- * Allowing fighters to compete in their state while under suspension - medical or otherwise.

- * Approving gross mismatches that sometimes lead to severe ring injuries.

There's a lot more stuff that could go on this list.

In many cases, their conduct has been WORSE than anything we've seen out of the sanctioning bodies. Do you think anyone should be overly anxious to hand even a minimum of responsibility over to them?

And here's the tremendous irony about all this - the reason the ABC leadership aspires to seize control of this process is to a great degree in response to what is perceived as excessive politics on the part of the world sanctioning bodies.

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While I won't exactly defend the sanctioning bodies on that count, it's important to point out that each and every member of a boxing commission, not to mention nearly every administrative director, is a product of the political process, in one way or another. In point of fact, that's how they got their jobs in the first place. EVERYONE in a real position of power or influence is a political appointee.

So let's not have any illusions that we are removing politics from the process of approving, appointing, or naming officials; in fact, we're actually ADDING politics to it. The selection of officials on a local level - that goes for the judges, the referees, the doctors, the inspectors - has a tremendous political element to it; one that can't be fully understood unless you've had direct experience with it.

You know, the term "hometown decision" isn't a figment of my imagination; I think you'll find the vast majority of questionable calls by judges, relatively speaking, don't happen in championship fights, but on the local level, by state officials.

I have been told by people with the ABC that the officials they approve to work at world championship fights within the United States would have to go through their certification program; this can only be done by attending an ABC-sponsored seminar, which exists solely at the annual convention now but which may soon be expanded to satellite locations around the country. There is a fee attached, which is not negligible. And what I find interesting is that their lead instructor for this year's seminar was a man (Marty Denkin) who was ejected from the California commission fourteen years ago for allegedly taking bribes to approve certain matches, who has somehow found his way back onto the commission, and who, while an active member of that commission, works for a sanctioning body (the IBA, for whom he referees fights), something that certainly appears to be a violation of Section 9 of the Professional Boxer Safety Act:

"CONFLICTS OF INTEREST. No member or employee of a boxing commission, no person who administers or enforces State boxing laws, and no member of the Association of Boxing Commissions may belong to, contract with, or receive any compensation from, any person who sanctions, arranges, or promotes professional boxing matches or who otherwise has a financial interest in an active boxer currently registered with a boxer registry."

This is the kind of standard they want to set.

And this is what they want to shove down your throat.

Don't let them.

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