Written by Charles Jay
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As I rant and rave about the importance of having neutrality in officiating, I'm occasionally encountered with the devil's advocate who asks, "What's the big deal about having neutral officials? It's more important is to have GOOD officials, isn't it?", as if officials from overseas are somehow inherently inferior to what we have here in the United States.

My response to them is "Well, can you define what a good official is?", at which point they frequently get tongue-tied.

So what IS a good official? Let's explore that.

Is it a referee who, like Joe Cortez, has done 150 title fights?

Well, the argument that there's strength in numbers doesn't resonate very well with me. Getting all those assignments as a referee can be as much a function of being in the right place at the right time as anything else. If you lived in New Jersey in the 1970's and 1980's, for example, you were going to get your fair share of title fights, no matter who you were. And right now Nevada is certainly one of the places to be. With the number of weight divisions greatly increased and the proliferation of sanctioning bodies, it's completely misleading to compare the numbers of the referees of the last 25 years to those who populated the sport decades ago. I'm not altogether impressed by such statistics. And we haven't even mentioned the strength of being political enough to ingratiate yourself to the right people.

Is it a judge who usually votes with the majority?

That's what people like the ABC's "Past President", Greg Sirb, seem to think. Sirb takes great pride in a system - entitled the "Judges' Statistical Report" - that he uses to grade officials. This system is predicated, to a great degree, on whether judges have voted with the majority in the process of scoring a fight. And it's also, I presume, one of the yardsticks that is going to be used if the ABC ever became empowered with the authority to appoint ALL judges for world title bouts.

According to Sirb, in a message to all ABC members:

"A Judge could vote for the winner of the bout and thus agree with the other Judges but if their score is 3-points or more from the other Judges that must be taken into account. Obviously if a Judge is above the world average in the % different column (voting apart from the majority), has a high percentage of even rounds, and is below the world average in voting with the winner of the bout - this may not be the Judge you want in your jurisdiction, particularly if it is to judge a world title bout."

Oh really?

Is THAT the right criteria for determining who a good official is?

Let me tell you something that is true right now, was true yesterday and will still be true fifty years from now. I could take almost any top matchmaker - and I'm talking about people like Johnny Bos, Tom Brown, Chris Middendorf, Jimmy Waldrop, Bruce Trampler - and I could put one of them in a room with two boxing judges. They can watch a tape of the same fight, from the same angle, and the matchmaker is liable to see a lot of things in that fight that the judges simply won't see. As a result, he might come up with a different decision on a close fight a high percentage of the time - I suppose too high for Sirb's tastes.

Now, would that make the matchmaker a bad judge? Or would it, in fact, make him (i.e., the MINORITY voter) the smartest guy in the room?

See what I mean? Voting with the majority doesn't necessarily make you any better than the OTHER guy who's voting with the majority.

I would suggest that it's much easier to identify a BAD official than a good official. If we see a fight and think it quite obviously went one way - and I mean overwhelmingly so - and one of the judges voted the other way, as I guess most people feel Eugenia Williams did in the first Holyfield-Lewis fight (I would think Patricia Jarman-Manning's scoring of the De la Hoya-Vargas fight fits into this category too), we figure we can tag that person as a bad official. Okay, I'll buy that.

If a referee lets a fighter take far too much punishment, putting him in imminent physical danger, and still won't stop a fight, we might be able to identify that guy as a bad official too.

So really, when it come right down to it, isn't the definition of a "good official" more or less anyone we can't readily identify as a BAD official? Isn't it someone whose screwups aren't so glaring as to make us notice? And under those parameters, couldn't we just as easily find so-called "good" officials from overseas as we could here in the United States, for the purposes of preserving the concept of integrity and geographic neutrality in officiating?

You better believe we can - if boxing commissions would just bother putting a little effort into it.

The question is - DO THEY WANT TO?

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