Over the last few weeks, a bandwagon of would-be boxing reformers has been created, in part, by the people over at ESPN, who seized upon the opportunity to take a shot at an easy target, and denigrate a sanctioning body, for the sake of pumping a commercial enterprise named Ring Magazine. Of course, Ring, which is controlled by a company called London Publishing, is in the business of selling advertising to promoters, managers, and networks who are themselves in the business of making profits that are often directly related to the rating and/or championship status of the fighters they are associated with.

Within the context of boxing, I guess that's what you would call a perfect marriage.

As Michael Katz so aptly put it in one of his columns, "No one person can be the one who decides who is champion, especially one with a commercial interest. Nigel Collins is not the man, either. He knows enough about the game so that if Bob Arum is his rag's biggest advertiser, then Bob Arum's guys become fighter of the year."

When Ring was perpetrating one of the more disgusting and distasteful scandals in the history of the sport, Max Kellerman, the magazine's new "de facto" public relations director, was four years old. And if he had done the slightest bit of homework, he'd have realized that even at that age, he could have gotten into the ratings - if he had passed enough cash into the hands of Johnny Ort, who was editor of the publication at the time.

But we'll explore the magazine's horrible history of fraud in more depth another time.

For now, let me revisit a situation that indeed has some new relevance, within the context of the ESPN/Ring-inspired "Hate the Sanctioning Bodies" effort.

On June 28, Germaine Sanders and Teddy Reid tangled for the vacant North American Boxing Federation welterweight title in Chicago, on an ESPN-televised card.

Somehow, the people who are so "anti-corruption", and so "anti-sanctioning body" at ESPN managed to get through the entire telecast without making reference to the fact that the very fight they were featuring was a product of double-dealing and ratings fraud so reprehensible that it made anything the WBA did look tame by comparison.

As we have already covered in

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of "Operation Cleanup", the fighter who should have been in that bout, defending his title, was Golden Johnson, who had won the NABF title IN THE RING (listening, Max?) and defended just three months earlier, yet lost it not by fighting, but by terminating his relationship with a promoter who ESPN, incidentally, was in business with.

He was stripped of his title after declining to sign a new promotional contract with Arthur Pellulo of Banner Promotions, even though he was ready, willing, and able to go through with the championship defense against Sanders.

The NABF would have been concerned only with the fact that Johnson was available - IF it were an honest organization. Instead, these guys decided to perform a little magic, and presto! - all of a sudden Johnson had his title, and a means of financial opportunity, taken away from him. And all of sudden, in one of those great feats of legerdemain, Teddy Reid, coming off a loss in the JUNIOR WELTERWEIGHT division, had not only gotten back into the ratings, vaulting ahead of other fighters for no reason at all, he had done so while moving up to a division he had not competed in before.

You guys want to talk about "Ali Act violations"? I wouldn't for a minute defend the movement of heavyweights in the WBA ratings that has caused all the controversy. But what the NABF did was far more egregious, because it involved STEALING A TITLE, under the most suspicious circumstances imaginable, THEN following it up with more unexplained ratings manipulation.

Where were all the "do-gooders" then? Where were all the people who now suddenly want to talk about the Ali Act? Where were all the people Kellerman have credited with "putting the heat on the sanctioning bodies"?

For that matter, where was Max himself?

On that June 28 show, I seem to have missed his "acerbic commentary and cutting-edge analysis, designed to reach the younger demographic" when it came to an issue that begged to be explored with a little "attitude". Perhaps I took a trip to the men's room at the wrong time.

This act of thievery by the NABF was documented publicly, right here in these pages, IN ADVANCE of the fight.

ESPN's people were aware of it. I know, because I talked to some of them about it, IN ADVANCE.

In the positions Bob Yalen and Russell Peltz occupy at ESPN, they would have been required to know about every development, every step of the way, especially when it regarded changing a featured bout.

Yet, not only was the network all too happy to go along for the ride, IT BANKROLLED this absurdity, knowing full well that it was a product of fraud, deception, and lawlessness.

Why?

Because in Bristol, Connecticut, life exists on the basis of 99% commerce and 1% conscience.

Message to Max - the same people who wrote the paycheck for THAT fraud also write YOUR paycheck.

Lesson for Max - if you aspire to be the new Howard Cosell, you need to bring some substance and integrity with you to the rave party.

I'm not saying that Kellerman or Teddy Atlas should rat on their employers. What I AM suggesting, though, is that it's NOT okay to editorialize about the misdeeds of others when your own house is the one that's dirtiest. Because when you do that it takes on the character of having no intellectual honesty whatsoever. Truth be known, they're better off not saying anything at all, and just staying in the "entertainment" business.

All of the ESPN boxing "personalities", without exception - that includes Kellerman, Kenny, Papa, and Atlas - badmouth the sanctioning bodies. Well, at least the major ones - it's pretty safe, since they don't do many WBC, WBA, or IBF fights; after all, their $50,000 rights fee doesn't buy much.

However, it bears mentioning that the "anti-sanctioning body" people, with seemingly very little hesitation at all, regularly pump main events as USBA, NABF, or - don't get me started - IBA title bouts on their website, when listing the "Friday Night Fights" schedule.

And any promoter who was unable to sell a fight to ESPN because it wasn't for a "title", please raise your hand.

Here's the litmus test for sincerity:

Do you think, EVEN FOR A MOMENT, if Teddy Atlas' fighter, Michael Grant, were to secure a bout with John Ruiz or Wladimir Klitschko, that Teddy would look in Grant's eyes during his pre-fight pep talk and tell him he wasn't really fighting for a title? Do you think he'd express to Grant that if he won, his own trainer and confidant wouldn't - indeed, COULDN'T - even consider him a champion?

And do you think he'd advocate that Grant - and by way of percentage, himself - take less money for such a fight because it wasn't being contested for the Ring Magazine "championship belt"?

Answer those questions - if you can stop laughing.

So then, what's the point of this ESPN "soapbox"?

Is it for the sole purpose of pushing a magazine?

Is it because some arrangement has been made with McCain's people to push the Senator's agenda on the air in exchange for the regulation of networks being ignored in the legislation (that's called "foreshadowing", folks)?

Is this an attempt to seize control of the ratings process, like they do everything else, and put it in the hands of one individual who might give them favorable press, or free advertising?

Is it an experiment to see just how much these guys can influence young minds?

Whatever the answers, last Wednesday at the New York Hilton there was a golden opportunity for Kellerman to stand up, be heard, confront the "enemy", interact with some movers and shakers in a free exchange of ideas, perhaps do something do advance the cause of boxing reform, and yes, in keeping with the ESPN theme, provide a little publicity "bump" as he strides into a new talk show the network has handed him.

Here was the big chance to "spit on the WBA" in person, as Kellerman had previously done on television (Wow, what a visual for that "Around the Horn" intro!).

A lot of people who cared about boxing showed up at that event. I, for one, traveled over a thousand miles for it.

Max had about four miles to travel, but I guess he decided there were more important things to do.

I have my own guesses as to why.

First, it's a lot easier to TALK about something than to actually DO anything pro-active about it.

Second, it's much safer pontificating from the controlled environment of a studio in Bristol than it is to match wits with real, live boxing people, face-to-face.

Am I getting warm?

Frankly, I don't care what excuses Kellerman had. He felt the subject was important enough to use several minutes of network time on several different occasions, so he should have felt it important enough to show his face.

On top of everything else, Max was offered - not once, but twice - the opportunity to sit down and interview Gilberto Jesus Mendoza of the WBA, one-on-one, no-holds-barred, without any public relations spinners in the room - just him and Mendoza. The interview could be held on whatever day and at whatever time he wished. Mendoza would have even extended his stay to accommodate him.

Well, to use boxing parlance, Max decided to "get on his bicycle" at the thought of that.

The delicious irony about all this is that even though they didn't have an explanation to its ratings mess that satisfied too many people, the World Boxing Association at least had the public forum in which anyone with a complaint, question, or statement could stand up and

be counted. And the executives in attendance sat there, without running, without hiding, but facing up to every tomato that was thrown at them.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the questionable practices at his own network, Bob Yalen, the head of boxing over at ESPN, won't even FIELD questions from anyone without a network public relations man named Dan Quinn present. And even then the best one can hope for is an answer which is somewhat less than direct.

Hypocritical? Yes.

But then, we've come to expect nothing less from the most dangerous, disingenuous alphabet organization of them all.

E-S-P-N.

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