

Written by Charles Jay

Thursday, 24 October 2002 18:00

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"Since its passage in 1996, the PBSA (Professional Boxing Safety Act) has not been adequately enforced. Many unscrupulous participants in the professional boxing industry are aware of the lack of enforcement and ignore the law's requirements. As a result, young boxers are often exploited."

That's the way Senator John McCain described the situation in the boxing industry in a letter he - or most likely, his "assistant", Ken Nahigian, wrote to Attorney General John Ashcroft, according to an October 14 story in the

Arizona Republic

. The title of the story was "WBA Ratings Practices Anger McCain".

Well, let's see how angry it made him.....

On Wednesday, October 16, the day the WBA conducted the public hearing/press conference on its ratings, McCain was in New York, not once, but twice - first, to appear on Don Imus' morning radio program, then, in the afternoon, returning from Washington to do rehearsals for "Saturday Night Live" (which he hosted this past weekend), and to appear on another TV show.

No doubt some of this travel was done on the public dime.

But McCain was hardly doing much on behalf of taxpayers that day.

For starters, McCain missed a Senate vote on a \$355 billion defense spending bill - a bill he had previously been critical of, and which, according to the

Republic

, "contained one of the largest defense spending hikes in decades." He just didn't show up.

"They (members of Congress) are supposed to be doing the people's business," said Bill Allison, a spokesman for the non-partisan Center for Public Integrity. "It should not be too much to ask a member of Congress who criticizes a bill to show up to vote against it. For him to make remarks and make an issue of something, and then not bother to show up to vote on it, how are his (Senate) colleagues to take him seriously?"

It would have been one thing (at least to us) if McCain had ditched that activity in order to attend the WBA's hearing, at which the very "ratings practices" that supposedly had the Senator so outraged were being discussed. He could have conceivably made the kind of

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impact you just can't achieve by sending Ken Nahigian around the do your grunt work.

But while in New York, and missing the defense spending vote, neither McCain, nor anyone in his office, bothered to attend the WBA event, which was just a held few blocks away from the NBC Studios, indicating that for "public servants", anger, as a rule, must be subject to any and all commercial considerations.

Perhaps if we could have coordinated McCain's appearance with his current book tour.....

A couple of other guys who are all of a sudden screaming "Ali Act" were also no-shows. Greg Sirb, the "Past President" of the Association of Boxing Commissions, who is a candidate for "national boxing czar", was quoted in a Fightnews article as saying, "This one (the WBA maneuver) is so blatant that when we call them to the table, it's going to be difficult to justify. But at least respond. Otherwise it's blatant disregard for Federal law."

Needless to say, Sirb wasn't "calling anyone to the table" last Wednesday.

Another guy who was missing was Tim Lueckenhoff, current president of the ABC, who was so "concerned" that he wrote his own letter to Ashcroft. Sample quote: " I would request that your office investigates this matter thoroughly and prosecute this matter to the full extent of the law. Violations of this law should not be allowed to continue."

What Lueckenhoff DIDN'T put in that letter was something like "We have also been presented with similar evidence about the North American Boxing Federation in the past, but our colleague Dickie Cole asked us to back off a little. After all, his son wants to be NABF president."

It's a shame; both Sirb and Lueckenhoff could have actually learned a lot about how this business operates - kind of like a "Boxing 101". I wonder if either one of them have interacted in this way with some of the major players who were present. I guess they were a little wary of feeling some resistance, since when you listen to promoters like Don King, Dino Duva, Gary Shaw and Butch Lewis, they're not shy about telling you who they think the REAL promoters are - the networks, who are hardly addressed at all in McCain's legislation.

Should their absence surprise me? Absolutely not. The people they represent, as a whole, couldn't give a damn about improving the sport - getting a job or having a job has always been more important than DOING a job.

Want to know something interesting? On October 2, Lueckenhoff sent off a memo to each of the 54 commissions in the United States (tribal commissions included), along with a copy of the new legislation (McCain's bill) that is presumably supposed to come up for a vote, and was essentially looking to conduct a "straw poll" as to whether the commissions would lend their support behind the bill. Of course, that also was to offer an insight as to whether congressional representatives from the various states would vote for it.

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Well, it's not so bad that most of the commissions who responded to Lueckenhoff's survey were against this bill - after all, it is legislation that is largely impotent, and there are plenty of things to object to. It's that, faced with a situation that could have represented a major power play for the ABC and its members, only 26 of the 54 commissions EVEN BOTHERED TO RESPOND, despite having over a week to do so. And even though there were a few minor changes, the bill has not exactly been a secret for the last five months.

Shouldn't that tell you something? NOW will you believe me when I tell you how indifferent these people are?

What you're looking at there is a 48% response rate, meaning more than half the ABC members really didn't care. And when you project the "yes" votes in the straw poll against the full membership, only nine out of 54 commissions, or roughly SEVENTEEN percent, actually support McCain's legislation.

So much for the "moral authority" of the ABC to expound on ANY issue. One would have to wonder, based on the evidence that is available, whether, when you hear a Tim Lueckenhoff or a Greg Sirb making a statement on behalf of the ABC, if they are really speaking for themselves and their own agenda, rather than their membership.

We've mentioned in the previous chapter that Max Kellerman and Teddy Atlas, two vocal critics of sanctioning bodies in general and the WBA specifically, were perfectly welcome to show up at the WBA hearing, but didn't. Kellerman lives in Greenwich Village, Atlas in Staten Island. They could have easily been there, even if it were to chant, "National Commission! National Commission!" But that was not to be.

And once again, as in the case of Kellerman in particular, Sirb and Lueckenhoff had a golden opportunity handed to them. Stand up and take your shots. Introduce the Professional Boxer Safety Act and the Muhammad Ali Act. Detail the violations. Demand answers. Point out what you want to do as a result. Condemn the organization to death. Even grab a little press in the process. Whatever. I'm not even saying they wouldn't have been able to make some very good points, if they wanted to.

Of course, after they did that I would have grabbed the microphone, defined the term "selective prosecution", and asked McCain, Nahigian, Lueckenhoff, Sirb, or whoever else was there on their behalf exactly what they were prepared to do about the NABF or other sanctioning bodies whose transgressions, as per the aforementioned laws, have been made known to them, and which they have ignored, and you know what? They would have been tongue-tied. Absolutely frigging tongue-tied.

And they would have been simply flabbergasted, and I suspect, somewhat disappointed, if they had been there and paying attention to one of the other announcements the WBA made, which I'll be happy to detail in the coming days.

In closing, isn't it funny - if you took any references to Congress or the Senate out of Bill Allison's quote, couldn't it just as easily apply to any of the "boxing reformers" I've just

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mentioned?

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