

WE LEARN AS WE GO

Written by Charles Jay
Sunday, 17 November 2002 18:00

About three-quarters of the way through this thing, somebody asked me, "In the process of compiling 'Operation Cleanup', who has your opinion changed about the most?" The question was simple, yet I was stuck for an answer.

For one thing, I hadn't really thought about it in those terms before, though I don't know exactly why. For another, my opinion has changed, I guess, about a lot of things.

You can probably glean the answer by reading one story after another throughout this series. There is no question that I have demonstrated a reversal of field on some topics. And that's happened for no other reason than that when one writes as many chapters as I have, one has to do a certain amount of research along the way. As a result of such a process, a certain transformation naturally takes place; you're definitely going to learn something you didn't know before.

When I started all this - and I don't mean Operation Cleanup specifically, but most of the serious investigative writing I did online - I considered the Association of Boxing Commissions (ABC), for the most part, to be an ally that was focused primarily in the same direction I was. You'll see that reflected in some of the early stuff.

The truth is, I hadn't paid a lot of attention to it before.

So I suppose they're as good a place as anywhere to start.

THE ASSOCIATION OF BOXING COMMISSIONS

-- I always knew that in addition to the outstanding administrators, there were a number of inept, uncaring, ever corrupt people in the category of state boxing commissions, but until I started to look more closely at it, I have to admit didn't realize how widespread the problem was, or how bad some of the people could be. And I was just a bit naive as to some of the political motivations of the people involved.

Still, I was willing to give the ABC every benefit of the doubt. I lined up with them when the WBC was meddling without justification in the selection and appointment of officials for the July 20 fight between Vernon Forrest and Shane Mosley, something you can find documented in

Chapter 35

. But along the way they completely lost me. A couple of incidents contributed to it.

One was when the ABC took the extreme position that they - and ONLY they - would take charge of the appointment of championship officials, without any input from ANY

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sanctioning body, and with absolutely no oversight as to what they were doing.

While I agreed that the WBC incident gave them sufficient justification to be concerned, the only way this process could really be done in a way that was equitable and satisfactory for all parties involved was to have some degree of cooperation; some collaboration, so as to produce a system of checks and balances that would make everyone act responsibly.

What I didn't expect was that the ABC would use the incident to do something which is just as potentially dangerous as what the WBC did - attempt to seize control of the entire process by itself, without responsibility to ANYONE.

Another thing, of course, was that Jack Kerns, someone who had done boxing irreparable harm by completely ignoring minimum safety standards that were set forth by federal law, would remain on the ABC's board of directors despite an opportunity to take him off. The ABC would have been completely justified in taking such action, and Kerns wasn't going to be suing anybody. In fact, ironically, the ABC was protecting Kerns as he was BEING sued by Greg Page for his shameful neglect.

As I wrote in

Chapter 49

of this series:

"Making Kerns look more credible for the sake of his lawsuit should not be the ABC's responsibility. By allowing him to stay on in a position that is supposed to mean something in the organization, the ABC is, in effect, contributing to the facade of respectability Kerns is trying to create. Therefore, they are aiding in his defense, and giving tacit approval of his actions, which have been demonstrated to be dangerous for fighters and contrary to the best interests of the sport. So maybe these guys just don't care.....Until such time as they are prepared to do the RIGHT thing and get rid of the albatross that continues to eat away at any credibility it may have, I can't fully support, believe, or trust the ABC."

SENATOR JOHN McCAIN AND HIS BAND OF MERRY MEN

-- At first, I thought McCain was a well-meaning guy whose "campaign" for boxing reform was sincere, if a little misguided. Then it became apparent that he was not really interested in receiving quality advice in order to put together a realistic piece of legislation that could actually DO something, but had more of an interest in escaping from the process with a minimum of effort and a few cheap headlines, some of which could be used to get him on talk shows so he could sell his new book.

Now I suspect there are other motivations at work, all political in nature and having nothing to do with sheer ignorance, that have caused him to shape his bill the way he has. It's something that deserves further exploration, and you can count on that being done.

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BOXING COMMISSION POLITICS

-- More than I had even imagined. The poster boy for this, and one guy about whom I developed an opinion about early on and felt consistently throughout, is Greg Sirb, the former president of the ABC. In Sirb, we have a guy who is ALL about politics. It's no secret to anybody that his life's ambition is to be named the national "czar" of boxing, and has lapsed into that pattern where everything he says and does that concerns business outside his own justification seems connected to a political motive. It's not that I think he's a bad guy or a bad commissioner. Not at all. But he's too transparent, too programmed, too ideologically unsound, and too much of a political animal to provide the kind of vision boxing needs to make a real transformation. He's done nothing to dissuade me since. And in a scary development, I also discovered that he is more or less dictating what has gone into McCain's bill, which may explain in part not only why it is ineffective, but why it treats various interests with "kid gloves".

BOXING FANS

-- I wish I could sit here and tell you that a whole bunch of boxing fans have rallied around the cause of boxing reform. But honestly, I don't think the average boxing fan really cares very much about it. Yes, they'll complain about the usual targets like Don King and the sanctioning bodies, but it's with the same level of perspective with which many people in the media have attacked them. In general, I think that they're only really concerned with what goes on inside the ring, which to an extent is the way it should be. But what has to be understood is that perhaps more than any other sport, what happens OFF the "playing field" has an awful lot to do with what happens ON it. That message has gotten through to some people, but not most. That's unfortunate.

THE MEDIA

-- What I have found intriguing is that many of the mainstream boxing writers have shown complete indifference in the substantive issues that would shape any boxing reform effort. Oh, I understand that they reflect what their readers are interested in, and the readers, for the most part, are not interested in boxing reform. And their editors would rather pass a kidney stone than devote space to any reporting that was investigative in nature. Therefore, you're not going to see much material in the newspaper.

When something IS written it's usually an item about what a terrible human being Don King is, what thieves and crooks the sanctioning bodies are, and how altruistic a human being John McCain is for being so "concerned" about boxing. Generally, it's the product of cliché, and fails to look below the surface. I would be lying if I said I wasn't disheartened by this spirit of "non-examination". In compiling this series, I couldn't afford to look at things with a myopic point of view.

That having been said, I wish the level of curiosity has been a little higher on the part of what you might refer to as the major print media. Perhaps that's because there are very few writers in this country who spend most of their time covering boxing; however, one would

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think that if you were writing about boxing and getting paid for it, you'd want to know as much as you could about the industry. I still have faith in them, though.

Now let me tell you about some things that have been pleasantly surprising. Those print writers who ARE genuinely concerned about the future of boxing reform have been more than just a little helpful - in fact, they have offered substantial insight and information.

And a lot of the better internet writers, who take a lot of criticism and don't get much respect from their print "brethren", have shown much more interest. I've developed rewarding alliances out of the feedback I've received through "Operation Cleanup", in large part from those who cover boxing simply for the love of the sport.

INDUSTRY PERSONNEL

-- When I embarked on "Operation Cleanup", a friend of mine told me that I would probably burn many bridges in the boxing industry. I left myself wide open for that possibility. But the opposite has actually been true. I must say, even after spending over two decades in and around boxing, I was not prepared for the groundswell of support from within the industry itself. I simply did not realize that there were so many people working in boxing who, when confronted with the introduction of brutal honesty to the discourse for a change, were sincerely behind any efforts to make the sport, and the business, better.

Of course, when I thought about it, it's perfectly logical - the axiom in boxing is that less than 1% of the people in it make over 99% of the money. That means the vast majority of people are going to feel unfairly disadvantaged by the system, and would like to see the field of play evened out to some extent.

Maybe the best way to put it is that I probably haven't burned any bridges that were worth building in the first place.

THE SANCTIONING BODIES

-- I have never been a great lover of them. I think for a while, I probably had some of the same cliché-ridden thoughts that most fans and writers have about them. Once again though, if you look below the surface you can see some things that surprise you.

First of all, every one of the sanctioning bodies is different in some regard. So it doesn't make sense to make blanket statements about them. And within the sanctioning organizations you can actually find some people who genuinely care about the sport. That just stands to reason - hey, if a promoter is going to pay off a sanctioning body with \$100,000, it's not as if that money is going to be divided twenty different ways. Not everybody is on the "pad". So I guess the lesson to be learned is that there are some good things and some bad things about each sanctioning bodies, and this whole culture of sanctioning fights in general.

You can look at it from various perspectives - for example, no matter what you say about

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the alphabet groups, I haven't seen any specific evidence that they've destroyed boxing in an entire area, like the New York commission has done in that state, or the way the commission has polluted things in Kentucky.

On balance, I've found that the sanctioning bodies have been a lot more willing to listen to ideas than most people from commissions or the ABC are. And they recognize more readily that they need certain changes to save them from extinction. For that reason, I've become a lot more willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

In fact, the conclusion that I've developed along the way is that between the ABC faction (commissions and its directors, like Kerns) and the sanctioning organizations, I'd say the alphabets are probably the lesser of two evils. Of course, there are glaring exceptions to that rule - they've been explored in the past and will continue to be explored in the future.

We've still got a ways to go in this mission. And unlike the John McCains of the world, I'm always willing to learn a little more. Feel free to contact me at your convenience.

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