

Written by Charles Jay  
Thursday, 19 December 2002 18:00

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### The 5th Round

We've recently learned something very interesting - that ESPN's strategic partner, Bjorn Rebney of Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing, has pro-actively made an attempt to jeopardize the employment of a Buffalo News writer who has, in the recent past, seen fit to criticize his operation.

On April 5 of this year, Tim Graham, who has been the News' regular boxing writer for the past three years, pointed out, correctly I might add, that Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, had falsely advertised and promoted a blackout in the Buffalo area, both in radio ads and through public relations man Mike Billoni, for its "Buffalo Blast" show (which took place that evening), and had continued to mislead the public about a blackout during the week leading up to the event.

In a subsequent interview with the website Boxingtalk.net, Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, admitted that he knew there was no blackout, and in fact claimed to have pulled the radio ads early in the promotion. However, Billoni, a member of "Team Mesi" who was working under Rebney's direction for purposes of the event, continued to inform the press that a blackout would be in effect unless the arena at the University of Buffalo, where the fight was being held, was sold out.

This chain of events was covered in depth within Chapter 16 of "Operation Cleanup".

On September 24, Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, sent a "Memorandum" to Steven Bell, the managing editor of the Buffalo News, and one of Graham's superiors, which made certain assertions as to Graham's "motivations".

"For reasons we understand, but are not yet in a position to irrefutably prove, the boxing writer for the Buffalo News (Tim Graham) has chosen to repeatedly and untruthfully attack our company", is what Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, writes in the letter. It goes on later to say, "Graham's attacks on Sugar Ray Leonard Boxing have been vicious, untrue and (we believe) based on motivations having nothing to do with actually reporting the news."

Toward the end of the letter, Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, gets deeper into the insinuations and also adds a threat for Graham's employer:

"Since the first article that Graham wrote about Sugar Ray Leonard, it was clear to us that his attacks were intended to damage our company and were not based on fact or opinion, but were instead based on something else. Our knowledge and further investigation into the motivation behind Graham's attacks has resulted in our being satisfied that we know why Graham has taken the action he has. Unlike Graham, until we have irrefutable evidence supporting our beliefs, we will not make those beliefs public. And, out of respect for the alliance/partnership we

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have formed with the Buffalo News, we will come to you and your staff to lay out our findings and information prior to sharing them with anyone."

The "alliance/partnership" that Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, refers to is something that deserves some elaboration. You see, on both cards SRL Boxing has promoted in Buffalo involving heavyweight Joe Mesi, SRL has entered into its own "partnership" of sorts with the Buffalo News, in which the promoters were given substantial print ads in the newspaper free of charge, in exchange for numerous marketing considerations, including appearances by Leonard on behalf of other advertisers in the Buffalo News. Indeed, Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, appears to be attempting to leverage this relationship in his letter to Bell.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, and in fact, rather suspiciously, Graham, who is one of the better boxing reporters in the country, has been more or less taken "off" the boxing beat when it comes to the SRL cards in Buffalo. He has been supplanted in favor of Rodney McKissic, a capable writer, but one who, previous to the arrival in Buffalo of ESPN's strategic partners - SRL and Rebney, had not written a story on boxing since the 1988 Adirondack Games. McKissic, in fact, has written the lion's share of all pre-fight stories regarding both SRL Boxing and Joe Mesi.

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Upon being contacted by us, Graham was not aware of any correspondence sent by Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, to Bell, and indicated he was "very surprised" that such a letter existed. Inasmuch as we originally spoke to Graham on October 21, it seems as though 27 days had gone by and still, neither executive who, to our knowledge, has seen the letter - meaning Bell nor executive sports editor Howard Smith - ever apprised Graham of these developments.

Naturally, the content of the letter raises questions as to exactly what Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, plans to spring on the Buffalo News in the way of concrete evidence about Graham's alleged ulterior motives. Certainly, the letter would seem to be rather defamatory in nature, since it is directed toward those people Graham is responsible to in the way of his employment.

We endeavored to get answers from Rebney, ESPN's strategic partner, by way of a questionnaire sent on October 23, which read like this:

"\* Even if, for the sake of argument, some reporting inaccuracies existed, what is it that tells you there was a clear ulterior motive on the part of Mr. Graham?

\* Instead of simply threatening the Buffalo News with such an implication, would you be kind enough to furnish the evidence that would justify sending a letter, clearly designed to damage Mr. Graham, to his superiors?

\* Is there, in fact, any evidence at all?

\* If you were going to warn the Buffalo News that such evidence existed, why would you hesitate for a moment in revealing it to them, or to paraphrase something you have stated, "share it with anyone"?

\* Is your overall objective to get Mr. Graham off the boxing beat?

\* Haven't you tried to have Mr. Graham "sanctioned" before, using your "alliance/partnership" with the Buffalo News as leverage?"

Unfortunately, no answers have been forthcoming.

One might also be curious as to whether ESPN, with whom Rebney and SRL Boxing have

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touted a "strategic alliance" and "strategic partnership" in the process of recruiting investors, was involved in the machinations that led to Graham being more or less "benched" by the Buffalo News. And it would be quite ironic, given the fact that in addition to his duties at the News, Graham also writes for the ESPN.com boxing web page. It certainly gives rise to all kinds of speculation, including the possibility that, given the relationship that Rebney claims with the network and ESPN acquiesces to, it could be part of an overall "strategy" between the two "partners".

Let's put it this way - Graham has not been asked to write a story for the ESPN website since September 9.

For his part, Bell told us that he invited Rebney - ESPN's strategic partner - to discuss his charges against Graham, but that Rebney never took him up on that invitation.

Of course, there's a very plausible reason for that. Truth be known, Rebney has absolutely nothing in the way of evidence. His desired result, it goes without saying, was to "scare" people like Bell and Smith into either firing Graham or disciplining him in some way, banking on the strength of Leonard's name and the "marketing relationship" between the News and SRL Boxing to carry some "juice".

Judging from the subsequent managerial decision made by Bell and Smith regarding the boxing coverage, that may in fact be what happened, at least to some degree.

It's disconcerting, to be sure. There is obviously nothing a boxing commission can do to intercede when promoters seek to manipulate the way coverage of their activities is delivered to the public and exercise control over those who would cast a critical eye toward them. That's simply not within their jurisdiction.

So the press has to serve as a guardian of credibility; the last line of defense, if you will. To put it bluntly, it must serve as the filtration system through which all bullshit must flow, before being regurgitated in the form of something that bares some resemblance to the truth. In a way, the media more or less becomes a de facto agent of reform.

And when the press casts this responsibility aside for the sake of engaging in a commercial "partnership" with an entity it is supposed to be covering with some level of objectivity, it becomes a "win-win" deal for everyone - except the public. Under this set of circumstances, there is no telling what kinds of misdeeds an unscrupulous promoter can get away with while going unchecked.

I wonder what other members of the "legitimate" press think. After all, if it could happen to Tim Graham, it could happen to them too.

That, for sure, will be the subject of a future chapter down the line.

You can count on that.