

Written by Charles Jay
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The 16th Round

One of the major complaints on the part of promoters and matchmakers during the normal day-to-day course of putting on boxing shows is that commissions are often somewhat over-officious when it comes to taking the matter of approving or disapproving specific matches into their own hands.

Generally, the contention is that the people who work at most boxing commissions are not qualified enough, or may not be operating within the proper frame of reference.

To be able to project what one fighter who do in the ring with another - or more to the point, what he can NOT do - is something which is extremely difficult. It is, in fact, the business matchmakers engage in all the time, and matchmaking is a subtle art in which one has to look well below the surface.

It is too simplistic to look at a fight between a guy who is 20-0 and one who is, say, 8-9, and summarily dismiss it as non-competitive, simply by glancing at the numerical records, when in reality, the fighter with the 8-9 mark might actually be just as credible. I've seen this happen all too often with fighters who come in from outside an area to fight a "hometown" boy, or in cases where two fighters, both from out-of-town, are matched against each other.

Some commissions intervene a lot more than others. They want to be involved, from beginning to end, in the process of okaying each match, well beyond the point where it becomes overbearing.

Some exercise a great deal of inconsistency, which is as much of a concern. They will approve matches submitted by a promoter they may have a "relationship" with, while refusing to sanction fights of a similar or even higher caliber put forward by others. This goes on at many commissions, whether it's conscious or sub-conscious, admitted or denied. And since boxing commissions are customarily one of the more autonomous agencies, or sub-agencies, in state government, a promoter who feels he's been "wronged" has very little recourse.

Worse yet, some commissioners actually ask one of their promoter buddies about the validity of his COMPETITOR'S matches, opening the door for a massive conflict of interest. Who the hell do we see about THAT?

The posture of being too hands-on, too nit-picky, with a lack of sound judgment behind those decisions, can indeed constitute a state of dangerous ignorance.

Yes, sometimes only a matchmaker has a proper sense of what is a legitimate match and what isn't.

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But does that mean that commissions only have the right to refuse the most egregious mismatches - at least those that look like it on paper?

I wouldn't go that far.

The way I figure it, one of the major responsibilities of a boxing commission is to offer protection to the consumer. This is a state agency we're talking about, so as long as they're in a position to exercise some quality control, why shouldn't they ensure that the consumer has at least a respectable product put in front of it?

I don't agree with the "caveat emptor" attitude. And I think it's rather contemptible for any promoter or matchmaker to feel that way. Yet some do.

You've got to remember, commissions were created with several things in mind - one of which was to protect the best interests of sport and society. Having some kind of right of refusal over matches - one which has some latitude - certainly falls within those parameters.

There's no doubt that if a fan is going to pay \$50 for a ringside ticket with the expectation of being entertained, he shouldn't have to endure six one-round fights that were mismatches from the outset. A commission can provide that last line of defense. We protect consumers against manufacturers who market defective products, don't we? Same principle at work here.

There are some matchmakers who have no problem at all with the commission's occasional intervention.

"There are a lot of pressures on matchmakers, on all different sides, and having the commission to fall back on can be an advantage," says Chris Middendorf, one of the busiest matchmakers on the east coast. "There are probably not enough quality matchmakers who can do it without some oversight from the commission. They're a necessary part of the process."

Of course the flip side is that when the commission takes a proprietary approach, it has to shoulder much of the blame if it ultimately allows some mismatches into the ring. And justifiably so.

Then what can we do?

I've always thought an interesting idea for some enterprising young man (or old man, as it were) would be to establish a "central matchmaking board"; a service where former matchmakers and booking agents, who are now non-partisan, could be retained on a monthly basis by commissions across the country for the purposes of consulting with them on the feasibility of certain matches.

Of course it might be hard to find enough capable "consultants" to staff such an operation, and some conflicts of interest might be unavoidable. But if it ever proved to be workable, it would provide an invaluable resource for commissions to make use of.

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But would many commissions use it? Really, I don't know. I don't know if enough of them care, if they have enough activity within their jurisdiction, or if too many of them think they already know it all (wouldn't that be ironic?). But it would afford the people who are in charge of approving matches with the opportunity to get some legitimate professional advice. And it would be a great model for something that could fit in with a nationwide structure, whether that be a national commission or an ABC-type organization (fat chance, right?).

And I have an answer for those people who think commissions should keep their nose completely out of the "matchmaking game" - that's next.

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