

Weighty Issues: Boxing's Latest Epidemic

Written by John Nguyen
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It used to be that a pre-fight weigh-in was merely a formality. Sure, it did have official implications by ensuring that the fighters were on weight, but that was once a given. It served mainly as one last means of publicizing a fight, a chance for fans and analysts to size up the combatants at a glance, and maybe even one final round of filibustering and psychological gamesmanship between rivals. All this was a prelude to the competitive suspense that would soon take place in the ring.

However, weigh-ins have lately taken on their own brand of suspense, as was demonstrated by the weigh-in for this past weekend's matchup between Erik Morales and Danny Garcia. The question now is whether a fighter will even bother to make the contracted weight. In Morales' case, the answer was a unequivocal "no," as Morales weighed in a full two pounds over the agreed-upon weight of 140 pounds and declined any further attempts to make the contracted limit. In regards to his failure to make weight, Morales is quoted as saying "If I tried to make the weight by taking off those two pounds it would have really affected me in the fight."

As disappointing as it was to see a respected warrior like Morales cavalierly handle such a grievous breach of boxing ethics, it is even more disturbing to see that it is a trend which is occurring with alarming frequency. Over the past few years, some of boxing's A-list stars have demonstrated a propensity for failing to make weight prior to major fights. The list of offenders is a long, but an abbreviated list includes Jose Luis Castillo, Joan Guzman, Floyd Mayweather,

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Nate Campbell, Brandon Rios, and the aforementioned Erik Morales. In almost every case involving these fighters, the penalty instituted was monetary and the fights were allowed to go on after being given the OK from the opponent. In reality, surrendering a portion of one's purse is of little consequence when considering the potentially huge competitive edge of not having to sweat off the last few pounds. It seems that this trade-off is an appealing one to many fighters, which is why it seems to be happening with increasing regularity.

The fact that the stars of the sport appear to be getting away with this with relatively little punishment has sent the message to younger fighters that making weight is of little importance, as was grossly illustrated recently by former U.S. Olympian Shawn Estrada, who weighed a completely absurd 22 pounds over the contracted 174-pound weight limit for his fight against Terrance Woods.

This recent epidemic of overweight fighters should have fans and officials up in arms. In modern sports, attempts to gain unfair competitive advantages have been met with outcries for reform. The most common example is performance enhancing drugs. Any athlete in any sport who becomes linked to PEDs becomes branded with a scarlet letter. Fans recognize that there is an honesty in athletic competition which cannot be compromised. Obtaining an unfair edge over one's opponent soils the beauty of the human drama inherent in sports. The increased attention in the past decade to preserving the purity of competition via stricter testing and regulation is a testament to the importance of keeping a level playing field for competitors in all walks of athletic competition.

In boxing, fighters who do not (or, worst case scenario, refuse to) make weight can gain a similar edge over their opponent as one who takes an illegal performance enhancing substance; the offending fighter is benefited by having physical advantages that their opponent can neither anticipate nor prepare for and, worse yet, can put the opponent's health and safety in jeopardy. There are certainly assumed risks that come with combat sports such as boxing, but these risks need not be exacerbated by fighters who demonstrate recklessly negligent behavior by weighing in above an agreed-upon limit.

A modern parable which illustrates this point is the 2005 rematch between Jose Luis Castillo and the late Diego Corrales. The first Corrales-Castillo matchup was one of the great all-time wars in the history of boxing, with both fighters giving and taking punishment in equal measure. The highly-anticipated rematch promised more competitive fireworks. Then, things got interesting. Castillo failed to make weight on three separate attempts, with his lowest weight being 138 ½ pounds, well over the 135-pound lightweight limit. At that point, ball was in Corrales' court. He could fight Castillo despite the fact that Castillo didn't make weight, or he

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could walk away, leaving untold numbers of disappointed fans and a career-high payday in his wake. After Castillo agreed to surrender 10% of his \$1.2 million purse, Corrales chose to fight on, and ended up paying for it. The same two fighters who waged a hellacious battle the first time around failed to create the same level of drama in the rematch. The bigger and stronger Castillo dominated Corrales en route to a fourth round knockout victory. The only fighter who fulfilled his professional obligations prior to the fight was Corrales, and he was rewarded with a concussive loss. Something about that seems more than a little unjust. Apparently, though, Corrales learned from the experience as he walked away from a rubber match months later when Castillo again failed to make weight. Castillo, though, seemed to learn very little from those experiences, as he came in overweight for a scheduled fight against Jose Cotto on the Morales-Garcia undercard this past weekend.

Much is made of the unprofessional aspect of a fighter's failure to make a stipulated weight, and, yes, it is poor form when a fighter throws the entire promotion in jeopardy as a result of failing to live up to contractual obligations. Greater still are the ethical implications of the offense.

A fighter who fails to make weight is giving the ultimate middle finger to his opponent, the fans, and the sport. The offending boxer is, in essence, saying to his opponent "I don't give a damn that you had to pay the price to make weight. I don't respect you enough to do the same." It forces the opponent to make a decision that no fighter should have to face: whether they should compromise their safety or a (usually very needed) paycheck. Weeks of physical and mental preparation hinge on a catch-22 scenario. It is simply wrong to put a fighter in that situation, and mutual respect between combatants should prevent it from ever occurring. Whether a fighter stands to make a million dollars or a hundred is irrelevant. Failing to make weight is an insult to a boxer's opponent and to the long tradition of fighters who have sacrificed of themselves for the love of the sport.

Something clearly needs to be done to stop the spread of this latest epidemic in boxing. It is quite evident that the current system of fines and purse forfeiture is doing little to buck the trend of fighters coming in overweight. Higher percentages of earnings need to be forfeited and suspensions need to be levied in order to serve as a deterrent for fighters who view making weight as optional. A strong message needs to be sent that contractual weights are taken seriously and that failure to honor those obligations will be considered a severe offense. This is an issue that is relatively easy to enforce but, like so many other problems in boxing, is drawing little attention in the way of serious reform. The way things are currently run, it is only a matter of time before a ring tragedy results from this issue. Regrettably, tragic circumstances are almost a prerequisite in boxing before actions are taken to right a lingering wrong.

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Boxing has never been an honest sport. As long as there have been fighters, corruption has been following them like a specter in the background. There are few things that a fighter can be assured of in this game. Betrayals, scandals, and improprieties in boxing play out more like the plotline of a telenovela than a regulated and sanctioned sport. Heck, a fighter can't even be guaranteed that the officials appointed to a bout are going to treat them fairly, so it's fairly obvious that little in the sport can be taken for granted. One of the few variables that can be regulated fairly, however, is weight. It's simple. It's standardized. It involves no subjectivity. There is no guesswork involved. On top of that, fighters used to carry themselves like fighters. A deal was a deal, and a real sportsman honored the arranged terms of competition.

Sadly, this is no longer the case. A fighter cannot trust that his opponent will adhere to the code of honor once so reverently held. The me-first selfishness that has overtaken athletics is revealing itself at the scale in the Sweet Science. The fact is that there are selfish punks parading as prizefighters who don't feel that the rules apply to them. Honor is becoming an archaic notion, and the fighter's ethos is slowly becoming obsolete. This is yet another sad reminder that the sport of boxing as we once knew it is gradually slipping away. Only this time, the blame cannot be placed on governing bodies, promotional kingpins, inept officials, or other external factors so commonly cited for their toxic impact on the fight game. This time, the wound is being inflicted from within.

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deepwater says:

Weight issues are nothing new and will always be part of boxing. That's just the way that it is. If you weigh in over weight you can pay off the other guy or the other fighter will reject the fight. Sometimes it can even work to the advantage of the fighter who made weight. ex: Shawn Estrada looked like a piece of fat garbage, he had an extra 30 pounds of fat on him not muscle. The can that he fought should of beat down his body and got a huge upset win. Again this is not a latest epidemic it is part of the fight game and always will be.

BHarper85 says:

Here's an idea to help remedy this situation, but I'd like to know what others honestly think, so please comment. Obviously, paying off a fighter to come in over weight has a monetary effect, but no effect at all in the ring. So, in addition to making overweight fighters pay, they should also be forced to wear heavier gloves than their opponent to help offset any advantage the extra weight would have. I'm not a boxer, but I'd think it would affect different types of fighters relatively equally. Speed guys would have reduced hand speed and power punchers would make less of an effect with their punches. I'll bet if this was implemented, you'd see guys start to make weight more often. Again, please comment because I could be wrong and not see a potential pitfall of this, but I'm just throwing it out there. Thanks.

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Radam G says:

The honor of weight has never been a chief part of the game, just the honor of getting PAID, as BIG as you CAN! The punks of boxing who believe that weight give them an advantage will always take that advantage. Besides, all these various weight divisions need to get the heck outta boksing Dodge city. GO BY to just nine or 10 weight divisions.

One of the true pound-for-pound greatest fighter of all time -- though he gets no love -- Tommy Burns were heavyweight champion of the world at exaggerated weights of between 168 to 185. This 5-foot-6 -- listed at 5-foot-8 -- dude usually truthfully fought at about 160lbs. TB whoop many of a BIG arse. Because during his days, size didn't mean syet. Everybodeeee and dey momma were fighting BIG because that was where the money was.

Nowadays fighters are full of jive because of all these weight divisions and Big [or at least decent] money to be made in every last one of them. Forty or 50 years ago -- maybe even 35 -- it is no way that Andre "SOG" Ward would have been winning a pseudo-division at 168lbs. He would have been just like the late, greats Bob Fitzsimmon [155-to-173lbs] and Tommy Burns and the late, very, very good Floyd Patterson [174-to-182lbs] and fighting at heavyweight where the only big money was. Oh, YUP! If it were not for all the phony weight divisions around and the money to be made in them, SOG would have been challenging and whooping the K-bros/docs in my humble opinion.

What has destroyed the great Yanky-fighting heavyweight is too much BIG money in the psuedo-and-lighter divisions, not fighters going to others sports and the penitentiary. Don't let me have to start naming all the good and great fighters who spent time lockdown in juvenile [reformed school] and in the penitentiary.

Big money started coming to all the divisions of boxing in the 1980s. Just imagine that Archie "Old Mongoose" Moore and Bob Foster never, never -- and I mean NEVER fought for and/or defended their light heavyweight titles for more than \$75,000. And now look at all the money-making lies that Money May tells, when no welterweight/junior middleweight even made more than \$60,000 before the coming of Sugar Ray Leonard and Tommy "Hitman" Hearns in the 1980s.

Sorry for that diversion on the issue of weight. But the biggest problem of weight cheating is PAY nowadays. Make it where just about five -- instead of 18 -- weight divisions get the BIG moola, and this so-called weight cheating will halt A-S-A-P! In the old days, bigger mean better paid, so pugilists went in weight, not down or staying the same -- starving like a muthafool, then putting on 25-30 pounds for the bout the next day. Holla!