

Kathy Duva Speaks Out On...Well, Everything (Part 1)

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Wednesday, 23 April 2014 15:28



You say this latest “Cold War” pitting Showtime and Golden Boy’s Richard Schaefer against HBO and Top Rank founder Bob Arum is basically a new twist on an old theme? Something with elements of hostility and intrigue that boxing really hasn’t seen before, at least to this degree, and might never see again?

How naïve such an assumption would be. Main Events CEO Kathy Duva might now merely play the role of interested observer, given her lack of direct involvement with either of the warring factions, but she was in the midst of a nearly identical battle, with different principals, 20 or so years ago, and she says that what happened then makes today’s combatants seem as if they are engaging in child’s play. The difference between then and now is the dizzying rise of social media, which takes every squabble, every veiled or direct insult that used to take place behind closed doors or in private conversations, and puts the nastiness out there on Twitter or Instagram for everyone to see.

So Duva, whose company has found a cozy television home on NBC SportsNet, sits back and watches as Showtime’s forces engage in a bitter and expensive war of attrition with its opposite numbers at HBO, the end result of which could be the mutual destruction of each side or, at least, one or the other.

And Duva figures she or some other patient entrepreneur will be sitting there like a spider, waiting to feast on the fleshy remains of the struggle scattered about on the world wide web. Something new – maybe better, maybe not -- almost surely must arise in such an eventuality because, well, the fight game isn’t just going to go away because the two biggest current players have bled themselves dry. Somehow, some way, boxing always survives, doesn’t it?

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Just like the common cockroach survived the Ice Age while mighty dinosaurs didn't.

"If HBO and Showtime beat each other up enough, and make each other small enough because their executives get tired and say, 'We're not going to bankroll this anymore,' you're going to see other networks come back into boxing," Duva theorized. "We're already close. ESPN has already bought a heavyweight title fight (in which WBO/WBA/IBF champion Wladimir Klitschko defends against Alex Leapai this Saturday evening in Oberhausen, Germany).

"What's happened is that HBO's budget for boxing has shrunk. Showtime's has grown. But if you look at the money they spend on boxing as opposed to what they spend on one football game, any network that has the will to do it could come into this business and blow them both away on the same day.

"The result of this fight is that they're going to empower somebody else because that's how this business works. It's not like they have only the two premium cable outlets and a finite number of fighters. There's always going to be somebody else, and that's the part that the two of them are just not thinking about. It's the part that will create opportunities for someone like me, so I'm not arguing about it or knocking it.

"ESPN or NBC, or maybe CBS, will say, 'Hey, here's a great big void. Let's jump in and take it over.' When you try to eliminate competition, all you do is creating openings for somebody else. Really, I'm kind of happy about it. I'm not going to lie. I got no problem with the 'Cold War.' It was great for Main Events the first time. We put a lot of great fights on HBO during that time. Don King took his fighters elsewhere (to Showtime) and it created dates for us."

Spanish philosopher/essayist George Santayana once observed that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. In the mid-1990s, HBO and Showtime were tossing similarly poison-tipped darts at one another, albeit with the better-financed, more powerful HBO in an even more obvious position of strength and scrappy Showtime hoping to take its haughty tormentor down a peg or two. And while Duva's late husband, Dan, held a seat at the head table, he also knew, as his widow does now, that he could become the beneficiary of whatever collateral damage was wrought by the fierce determination of the arch-rivals to inflict as much damage upon the other as was humanly possible.

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Playing the role of current HBO Sports president Ken Hershman then was the well-financed Seth Abraham, boxing's equivalent of New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. Current Showtime honcho Stephen Espinoza predecessor was the late Jay Larkin, forever asked to do more with less and doing it with some degree of regularity. Arum was still Arum, then as now a feisty, spit-in-your-eye sort long on vinegar and short on patience. But instead of Schaefer, Arum's mortal enemy was Don King, publicly harrumphing "Only in America!" while cutting backroom deals that any seedy Washington politician would have been envious of.

And where the pivotal figure in the ring today is Floyd Mayweather Jr., who crossed the street from HBO to Showtime and brought his enormous star power with him, Showtime's big-ticket attraction was Mike Tyson, who was to do for Larkin what Mayweather abdication from HBO is supposed to be doing for Espinoza and his company today.

There is a notion, quaint and incorrect, that Cold War I was a bit more civil than the present version. Hey, didn't HBO and Showtime both televise, via their pay-per-view arms, the Lennox Lewis-Tyson heavyweight megafight on June 8, 2002, in Memphis, Tenn.? Wasn't that an indication that the two sides could play nice, at least once, if circumstances so dictated? And if it happened then, isn't there still hope that a Mayweather –Manny Pacquiao fight somehow can be made for the good of the sport, present business allegiances notwithstanding?

King and Arum even occasionally got past their obvious personal differences, if there was enough money to be made on each side. They were photographed, smiling and shaking hands, when the matchup of Arum's Oscar De La Hoya and King's Felix Trinidad was made. OK, so those smiles were forced and fake. A very attractive superfight nonetheless was negotiated and took place. If it happened then, couldn't it happen again? Wouldn't it just be a matter of Arum and Schaefer sitting down together and somehow stowing away the animosity, or at least picking up a telephone and having a conversation? What might happen if Hershman and Espinoza bumped into each other at a coffee shop and, you know, sat down for a latte and a Danish? If Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill could have a summit meeting with Joe Stalin, isn't a temporary boxing truce at least possible?

Duva said the idea that Arum-Schaefer somehow surpasses Arum-King, or even Arum-Dan Duva, for pure, unadulterated hatred is downright ludicrous. Those legendary feuders, the Hatfields and McCoys, had nothing on the feudin' fight folks of two decades past.

Although Lewis-Tyson was a shared event (and, almost certainly, a one-of-a-kind thing never to

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be repeated), the counterpoint that underscores just how weird had gotten was the scheduling of two major fights on the same night in the same town – literally just down the street from each other -- and at the same time. That, too, is something unprecedented and highly unlikely to ever happen again.

Remember what was supposed to happen on Nov. 4, 1995? HBO had announced the much-anticipated rubber match between Riddick Bowe and Evander Holyfield, which was to take place in the outdoor arena at Caesars Palace. Fox (not Showtime), meanwhile, had penciled in the matchup of Tyson, in his second comeback fight on the comeback trail against an opponent to be named (it would prove to be Buster Mathis Jr.) at the MGM Grand, just down the Las Vegas Strip.

Boxing's answer to the Gunfight at the OK Corral, of course, didn't happen. Bowe did fight Holyfield, "Big Daddy" winning on an eighth-round stoppage, but a few days before Tyson was to have fought Mathis, he appeared at a press conference to show the bandaged right thumb he supposedly had injured in sparring a couple of weeks earlier. At Tyson's side were two doctors who held up X-rays and assured the media that the injury was indeed legitimate.

Duva, whose company co-promoted Bowe-Holyfield III, is one of many skeptics who continues to believe that, wink-wink, Tyson-Mathis (which was rescheduled and took place on Dec. 16, 1995, in Philadelphia) was pushed back not so much because of Tyson's perhaps damaged thumb as because his likely blowout of Mathis was going to get killed at the box office by the more competitive and attractive third pairing of Bowe and Holyfield.

"I can't remember who had first dibs on the date," Duva said. "Back then I was the (Main Events) publicist and raising three kids, too. I can't say I was paying that much attention to that stuff. That was Danny's deal."

But Duva has a much more vivid recollection of Lewis-Tyson, which might have resembled peace in our time between HBO and Showtime but was actually a raging fire fight involving guys in suits that somehow was kept out of the public's eye.

"Everyone who was involved in that debacle – and `debacle' is the only word to use – will tell you that, yes, it was an incredibly successful event," she said. "It was incredibly successful from

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a financial standpoint. At the time it was the highest-viewed pay-per-view fight ever , so I have to be careful in parsing my comments. But everyone who was involved in it walked away saying, 'We will NEVER do this again.' It was a nightmare.

"Here's the difference. Today, you are seeing on social media conversations that took place privately on the phone back then, when Dan and King and Arum hated each other's guts on a level (Arum and Schaefer) don't even come close to. It's just that most people weren't aware of how deep it went. But I was living through it.

"During that Lewis-Tyson promotion, they had to have a weekly conference call with all the lawyers that were involved, representing all the various entities just to hash out the legal issues. Those calls would last for two or three hours every Tuesday.

"You had lawyers literally arguing over who would bring the stool into the ring. I mean, crazy stuff. The Tyson and Lewis camps were trying to screw each other in so many ways, I can't even begin to count them all.

"At one point we got a house for Lennox (Main Events was his U.S. promoter) to stay in when he got to Memphis," Duva continued. "Next thing I know, Mike Tyson's people rented him a house in the same neighborhood. We had a blowup over that.

"If you recall, there was a press conference where Tyson literally assaulted Lennox Lewis (and chewed on his thigh). There's no other word for it. And they're trying to put them in the same neighborhood? All we were trying to do was to keep them apart until the bell rang."

Today's technological advances, Duva figures, would have altered the landscape considerably.

"If there had been Twitter back then, you'd realize that what's happening now with Arum and Richard Schaefer is, like, I don't know, gentlemen playing cricket or something. But, as a publicist, all that nastiness would have made my job a lot easier."

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Part 2 of 3 will deal with how the HBO-Showtime divide is impacting the light heavyweight division, now and moving forward.

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deepwater2 says:

Kathy Duva speaking the truth. Boxing will be here long after Floyd and Manny are gone and hopefully we will be on this website talking about the new crop. By the way didn't Mayweather retire for a few years and no one really cared? Cheers to the new guys coming up, can't wait for the heavyweight scene to open up. Floyd better stop saying he won't do business with a promoter and fight already or just move and get out of the way because time is priceless.

dino da vinci says:

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Great work deep.