

Kathy Duva Speaks Out On...Well, Everything (Part 2)

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 06 May 2014 12:27



Trying to fully unify a world championship in the fragmented arena of professional boxing – any world championship, in any weight class – is proving more difficult than super-gluing the fragmented, war-torn ethnic regions of the former Yugoslavia, or maybe prying Crimea from Russian control.

Certainly, the power brokers of boxing seem more intent on solidifying their own spheres of influence than in sitting down at a conference table, or maybe picking up a telephone, and working out an arrangement that would at least partially appease the most abused segment of the fight game, namely the fans who pay the freight with their hard-earned pay-for-view dollars.

Those diehard fans – the ones who once pined to see Mike Tyson swap punches with his homeboy from the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Riddick Bowe, or for Bowe to get it on with Lennox Lewis in a rematch of the 1988 Olympic super heavyweight gold medal bout -- are still waiting for that megafight between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao to be made. But the odds of it ever taking place are longer than, say, an overweight plumber getting a call to fix a leaky faucet in a rundown neighborhood and somehow winding up in a ménage a trois with a Victoria's Secret model and the cover girl from the most recent Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue.

We all want to win the Powerball Lottery, don't we? But pipe dreams almost never become reality, and no one understands frustration more than the boxing buff who knows which entree he truly hungers for, but too often is obliged to settle for some substitute item from the Column B side of the pugilistic menu.

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Latest case in point: the light heavyweight division, so teeming with attractive, big-name talent, yet so isolated in terms of who will or won't fight whom because of the entrenched positions of various entities who'd rather reconstruct a figurative Berlin Wall than find a way to achieve peace in our time.

Simply put, unless something changes very dramatically and very soon, there won't be a unification showdown between WBA 175-pound ruler Adonis Stevenson and IBF champ Sergey Kovalev. That much-anticipated pairing – an updated version of Mayweather-Pacquiao, if you will – appeared to be nearly signed and sealed not that long ago. But it can't be delivered because Stevenson, having turned his career over to Mayweather's chief negotiator, the shadowy Al Haymon, jumped ship from HBO to rival Showtime, for whom he will fight exclusively for at least the foreseeable future. By all accounts it was a lucrative deal, financially, for Stevenson, but the bottom line is still this: Not only will we not get to see Mayweather-Pacquiao, we can't hope to witness its near-equivalent, Stevenson-Kovalev. Instead, we get a matchup of Stevenson (23-1, 20 KOs) and Andzej Fonfara (25-2, 15 KOs) on regular Showtime on May 24. That fight comes on the heels of the HBO-televised seventh-round knockout victory by Kovalev (24-0-1, 22 KOs) of Cedric Agnew (26-1, 13 KOs) on April 29.

Such real or imagined mismatches are not just substitutions from the Column B side of the menu, but week-old slices of stale pie from Joe's Greasy Spoon Diner.

As might be expected, Stevenson and Kovalev, prohibited from trading actual haymakers in the ring, took verbal or social-media potshots at one another.

"Adonis Stevenson is a piece of (crap)," Kovalev said while being interviewed in the ring. "I will fight any champion in my division. I want to get another title. I am ready for anyone."

Stevenson fired back on Twitter, telling Kovalev that "You just a real slow BUM with no defence. Easy work! You can't fight for (crap)! Tell mama Duva to call Al Haymon and Yvon Michel (Stevenson's promoter) so I can have an easy pay day."

Sticks and stones, folks. Again.

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“Mama Duva” – that would be Kovalev’s promoter, Main Events CEO Kathy Duva – does have a horse in this race, so her thoughts on the current state of affairs might be interpreted as being at least somewhat biased. Then again, how could they not be, given the fact that Duva has just filed a suit against Stevenson, Golden Boy Promotions, Showtime and Michel, alleging breach of contract. But her views are interesting in any case, when one considers that she has taken a twirl in this kind of circle dance before. Although Duva’s company gets many of its television dates on NBC SportsNet these days, she and her late husband, Dan, did or do far more business with HBO than Showtime, and she believes that Showtime’s apparent interest in rounding up many of the currently formidable light heavies – in the process isolating Kovalev – will prove to be an exercise in futility because boxing is cyclical. Today’s hot division is tomorrow’s tepid leftovers.

“People think Sergey Kovalev is toast now because two guys from Canada (Stevenson and former – light heavyweight titlist Jean Pascal) went to Showtime,” Duva said in a far-ranging interview that touched on multiple topics. “You’re looking at a 49-year-old champion (IBF/WBA ruler Bernard Hopkins), a 36-year-old champion (Stevenson) and some French-Canadian guy (Pascal) who fought on HBO a few times and got not very impressive ratings at all, certainly not as impressive as Sergey got for fighting a guy (Agnew) that nobody knew.

“For anyone to say, ‘Showtime’s got it now. They’ve locked up the light heavyweight division,’ well ... they might determine who the light heavyweight champion of Canada is. Maybe that guy will wind up fighting a 50-year-old champion (Hopkins) at some point. But I’m taking the long view. In five years, I think Sergey Kovalev will be a really big star and it really doesn’t matter who fights him now, or who ducks him now. Clearly, Stevenson was the express train to that kind of attention, but on the other hand HBO really has no choice but to focus on Sergey now.”

Duva said she can wait for Kovalev’s emerging star power to blossom, but she said the posturing between boxing’s perceived superpowers – Showtime and Golden Boy on one side, HBO and Top Rank on the other – is like dripping acid on the fabric of a sport that can ill-afford to have any more of its fan base eroded. Unlike the NFL, NBA, NHL and Major League Baseball, boxing does not operate under a singular authority that has the authority to do the right thing, or some reasonable proximity. No matter the intemperate words that sometimes come out of the mouths of the various principals, who’s going to slap them down like NBA commissioner Adam Silver did to dumb-ass Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling? Unlike the hazy notion of Mayweather-Pacquiao or Stevenson-Kovalev ever being staged, NBA fans know they’ll get LeBron James vs. Kevin Durant if their teams win their way into the Finals. Other sports are true meritocracies in that respect, boxing a traveling crapshoot.

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“The big fights are boxing’s Super Bowls, its World Series, its Kentucky Derbies,” Duva continued. “Those are the times when fans that like sports but are not necessarily that much into boxing come and watch us. When you don’t have those events, or they don’t happen often enough, the whole sport suffers.”

To be fair, both HBO and Showtime have, at various times, tried to come up with multi-tiered formats that would give long-suffering fans some of what they want. Thirteen years ago HBO and promoter Don King staged a four-man middleweight unification tournament, its participants being IBF champion Bernard Hopkins, WBC champ Keith Holmes, WBA titlist William Joppy and Felix Trinidad, the WBA/IBF junior middleweight ruler who was moving up from 154 pounds. Hopkins won the event, memorably stopping the previously undefeated Trinidad in 12 rounds on Sept. 29, 2001, in Madison Square Garden.

Showtime cobbled together a similar coalition for its “Super Six” super middleweight tournament that took place from 2009 to 2011, the lineup consisting of WBA champion Mikkel Kessler, WBC titlist Carl Froch, 2004 Olympic gold medalist Andre Ward, former middleweight champs Jermain Taylor and Arthur Abraham, and 2004 Olympic bronze medalist Andre Dirrell.

Ward outpointed Froch in the finale, on Dec. 17, 2011, in Atlantic City’s Boardwalk Hall, in the process establishing himself as one of the premier pound-for-pound fighters. But while the end result was mostly positive, there were glitches: IBF champ Lucian Bute was not invited to participate; Taylor and Kessler withdrew during the course of the tournament and had to be replaced by Glen Johnson and Allan Green, pinch-hit assignments that are fine in baseball but warped the original premise almost to the point of it being unrecognizable. Maybe that’s why neither Showtime nor HBO have tried to launch a similarly ambitious project in another weight class.

Even if the premium-cable outlets and their partners did deign to undertake such a mission, boxing’s various sanctioning bodies would probably strip the last man standing of one or more of his titles with alarming speed. Like HBO/Top Rank and Showtime/Golden Boy, the WBC, WBA, IBF and WBO are highly protective of their turf because it’s really not in their best interests for anyone to be seen as the undisputed kingpin of a particular weight class. The WBC, now under the direction of Jose Sulaiman’s son, Mauricio, has already declared it will vacate the title of any WBC champion if he has the temerity to fight for another organization’s bejeweled belt.

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In the meantime, Duva is left to wistfully contemplate the near-deal she thought she had struck to put Kovalev in with Stevenson, on HBO, in what could have been a career-defining slugfest for either or maybe even both power-punchers.

“You have a situation here, unless I’m missing the boat, that’s a first,” she said. “I’m used to other promoters coming along and trying to screw up my deal. It’s part of what I live with. But in this case you had a manager (Haymon) and a television network (Showtime) actively come in and screw up a deal. I thought that was interesting.

“In the beginning, Stevenson’s promoter (Michel) was completely on board with the deal until (Stevenson and Haymon) they changed his mind.

“It was early February when I learned Al Haymon was talking to Stevenson. It was pretty clear to me where this was going. But what I didn’t know was that Al was talking to Stevenson as far back as last October or November. If I had known that then, I wouldn’t have been the least bit surprised. There are other people who shouldn’t have been surprised, but they’re not me.”

To be sure, not everyone agrees with Duva’s take on the situation. Stephen Espinoza, the executive vice president and general manager of Showtime Sports and Event Programming, told TSS editor Michael Woods that he’d love to stage a Stevenson-Kovalev fight, provided Stevenson survives a unification match with ageless wonder Hopkins, hardly a given.

“If Kovalev’s available,” he said. “Except for some reason Kathy Duva seems interested only in HBO and not maximizing revenues.”

Part 3 of 3 details the similarities and possible ramifications, in Duva’s opinion, of Golden Boy’s decision to exclusively align itself with Showtime, much as Don King did in the 1990s.

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