

Dear Governor Cuomo, Please Don't Hurt NY Boxing

Written by Michael Woods

Tuesday, 22 February 2011 17:23



Chairperson Lathan has restored some humanity, some warmth, to a body that is traditionally lacking in that department. TSS hopes the Governor recognizes this, and acts accordingly, in the best longterm interest of the sport in New York.

Dear Governor Cuomo:

I don't envy you.

I wish you well, as you are tasked with the arduous and thankless task of wringing the excess from the state budget, and trying to restore some fiscal sanity to a state you termed "functionally bankrupt" when you presented your version of the budget for the next fiscal year.

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You are acting like a grownup after too many years of reckless behavior from leaders who treated the budget like a combination empty Coke can and personal gift card. They kicked the can down the road, adding mountains of debt to be paid for by future officeholders and taxpayers of the future, while doling out goodie bags of funding and pet project monies to reward their backers and key voting blocs. Judging by your poll numbers, Governor, the majority of the people like the direction you're sailing the ship, and by and large, I am among the 77% who give you a thumbs up.

But I must quibble on one item that you've floated, sir. Within the 2011-12 NEW YORK STATE EXECUTIVE BUDGET TRANSPORTATION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION ARTICLE VII LEGISLATION MEMORANDUM IN SUPPORT there contains wording that would diminish, seriously diminish, the role of the Chairperson of the State Athletic Commission, which is currently Melvina Lathan. Here is the specific phrasing:

Part N – Eliminate the salary for the Chair of the State Athletic Commission.

Purpose:

This bill amends the Executive Law to eliminate the statutorily mandated salary of the Chair of the New York State Athletic Commission. The Commission would continue to exist, but the Chair position would no longer be funded.

Statement in Support, Summary of Provisions, Existing Law, and Prior Legislative

History:

The State Athletic Commission regulates and supervises all activities related to boxing and wrestling contests, matches and exhibitions including granting licenses to applicants, enforcing rules and regulations, and evaluating medical and safety standards to ensure the health and safety of boxers and wrestlers. While the Commission performs essential services on behalf of the State, it can do so without a full-time salaried Chair. This bill achieves Financial Plan savings by eliminating the statutorily mandated salary of the Chair of the State Athletic Commission.

Budget Implications: □

Enactment of this bill is necessary to implement the 2011-2012 Executive Budget as the State Financial Plan assumes \$154,000 in recurring savings resulting from not funding the State Athletic Chair position. □

Now, I'm no numbers cruncher. But I can say with certainty that there are better places for you, Governor, to trim the "fat" than in choosing to do so in a manner that risks losing a verified asset to the state, and to the boxing community.

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Lathan, a highly regarded judge of amateur and then professional boxing matches for over 20 years, was named Chairperson by then Governor David Paterson on July 25, 2008. She was the first and to this day, only African-American female to be appointed this position, in NY or in any other state in the union.

Now, cynics might stop right here, and grumble. They might mutter about "diversity hire" or maybe even use less genteel terminology. If so, they'd be wasting their breath. I've seen with my own eyes, and chatted up enough fight game participants, including fighters, promoters, judges, on down the line, to confidently state that Lathan is no "mercy" hire, or "diversity" figurehead.

Governor, I phoned Lathan up after news of the proposed cut came to light. She didn't want to delve deeply into the matter. She offered me only a cursory statement when I asked about the proposal to make her position a non-salaried one.

"I respect the very difficult position the Governor is in," she said, and then indicated that she preferred to be the good soldier, and let the situation play out, before graciously ending the call.

Well, I then asked around, and chatted up a bunch of folks who've been in the New York fight game for decades. Because while I've seen Lathan in action, seen the authentic warmth she brings to the table, the obvious bond I see between her and the fighters, and the other citizens involved in the fight scene here, I needed to know if others shared my viewpoint. Governor, across the board, they did. I didn't find a voice of dissent.

Now, I know how things work, generally. Maybe someone whispered in your ear, or in the ear of an aide, and told you that the chairmanship isn't an integral position, that there would be no ramifications if the position was downsized. Or, perhaps, in a more Machiavellian manner, someone has designs on the post, someone thinks they are owed a favor, and would like to see Lathan leave, so they can slither into the role, and be in the throne when the economy upticks, and the salaried position is restored. I have no inside info if this is the case. But if any odious game-playing is at hand, please resist the temptation to give in, sir. I do know that if this budget cut occurs, and Lathan decides the job isn't right for her, the game and the state will be losing an asset which we cannot put a price-tag on. But if you can't rely solely on my word, Governor, read on...

Joe Dwyer, the current president of the North American Boxing Federation, worked as an inspector at NYSAC for 12 years, and rose to the level of chief inspector before leaving in 1996. He saw chairmen--always men-- come and go, during his tenure and after, and more than a couple were of the hack variety, appointed for reasons other than their storehouse of boxing knowledge. I asked him, Governor, if making the chair position non-salaried, even if the chair were given a stipend, which could amount to around \$100 for a 15 hour day, would be wise.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I intend to send a letter to the Governor. Since her appointment, in the past 15 or 20 years, this is the best I've seen the Commission running. Her integrity, her exposure for the sport, the confidence the fighters, promoters have in her....I think she's a credit to the Governor's office to have her in that role."

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Bob Duffy is now a promoter/advisor. He also had his time in the NYSAC, and rose to director of boxing before leaving in 2001.

"I've been in the business long enough and have seen previous administrations and their incompetence," he said. "Those chairmen were getting paid. Why stop paying properly a competent one?" Beyond competence, Duffy has seen qualities in Lathan which should speak louder to us all than mere competence, or saving a few nickels which could easily be restored if we simply installed a micro-mini tax on every trade those titans of Wall Street make, say ¼ quarter of one cent per trade. "She brings a lot to the table," he continued. "She doesn't have a closed door policy. She listens to problems. She's there willing to listen to you. That kind of person, with her kind of experience, is valuable. People like her! She makes the Commission a pleasure to work with. She keeps the Commission in line, on message. All the Governor has to do is talk to her, and he'll see what he has."

Governor, next year you will have a new fight series coming to Brooklyn, as Oscar De La Hoya's Golden Boy Promotions will bring regular fight cards, 12 a year, to the new Brooklyn Arena. The timing would be poor, to say the least, if the chairman position was diminished. Also, many of us hope and believe that mixed martial arts will finally be welcomed to NY. Dana White's UFC will pack Madison Square Garden to the gills three or so times a year, and Governor, Lathan knows the MMA world as well. All fight sports are not created equal, and she would be able to traffic in MMA flawlessly, and it is no easy task finding capable regulators who can move with equal ease in the boxing and MMA worlds. Lathan can.

Another testimonial, Governor, from a highly respected voice in the boxing community. Julie Lederman has been a judge since 1996. She's judged more than 36 title fights, and because her eyes and judgement are so respected, she works around the world in that capacity.

"The Governor's proposed budget cut to make the Chairperson of the New York State Athletic Commission a per diem position scares me," Julie told me. "Boxing is a sport that needs to be regulated on a day to day basis, especially with as much boxing as New York. Our current Chairperson, Melvina Lathan, has always had a passion for the sport, judging over 83 world title fights. She's always been one of my role models. Her hands on approach to her job cannot be replaced. Many don't realize that Melvina scores every fight while at ringside, is constantly reviewing the rulebook and what improvements can be made, reviews medical testing procedures such as procedures to test for PEDs, has done countless reports on how much revenue MMA would bring to New York State, attends numerous medical seminars all over the world, etc. People don't realize how difficult it is to regulate an international sport where you have fighters coming in from all over the world and the proper safety checks that must be made, besides just reviewing the suspension list. Records can be deceiving, and the decisions she makes effect people's lives. I pray for the safety of the fighters, and for boxing in New York and as a whole, that we don't lose the best Chairperson I've worked for."

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Tommy Gallagher, a trainer/manager/guru who has been in the NYC fight game since the cradle, is also mightily impressed with Lathan. Mind you, this guy has been in this scene since the mid 1950s; his opinion is not to be casually dismissed.

"She knows her sh*t," he said. "She looks out for the fighters. She's a special person. She knows the most important thing is the health and welfare of the fighters. She understands the business."

Gallagher trains a kid named Gabriel Bracero, a 14-0 junior welterweight who has emerged as a rock solid prospect. Not too many years ago, he was a rock solid prospect for a life misspent. He was dabbling, OK, more than dabbling, in felonies. He got caught, for assaults, and got locked up, for almost six years. He got out, and took to boxing. Boxing gave him the structure, the focus he needs to live life the right way. If he feels a pull to head the wrong way, he shifts his thinking to his goal, to win a world title. We all hear about kids like Bracero, and we mindlessly babble on about how boxing serves as an antidote, an alternative, to the street life. But this isn't just rhetoric, Governor. If one kid like Bracero gets lured away from the streets, away from the thug life, and instead invests their time in boxing, and if that one kid doesn't murder someone, then boxing has proven itself worthy. Boxing isn't simply an excuse to throw two kids in with each other, let them whale away on each other for our amusement. It truly is an outlet, often times the ONLY positive outlet for people who have no other doors open to them.

Sorry to digress, Governor, but Bracero fought in the main event at BB Kings on February 9. He beat Chris Fernandez, via unanimous decision. About 20 minutes after his fight ended, he exited the dressing room, and saw Lathan. I spied, and eavesdropped. The two hugged. She beamed, and looked at him like a proud mama. I won't pry too much into their conversation, but they both mentioned God, and gratitude. Governor, I'm a cynic, in the Bill Maher camp regarding Godstuff, but that doesn't mean I can't be impressed by someone whose spiritual nature radiates positivity. Lathan's does. It is apparent that she cares, truly madly deeply, about Bracero, and kids like Bracero. "I see her, she puts such a big smile on my face," Bracero told me. "She makes me feel special, like I have a purpose."

Hey, sorry if I'm getting all syrupy here. It's just...this sport doesn't have enough people in it who don't see fighters as anything other than commodities. There are more than you'd think, for sure. Boxing isn't all filled with cads and fleshbrokers. But Lathan does stand out for her warmth, her decency. You don't want to risk losing that, in my humble opinion, Governor.

Thanks for indulging me, and best of luck during these trying times.

Sincerely,

Michael Woods

Editor, TheSweetScience.com

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Radam G says:

The BIGGEST mistake that you New Yorkers made was electing Cuomo. Sometimes it is BEST letting the blind lead -- in your last government. A lot of times, an arrogant, seeing man misses more of the BIG PICTURE because of beaming in on a small part. "It is a scratch on this picture," is what he sees when 99.555 percent of the picture is fine and will bring in MAD MOOLA. I'm reminded of a fool who cannot see the stability of the stars for one falling star. Holla!

astro says:

I'm not a Democrat, but, any Governor in the U.S. now that is trying to budgets under control is doing good work. Even though it may a little misguided to make Athletic Chair an unpaid position.