

Now Best Buds, King And Arum, It Wasn't Always So

Written by Michael Woods
Thursday, 03 March 2011 22:23



The old codgers, bad blood washed away by the rain of the decades passed, sit together in New York. "The cancer" next to "The Apostle of Apartheid." They battled hard over the years, but always stored a measure of respect for each other away. (Chris Farina-Top Rank) You could almost picture them on a porch, in rocking chairs, sipping lemonades, side by side, sharing stories about the old days. Bob Arum with those apple cheeks glowing with mirth, Don King with that booming laugh which can startle you even if you see it coming.

They truly seemed like comrades in arms, with shared history, and secrets only two of the games' most influential power brokers of all time could know and boundless mutual respect in common on a conference call Thursday to bang the drums for their March 12 co-promotion, which pits Miguel Cotto, Arum's guy, against Ricardo Mayorga, King's fighter.

King has said in the last few weeks how much he liked working with Arum, Arum has said that he wasn't sure why they didn't do this more often...Yes indeed, it has almost felt possible that we'll see a merger, one company, King-Arum Promotions, or maybe after a coin flip, Arum-King Promotions?

There was that much love in the air at a promotional stop at BB Kings in NYC, and on the call. Fred Sternburg, the publicist, started off the call by calling the two "good friends." They took turns patting each other on the back, with King going a step further, and lauding Arum for staying current, more current, "more practical, more logical," than he, and succeeding at bringing boxing back to terrestrial TV, while King tries to get his Don King cable network off the ground. Arum told the press that "there has never been a better salesman in boxing.

The men are both 79, and God bless them, have workaholic tendencies that shame less ambitious persons. It didn't seem like work, like it was forced, when Arum said their intense battles of yesteryear occurred because they "got off on going after each other." Both agreed that their competition lifted the others' game, and promotions, with King saying, "I never would have known how good I was if it wasn't for Bob."

Arum had the sharper of the tongues Thursday, as he lashed out at other promoters who he feels aren't true promoters, calling them "whiners," saying they just make TV deals and deals with casinos, and he took umbrage at the notion that he too often prevents Top Rank fighters from fighting outside his stable. When a caller asked about Golden Boy, Arum went for the

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jugular, asking him to name their fighters. The man cited Amir Khan, and Arum derided that pugilist, suggesting that Oscar's hold on Amir was tenuous, good for only one more fight.

Of course, there were some moments that defied the stern eye of a fact checker. When King said there has "never been acrimony, we're promoters," well, please read on for a little refresher course on what sure as hell felt like legit acrimony back in the day. King said he never hated Arum, and acknowledged he did get angry at him, but since he couldn't punch him, he worked at other ways at getting his revenge.

King still has it, for sure. He doesn't throw the fastball as often, but when he does, that sphere sizzles. After Arum digressed into an anti Golden Boy diatribe, King picked up the baton, and rattled off names of guys on his roster, Tavoris Cloud, Guillermo Jones, and said Arum should "bring me a light heavyweight, bring me a cruiserweight" so their sweet affair could continue.

King managed to convince us that he believes Mayorga has a chance against Cotto, and Arum, while of course convinced he doesn't, allowed that Pacquiao-Mayorga would be "the biggest pay per view of all time." These two were so simpatico, match.com couldn't do better at making a pair.

They both chuckled at the memory of instances which made them gnash their teeth to dust when they occurred. Arum called the moment he unplugged the microphone when King was talking after Felix Trinidad beat Oscar De la Hoya in 1999 his career highlight, and even giggled as he recounted how King prevailed upon the dictator in charge of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, to bar Arum from that nation when the Rumble in the Jungle went down in 1974. "I couldn't have him there when I was making the World's Fair," King said, chuckling.

But it wasn't always so.

I hesitatingly offer a refresher course, spurred more by my own quest to better understand the interplay between these two giants of this industry, because sometimes it's nice to luxuriate in an atmosphere of serenity, rather than rehash ancient skirmishes.

It's nice, but it's also engaging in willful self deception.

On the bright side, one can pore over the vicious rounds of brawling these two have engaged in, and not feel like we're wrecking a special moment, feel even more amazed that they're able to bury the hatchet, not in each other, but in the ground, in order to do business.

Arum and King had of course come across each other, with Arum starting in the business in 1966 (Ali vs Chuvalo), and King in 1972, but they truly worked together for the first time on Oct. 1, 1975 at the Thrilla In Manilla. King was the lead dog, and Arum told me, they "worked together very well."

The Sports Illustrated writer Mark Kram wrote that Arum wedged his foot in the door of that deal because he was acquainted with a well connected Malaysian major named Thomas Oh. King had Ali's signature, but was having a hard time locking down a site. He wanted Ali-Foreman in

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New York, but that fell through. Manila beckoned. But King didn't have as strong a conduit there as Arum did, in Oh. So King had to work a deal thru Oh, and cut Arum in. As Kram put it, "King fought long and hard to break Arum's grip, and here Arum is, back in the middle of the money, right in the middle of King's own operation, sitting on his shoulder like a wise and patient owl observing a field mouse who has gotten too big." The owl and the mouse managed to get thru that deal without one or the other slicing up or eating the other. But blood would be shed later.

Pinpointing the exact time when the animus grew to outsized proportions is hard. But Arum was beyond irked when King stole his spotlight after on Sept. 15, 1978 Ali beat Leon Spinks in their rematch. King came into the Superdome ring after Ali-Spinks II, in which Ali showed the kid and the world of haters that he could still get down to business, steer clear of the ice cream and deliver a decent showing. The high-haired one threw his arms around Ali. "To this day," Arum would say every so often, decades after, "people think King promoted that fight." Arum then swore like Andrew Dice Clay, and called King every name in Jack Newfield's book on the black Barnum of boxing in Louisiana; but repeatedly, when it made sense, when there were dollars to be made, they'd co-exist.

Knives were sheathed when collecting money was more important than inflicting wounds with words. On June 20, 1980, they put on the Sugar Ray Leonard-Roberto Duran tiff in Montreal. "Boxing breeds strange bedfellows," King once said. "Today's enemy is tomorrow's friend." The matchmaker for this date was Sugar Ray Leonard's advisor, Mike Trainer, who brought in Arum to counterbalance the impact of Duran's promoter, King. Everyone made money there--the bout grossed \$24.7 million--and the two bests of breed, King and Arum, parted ways on decent enough terms. (For the Nov. 25, 1980 rematch, since Duran had won the first tiff, King held the better cards. So Trainer couldn't toss the boss around, and Arum was out of the loop for the 'No Mas' fight.)

The two Godzillas of the promotional end of the sport squabbled in 1982, when Duran signed contracts with both. Arum gave Duran a check for \$25Gs to hop aboard the Top Rank train, which Duran accepted after reading something King said that angered him. But the Panamanian returned the dough to Arum, and stayed with King.

The titans largely stayed in separate pools in the mid 80s, with King locking down the heavyweight division, with Larry Holmes at the top of the heap, and Arum enjoying a run with Marvin Hagler as the man at middleweight.

Then, in 1987, things got physical. The night of April 6th, at Caesars Palace, tensions were high as fight fans awaited word on who had won the showdown between Hagler and Leonard. King, merely a spectator, tried to pull one of his signature moves, tried to make his way to the victor, who he presumed to be Leonard, as the cards were tallied. As he went up the steps into the ring, after hearing "...and neewww..." Arum intercepted him. He tugged at King's tux, tearing a pocket, and prevented him from committing theft of spotlight. Security stepped in, before things escalated.

"That man had nothing to do with this fight," Arum said after. "There was no way he belonged in the ring."

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With King being involved with Mike Tyson in the latter part of the 1980s, and Arum carving out a niche in lower weight classes, the salesmen steered clear of each other. The odd couple did pair up on June 16, 1990, for a card which featured Tyson boxing Henry Tillman, and George Foreman facing Adilson Rodriguez. Both were on their best behavior when they were in front of the press. "This is a young man who worked with me on the Thrilla in Manila (Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier III) and one of the champions in the sport of boxing," King said of Arum. "It's good to have him for an ally." The two found common ground in those days, beyond the green variety, when they united against hotel honcho Steve Wynn, who was then making a play for market share. The lovebirds announced Tyson would meet Alex Stewart and Foreman would fight Francesco Damiani in a September double-header, continuing their relations, but then Big George turned down Damiani, as he figured he should steer clear of living beings while a title crack, against someone, loomed. Then titlist Buster Douglas lost to Evander Holyfield, further muddying the King-Arum mashup. Dan Duva took on the Arum role, going back and forth with King as they jockeyed for ground in the mega-money heavyweight class.

King had his hands full in the early 90s with Tyson's legal woes, and his prized pugilist being sent to prison for rape. A word war between King and Arum heated up in 1994, after King was charged in July with fraud involving a \$350,000 insurance claim for a 1991 fight that was didn't come off. Arum applauded the charge, calling his rival "a cancer on the sport." The Feds didn't shoot down Arum's target, the first "Teflon" Don; the case resulted in a mistrial, and upon re-trial, King was acquitted in 1998. King responded by signing one of Arum's top fighters, Michael Carbajal. The best revenge, it could be said, was making off with one of the other guys' cash cows.

King and Arum both had similar interests in the summer of 1995, with the two seeking to make Tyson-Foreman. That blew up on the runway, but the combatants, now well into their 60s, worked together for the third time, on the Oscar De La Hoya (Arum)-Julio Cesar Chavez bout. They weren't quite ready to be as magnanimous as they are today.

"King is very bright, a great salesman," Arum said then of King, who was estranged from Chavez, as they beefed over his contract status. "But, to a large extent, he can be unscrupulous. The only thing that is important to him is money. People used to say that he would rather steal 50 cents than earn a dollar. But with Tyson, I think King's plate is filled now." King portrayed himself as a kinder, gentler wheeler dealer as compared to Arum. "I am more concerned with fighters as human beings, rather than as commodities," King said to the LA Times' Steve Springer. "When we work together, we can be an invincible team, when you don't let larceny and jealousy come in. He has been a Dr. Moriarty fictional archenemy of Sherlock Homes to me, but look at how much better we do when we work together. We are both in our 60s now, and it is idiotic to keep beating one another over the head. Think of the energy we have wasted. We are Siamese twins. If we keep beating each other, one will die and then the other will die."

No one died, both men made money. But squabbling over talent continued. Christy Martin jumped into Arum's arms in 1997, then almost immediately reversed herself and went right back to King. The pair also scrummed over Terry Norris' contract. Arum fired a broadside in June, when King entered the Hall of Fame. "These guys (Sugar Ray Leonard, Jose Torres) worked so

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hard to build it and now in one fell swoop they knock it down," Arum told organizers. "It's appalling."

By 1999, the rivals still waged combat, if not with the same intensity as in the past. Arum's guy Oscar De La Hoya faced off on Sept. 18, 1999 with King's guy Felix Trinidad, and the fightgame impresarios were again in the same orbit. Arum wasn't overjoyed by the fact: "I don't think there is a feud," he said. "I just really prefer not to be associated with him." He said that Oscar's sponsors were leery of the association between King and the Golden Boy. "He will be part of the press conference, but we are going to do everything we can to distance Oscar from King's presence," Arum said. "I am not going to insult the man, and he is Trinidad's promoter. But we are going to have to be very, very careful of how that is handled."

King, for his part, was a bit less icy. "We get along," King said of the feud. "Everybody knows Arum. I don't have to (criticize). I leave that to the people. I am not here to castigate or vilify Arum. I wish him well. I believe in my heart of hearts my fighter will knock out his fighter."

Trinidad didn't do so, but he did win a controversial decision, which left Arum fuming, and King gleeful. At the postfight presser, an irked Arum took an angry step towards King, but was stopped in his tracks by a Top Rank PR person. He did manage to unplug King's mike, though.

In 2002, they got reacquainted, with King accusing Arum of interfering with Chavez, and taking him to court. King didn't get the W in that one. Arum was distracted himself by legal dark clouds, when the Feds raided his office, during an investigation that spared him from indictment.

The two steered clear of each other for a spell, with Arum spending some of his anger allotment in a feud with Oscar De La Hoya, and King easing off the throttle, and spending less time hustling for business, and more time helping George W. Bush get re-elected.

Then, in March 2006, they looked to get on the same page to present Floyd Mayweather, then with Arum, versus Zab Judah. King seemed ready to form King-Arum Promotions. "The rest are pretenders and contenders, but they're not promoters," King said, referring to Golden Boy, their common enemy at the time. "[Arum] and I need to come together and put together something that will be a formidable, dynamic duo."

The promotion was titled "Sworn Enemies," referring to the boxers involved, but of course the history of the promoters came to mind when one heard the tag. You'll recall that while that bout devolved into a clusterbomb in the tenth round, with Roger Mayweather hopping into the ring and causing a rumble after Judah fouled Floyd, the promoters basically stayed calm and respectful towards each other.

King has scaled back even further the last couple of years, as he battled some health issues and his wife Henrietta, who died in December, deteriorated. Arum, meanwhile, didn't concede an inch to age. He has overseen the remarkable ascent of Pacquiao, the fighting Congressman who has become the likable icon who can carry the sport the fightgame has been missing since Oscar De La Hoya hung up the gloves two years ago.

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We got the sense that the "two old codgers," as Arum put it in New York, might reconvene to do what each does best, bang the drums and make piles of loot, last August. Floyd Mayweather, who parted with Arum in 2006, and then hooked on with Dan Goossen before signing up with Golden Boy, started talking with King.

Was it posturing?

Floyd looking to stir the pot, get 'em talking? Hard to say, at this point. King told TSS in NY that he had recently met with Floyd, and was still trying to work his rhetorical magic, get the promotional free agent Mayweather to hop aboard the DKP train. On the conference call, the Florida resident said Mayweather was chilling in Miami, and implied he would again try and entice Floyd to glove up with Pacquiao.

From the outside, if you just look at all the bad blood spilled between King and Arum, you might find it absurd that the two could bury the hatchet anywhere other than each others' back, and pull off something of the magnitude of Pacquiao-Mayweather. But by no means is it absurd when you consider that for each, the bottom line has always been about dollars. If it makes money, it makes sense that the two 79 year olds work together to give fight fans the one matchup they've craved for two years.

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Radam G says:

Wow! Ebony and Ivory, so sang Stevie Wonder. I just never thought of Don King and Da Bobfather being the epitome of that song. The next thing you know, DK and Da Bobfather will be walking down the runway of an airport, saying, "This is the start of a wonder friendship." They will no doubt steal -- I mean borrow -- that line from the movie, CasaBlanca. Holla!

dino da vinci says:

If Bob Arum didn't have a Don King to contend with, he would have ended up a boxing "god". If Don King didn't have a Bob Arum to contend with, he would have ended up dead.

Isaiah says:

"The men are both 79, and GOD bless them," Agnostics and so called Atheists are funny in their little bitty 2-3 percent of the world population and their IRONIC statements. LOL! I KEED! I KEED MAN! Seriously though, Don King and Bob Arum have a way of reminding us that even though they would probaly screw eachother over in a heart beat, that time sure has a way of mellowing someone out. Well.... except for that maniac President in Libya, but that's a whole "nuther" can of worms.