Written by Bernard Fernandez
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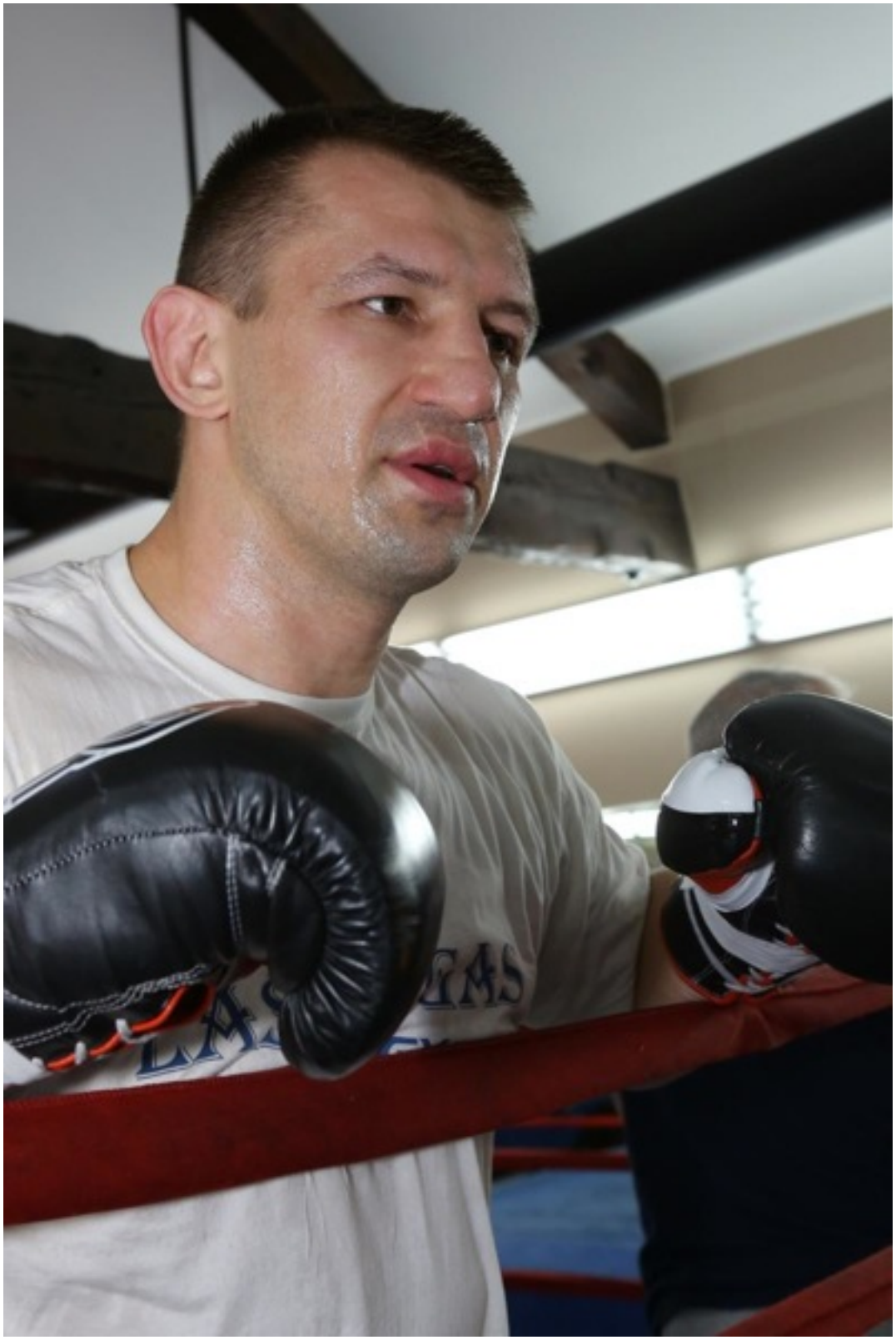

Adamek is a 4 to 1 favorite, as the oddsmakers figure he is more natural at heavyweight than Cunningham is. Readers, who do you like in this rumble? (photo by Kubikfoto)

Boxing on free, over-the-air network television is going back to the future for the second consecutive weekend. This past Saturday afternoon, CBS floated a 235¼ -pound test balloon – that would be the combined weights of IBF bantamweight champion Leo Santa Cruz and challenger Alberto Guevara, who duked it out in the Los Angeles Sports Arena -- with Santa Cruz retaining his title on a wide unanimous decision.

This Saturday afternoon, at the Sands Casino Resort in Bethlehem, Pa., heavyweights Tomasz Adamek and Steve Cunningham collectively are a 430-pound balloon attempting to lift off in what might be an even more consequential experiment to see if fights and fighters still have a place in the non-cable and non-satellite sports universe.

If the NBC ratings are reasonably favorable – and they just might be, if Adamek and Cunningham generate anything close to the heat of their scintillating Dec. 11, 2008, slugfest, in which Adamek claimed Cunningham's IBF cruiserweight title on a split decision -- boxing on Saturday afternoons may again be revived after long years of being almost exclusively consigned to cable, premium cable and pay-per-view.

Not that anyone would care to admit it, but the future of an increasingly marginalized sport could well hinge on whether those potentially larger audiences have their appetites whetted by the sight of gloved boxers pounding away at one another on a roped-off swatch of canvas.

"It's a great matchup," co-promoter Kathy Duva, CEO of Main Events, said of Adamek-Cunningham II. "When their first fight (which was staged at the Prudential Center in Newark, N.J., and televised by Versus) ended, I remember saying, `We just promoted the two best cruiserweight bouts of all time,' the other, in her opinion, being the first meeting of Evander Holyfield and Dwight Muhammad Qawi, in which Holyfield claimed Qawi's WBA crown on a rousing split decision on July 12, 1986, in Atlanta.

Any list of all-time great cruiser wars would have to include the April 26, 2003, pairing of Vassiliy Jirov and James Toney in Mashantucket, Conn., in which Toney wrested Jirov's IBF strap on a unanimous decision – but Duva's point is basically well taken. It wouldn't just be a good thing if Adamek and Cunningham recreate some of the magic they made four years earlier; it is almost essential if the seed they, Santa Cruz and Guevara planted is to grow and flourish.

“This fight, we hope, is a bridge from the NBC Sports Network cable series to regular NBC dates,” Duva continued. “It’s a natural progression. Hopefully, it’ll be the first of many such shows. There are 129 million TV homes in the United States that can get NBC. You can’t say that about anything that’s on the cable systems. HBO is in about – and forgive me if I’m a little off on the numbers – 25 to 30 million homes. Showtime is in 22 million homes. Even ESPN, which has the widest distribution of any cable network that does boxing, is only in about 90 million U.S. homes.

“We have an opportunity here to reach almost everyone in the country. There are a lot of people who can’t watch boxing because they don’t have cable or don’t subscribe to HBO or Showtime. For those people, it’s like the sport doesn’t even exist. That’s why we chose (Adamek-Cunningham II) – because it figures to be all-action, like the last one. When people are flipping through the channels on Saturday afternoon, we want them to stop when they come across this fight. We want them to keep watching and to get excited about what they’re seeing. Not to overstate the case or anything, but we can build a new generation of fans if this catches on like I think it can.”

While Duva’s assessment might be dismissed as typical public-relations hype – she started out in the boxing business as a flack for Main Events in the early 1980s when her now-deceased husband, Dan Duva, was the company’s CEO – it is more or less seconded by legions of increasingly disenchanted fight fans who remember the way it used to be, when big names like Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvin Hagler and others helped build their reputations and immense followings with Saturday afternoon network appearances.

On theboxingpalace.forumotion.com, a web site which allows John Q. Public to respond to boxing-related questions, one such query wondered which as-of-yet-unmade fights might benefit from the sort of over-the-air network exposure provided to Santa Cruz-Guevara and Adamek-Cunningham II.

One poster wrote: *What boxing matches on Network TV would succeed? Promoters lost track of the fact that you need to build an audience before people will care enough to buy a major fight on PPV. So, the level of what’s considered a “major” fight is so diluted that anything better than all right is buried on PPV where casual and potential new fans will never see it.*

So you, the fight-loving everyman, have spoken, and the powers-that-be, those with the wherewithal to effect meaningful change, are listening, or so it would seem.

In an interview with RingTV.com's Joseph Santoliquito, Jon Miller, president of programming for NBC Sports and the NBC Sports Network, ruminated on the long absence of boxing from the broadcast networks. Santa Cruz-Guevara, with a Showtime boxing crew calling the action (CBS and Showtime both are owned by Viacom), was the first fight on CBS since Bernard Hopkins retained his IBF middleweight championship on an 11th-round stoppage of Glen Johnson on July 20, 1997, in Indio Springs, Calif.

"I think network boxing disappeared because the promoters, and quite honestly, the fighters, were more concerned about a payday than growing their fights and growing their sport," Miller told Santoliquito. "Boxing just migrated to cable from there, then eventually to pay cable, choking off any kind of development for a good, young fighter to build a fan base."

Miller had reason to be at least a bit skeptical that his company's most recent foray into the fight game would be any more successful than the last. Adamek-Cunningham II is the first boxing match on NBC since 2004, and the first hint at anything resembling regular dates since the sport began being phased out in the late 1990s for the reasons Miller has already outlined. Even the first smaller test balloon tossed up by the fledgling NBC Sports Network nearly a year ago was blown a bit off-course by the unfavorable winds of change that can come out of nowhere, and frequently do.

The NBC Sports Group had acquired the ratings-poor Versus and 12 of Comcast's regional sports networks when the decision was made, with a goal of helping fill all those programming hours, to launch the four-bout "Fight Night" series on the former Versus, now renamed NBC Sports Network. The first main event, on Jan. 21, 2012, was to have been an attractive matchup of heavyweight contender Eddie Chambers and former WBO heavyweight champion Sergei Liakhovich at the Asylum Arena in South Philadelphia.

But Chambers pulled out on short notice with an injury, and Liakhovich also withdrew, leaving Kathy Duva and matchmaker J Russell Peltz scrambling to come up with at least a semi-attractive bout to headline. What they finagled was an all-Philly showdown of undefeated but below-the-radar young heavyweights Bryant Jennings and Maurice Byarm, which, on paper, didn't appear to be nearly as appealing as Chambers-Liakhovich.

What could have proved a disaster turned out to be an unexpected gem when Jennings

outpointed Byarm in a crowd-pleaser. Jennings then stopped Liakhovich, also on the NBC Sports Network, and on the strength of three more victories – the most recent a fifth-round, one-punch knockout of Bowie Tupou on Dec. 8, which, natch, was televised by the NBC Sports Network – he has moved up to No. 5 in the IBF heavyweight ratings. Five-time Boxing Writers Association of America Trainer of the Year Freddie Roach, who has ties to Jennings, went so far as to proclaim the onetime standout high school defensive end as this country's top heavyweight prospect.

Hey, when presented with lemons, the resourceful person makes lemonade. And Duva is nothing if not resourceful.

Which brings us back to Adamek-Cunningham II, and the differences between where they were then and where they are now. It is a tale of opportunities presented and capitalized upon, which is, after all, the basis for virtually every boxing success story.

"I'm not going to underestimate him this time," Cunningham said of how he expects this second go-round to transpire. "I didn't underestimate him a lot in the first fight, but my trainer at the time, Anthony Chase (his chief second is now Naazim Richardson), thought he saw things we could turn to our advantage. We didn't think he could outbox us, and I do think for the most part we won the boxing end of it. But Adamek was durable – more durable than we thought. We didn't realize he's as strong as he is, and that he had such a good chin.

"I made mistakes. I know that now. One was that I wanted to be a *star.* I wanted to put on a big splash. I wanted to put a big hurt on the dude. When Adamek knocked me down the first time, my strategy went out the window. I just fought harder. A lot of people applauded my heart, but what else was I going to do? Lay down and quit?"

What's different this time is that Adamek (47-2, 29 KOs) and Cunningham (25-4, 12 KOs) are heavyweights, toiling in the most traditional glamor division, instead of on the cruiserweight back streets. That seemingly is to the disadvantage of Cunningham, who was a taut and trim 207 pounds for his only previous bout as a heavy, and isn't expected to be much higher when he enters the ring on Saturday. Adamek, on the other hand, has come in as high as 225 pounds, with 10 outings as a heavyweight, including a 10th-round TKO loss to WBC champ Vitali Klitschko on Sept. 10, 2011. He has a size, strength and experience advantage in the division over Cunningham, which helps explain why he's a 4-1 favorite.

But Duva, who now has a promotional interest in both fighters, believes a lot of that magic from 2008 will carry over. That might be a case of wishful thinking, but who could blame her for feeling that way? So much is on the line this time around, not only for the fighters but maybe for the sport of boxing itself.

“So much in our business rides on what the heavyweights do,” Duva acknowledged. “That’s always been so. Part of our mission on the NBC Sports Network, and now on NBC, is to exhibit the heavyweights.

“I can’t predict the number of eyeballs that are going to watch this fight, but it will be exponentially higher than the first time. I will be very pleased if we get something equal or close to what we got from these guys before. The electricity that night was incredible. We need more of that. *Boxing* needs more of that.”

Comment on this article

deepwater says:

the average american doesnt care about this fight. no one really knows cunningham except a few people in philly. adamak has got the poles but thats about it. this fight is no troy dorsey vs jorge paez. the ratings will not be that good.

ILLINI4030 says:

The average American might not care about the two fighters that much but I would think that the average boxing fan will.

deepwater says:

[QUOTE=ILLINI4030;23746]The average American might not care about the two fighters that much but I would think that the average boxing fan will.[/QUOTE] hbo,showtime ,espn is for the boxing fan. cbs,nbc,abc, is public broadcasting free for every american. I say the numbers will not be great.

Bernie Campbell says:

I am an Irish American avid boxing fan, and I care about this fight! Adamek is the most exciting, ballsy fighter there is in the sweet science! Dude's gotta lot of mucho heart too. I think a fight

with him and Povetkin would have drawn alot more attention! And a tittle on the line! Both are evenly attractive combatants!

Buzz Murdock says:

Adamek has been in some rough bouts Arreola, Grant, and a sound beating (which had to put many miles on his speedometer by Vitali)...He's always been a beefed up version of his cruiserweight days, and is now slower and more worn...Brother Nazim handles Cunningham, has brought him along as a heavyweight without the bloated look of Adamek...I can't see anyone but Cunningham winning this fight which should be a good one.

Bernie Campbell says:

Who you kiddin Brother Naseem, I knew him in the old days when he went by the name of Wallace Robinson!

Radam G says:

Wallace Richardson, not Robinson. Holla!

SouthPaul says:

Whoever added up those scores cards incorrectly then let Buffer announce the wrong decision ...needs to be flogged and doused with kerosene ...set on fire. Inexcusable !

the Roast says:

Cunningham got the shaft. Maybe he was a bit too careful but I thought he won a close fight. Adamek had the crowd, promoters and apparently the judges on his side. Adamak tried to steal rounds at the ten second mark by rushing in but he wasnt effective. Tor Hamer was a letdown. Dont know why he quit after four. I lip read that he said something about his back.

brownsugar says:

[QUOTE=the Roast;23840]Cunningham got the shaft. Maybe he was a bit too careful but I thought he won a close fight. Adamek had the crowd, promoters and apparently the judges on his side. Adamak tried to steal rounds at the ten second mark by rushing in but he wasnt effective. Tor Hamer was a letdown. Dont know why he quit after four. I lip read that he said something about his back.[/QUOTE]

Tell em Roast..... even Adameks' wife was clutching her cross and praying like there's no tommorrow. Cunningham clearly won but he should have been busier in Adamek's back yard. Good fight...poor judging. A draw should have been the least he received.

Radam G says:

Whenever you go into the devil's helldom, you have to show disrespect. USS Cunningham -- is known for talkin' Jesus Jive. So he should have marched into hell for a heavenly cause and torched @ss with very mean intent. "Burn without gettin' scorched," should have been the old, wise Genie Naazim's word of wisdom to USS Cunningham. Holla!

SouthPaul says:

Totaling up those scores wrong is unforgivable. Fire tha' muthafucka'.

ILLINI4030 says:

[QUOTE=deepwater;23755]hbo,showtime ,espn is for the boxing fan. cbs,nbc,abc, is public broadcasting free for every american. I say the numbers will not be great.[/QUOTE]

Just curious, do you consider the CBS card last week a success?