

Pelullo Knows It Works To Have Your Face in the Place

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 24 December 2013 14:56



It's a credo understood by every politician. Mass mailings, automated telephone calls to registered voters and posters seemingly plastered on every building and utility pole aren't always enough to win the day.

A lot of times, you just have to have your face in the place. It's that personal touch -- looking people in the eye, pressing the flesh, kissing babies, impressing people with your sincerity and vision of the future – that often makes the difference on election day.

Philadelphia-based boxing promoter Art Pelullo isn't a holder of public office, but he understands the value of one-on-one interaction. A *lot* of one-on-one interaction. It's an approach that has enabled him to carve out a foothold in a savagely competitive business dominated by megapromoters with large staffs and deep rosters of fighters.

Pelullo's Banner Promotions doesn't have as large a support staff or as deep a roster as, say, Golden Boy, Top Rank and other promotional entities that control a disproportionate percentage of big-time boxing. But Pelullo understands the necessity of winning certain local precincts, even if those precincts are in Brazil, England and Russia.

"My mother always said that it's better to be lucky than smart," said Pelullo, who has known his share of both favorable sides of professional destiny. "I know I've had my share of good fortune."

Consider the three names with whom Pelullo is most often associated: Acelino "Popo" Freitas, Ricky Hatton and the current lead pony in his relatively compact stable, emerging superstar

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Ruslan Provodnikov, the “Siberian Rocky.” Hatton was already a major player in the fight game, widely sought by virtually promoter in the world, when he signed a three-bout deal with Pelullo in 2006. In its own way it was as big a surprise as prized free agent Robinson Cano opting to leave the New York Yankees for the Seattle Mariners, or maybe the Toledo Mud Hens.

But Freitas and Provodnikov were different. Pelullo hitting it big with them was the equivalent of a neighborhood guy stopping by at his local convenience store, buying a couple of Powerball tickets and then having the winning ping-pong balls pop up. And it couldn't have happened if Pelullo, a longshot himself, hadn't decided to purchase those tickets despite the logistical difficulties of those inconvenient convenience stores being located thousands of miles from his Philly office.

Take his successful recruitment of Provodnikov (23-2, 16 KOs), the recently crowned WBO junior welterweight champion (by virtue of his Oct. 19 stoppage of Mike Alvarado) who is emerging as one of the hottest growth properties in the sport. Pelullo found out about him quite by chance on something of a fishing trip to Russia that was intended only to catch *somebody* with talent, not necessarily a fighter from a frozen outpost in western Siberia that virtually no one in the United States even knew existed.

Better lucky than smart? Yeah, maybe. But there are another couple of old sayings that contain at least a grain of truth. One is that luck is the residue of design. The other is that those who work hard enough create their own luck. Let Pelullo explain:

“Five or six years ago – it probably was closer to six – I went to Moscow,” Pelullo recalled. “At the time, Ricky Hatton was still fighting for me and Popo Freitas’ career was winding down. I just took a flyer. I was looking for new guys, new talent, and I knew some Russian promoters I had done some minor business with. I was already selling Freitas and Hatton fights to (Russian television’s) Channel 1 and Channel 2, so it was a dual-purpose trip, to meet with Russian promoters and TV people that were buying my ongoing events.

“I had just gotten off a 15-hour flight and I wanted to go to my room to change, but they were in the lobby at, like, 11 in the morning, Moscow time, drinking vodka. So I never even went to my room. I introduced myself to a couple of fellows named Rinat (Yusupov) and German (Titov) who were Russian promoters. We started talking and I told them I wanted to get some Russian fighters and bring them to the United States and develop them on ESPN. I told them I thought we could open a new market.

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“There weren’t a lot of Russian fighters appearing in the U.S. at the time. They liked the idea, but I have to say they were a little skeptical of me, that I would actually do what I was saying. They probably thought I would try to steal their fighters. But one thing led to another and I started bringing some of their fighters over, a couple at a time.”

One of those imported questions marks was Provodnikov, a distinctive face in the crowd only because of the genealogical features inherited from his mother, who is of Mansi heritage, which is the Siberian equivalent of a Native American. No way did Pelullo expect that he was about to strike the mother lode again, as he had first done with Freitas.

“I have to say, I really didn’t know who Ruslan was then,” Pelullo admitted. “He was just one of the guys in the group. But he fought his first fight for me, a four-rounder on a Freitas undercard at Foxwoods, and from that point on we started using him more and more.

“Russell (Peltz) was my matchmaker at the time and he said, ‘Artie, you got something here.’ I said, ‘I think you’re right.’

“From there I found Maxim Vlasov, who’s No. 4 in the world (in the WBC ratings at super middleweight, as well as No. 5 in the IBF), and Dmitry Pirog, who won a middleweight title (WBO) for me by knocking out Danny Jacobs on HBO Pay-Per-View. I did the same thing when I wanted Popo and Ricky Hatton. You have to go where they are because you’re handling these guys’ careers and their lives are in your hands. They want to know what you think, and they want to look into your eyes when you’re telling them that. It’s all about if they feel they can trust you, and if you feel you can trust them.”

Freitas, the former WBO/WBA lightweight and WBO super featherweight champion who retired in 2012 with a 39-2 record (including 33 knockout victories) while winning 13 of 15 world title bouts, is Exhibit A in the Pelullo personal-touch playbook. Like Provodnikov, he was a miracle waiting to happen, provided someone with enough insight was on the scene to glimpse all that untapped potential.

“We were doing the Boxeo tournament,” Pelullo explained. “Freitas was not the guy we were

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building the tournament around. J.C. Candelo was. But Freitas came out of nowhere to become what he became.”

The relationship between Pelullo and Freitas was close – so close, in fact, that Pelullo almost came to be regarded as a trusted member of Freitas’ family, and one that didn’t hesitate to tell his guy the sort of hard truth that so many fighters are unwilling or unable to hear. Even though Freitas was still vastly popular in Brazil, and had a not-insignificant following in the U.S., Pelullo advised him to hang up his gloves for the betterment of his health and well-being when the pendulum began to swing the other way.

It was that concern for Freitas – not to mention Pelullo’s in-presence persistence – that convinced Hatton, or more specifically his mother, to throw in with him when the “Hitman” from Manchester, England, was the big-ticket item on every promoter’s radar in early 2006, less than two years after he had shocked the world by stopping the great Kostya Tszyu, who didn’t leave his corner after the 11th round.

“Nobody expected me to sign Ricky Hatton,” Pelullo said. “He was the biggest thing in boxing at the time. Everybody wanted him. I definitely was not the frontrunner. It was (Oscar) De La Hoya, it was Lou DiBella, it was Gary Shaw. It was everybody but me. Don King was even in play. I was way down the totem pole.

“I went to England. I called Ray Hatton (Ricky’s father and manager) and said, ‘I’m coming over, and I’m going to stay there until I sign Ricky.’ And that’s exactly what happened. I stayed in Manchester, I ate fish and chips for seven days until I signed Ricky to a multimillion-dollar, multifight deal.

“It’s pretty simple, really. The reason I got him and not one of my competitors is because nobody else got on a plane. Everybody else talked to him by phone. Nobody else but me got on a plane, went there, lived there, talked to his father.

“We’re in the people business. The Hattons wanted someone to look them in the eye and make them believe that he was going to do what was best for them, in every sense of the word. It’s isn’t always about the money.”

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It didn't hurt, of course, that Hatton and his family were aware of Pelullo's strong ties to Freitas, but sometimes the deciding factor isn't about promises of what the promoter can do for a fighter in the ring as much as what he feels he should do for a fighter out of it.

"Ray knew what I had done with Popo," Pelullo said. "But when he said something about maybe Ricky fighting him, I wouldn't have any of it. I said, 'Look, Ricky would hurt Popo, and I don't want for that to happen. I care too much about him to allow that to happen.'

"Ricky's mother, Carol, overheard what I said. 'We're going to sign with him,' she said, looking at me. Ray said, 'Why?' And she said, 'Forget the deal. Just remember what he said about (Freitas) when someone tries to get him to throw our son under the bus.'"

Hatton fulfilled his three-bout contract with Pelullo, to their mutual benefit, but he didn't re-up when Pelullo cautioned the Brit to hold off on accepting a bout with Floyd Mayweather Jr., for which Hatton was paid \$10 million and was on the wrong end of a 10th-round TKO.

"The Hattons made a lot of money, I made a lot of money," Pelullo acknowledged. "But I didn't think Mayweather was the right fight for Ricky *at that time*. Ray obviously thought otherwise. I told (the Hattons) when I was in Manchester that the grass isn't always greener somewhere else. Sometimes it's just grass."

Provodnikov, stashed away in Beryozova, Siberia, wasn't so far removed from the outside world that he wasn't aware of the kind of marks Freitas and Hatton had made in boxing, and he was intrigued about the man who had helped hand them the pencils with which they made all or part of those marks.

"Ruslan knew I had brought Popo up from four-rounders to four world titles," Pelullo said. "He knew about Hatton, obviously. Plus, he liked me. At first he was a little leery. Look, a lot of the Russian people I have met need time to warm up to you if they don't know you. We're Westerners. Ruslan comes from a small town in Siberia. In the beginning, he was understandably a little apprehensive."

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“I didn’t even sign him to a contract until he’d had three or four (pro) fights. I said, ‘Take your time. See if you like me. But, really, we’re going to get along just fine.’ I never pushed him.”

There is a steep cost to any promoter for fostering all that good-will. Banner Promotions hasn’t exactly cornered the market on the Eastern European fighters who are quite the rage these days, but, in addition to Provodnikov, Pelullo has signed Pirog, Vlasov, Alisher Rahimov, Fedor Papzaov, Zvengy Chuprakov and Sherzod Husnov.

“You know how much it costs to fly three guys from Ruslan’s hometown here (the U.S.) for a four-rounder?” Pelullo said of Provodnikov’s traveling support team. “It’s \$5,000 an airline ticket. Then you’re paying him, you’re paying the opponent. It was costing me a ton of money early in his career, with no assurance I’d make it back. But I believed in this kid.”

Unlike Hatton, whom Pelullo had cautioned against taking a fight with Mayweather, Artie is quite willing to put his ascending fighter as quickly as possible into a big-bucks clash with Manny Pacquiao. Bob Arum, who promotes Pacquiao, is owed co-promotional rights to Provodnikov’s next fight, provided that fight can be made by the April 15 deadline, and Pelullo is confident he and Arum can make nice much more so than Arum can with his arch-rival, Golden Boy CEO Richard Schaefer, which is why a Mayweather-Pacquiao fight probably is doomed never to happen.

“I’ve known Arum for 26 years and we get along very well, even when we sometimes disagree,” Pelullo said. “We usually find a way to make things work. It’s possible to disagree with someone and still get along. It starts with being able to talk to one another.”

“You don’t always get what you want, and neither does Arum, but you meet somewhere in the middle. What good does it do to get crazy and always be at odds with one another? If you’re always insisting on all-or-nothing, you’re never going to find that middle ground.”

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