

Sulaiman Was A Lightning Rod For Controversy

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Friday, 17 January 2014 14:43



If you think there is polarization on opposite sides of the aisle in the United States Congress, just try to reconcile the widely disparate comments made about WBC president Jose Sulaiman, who was 82 when he died Thursday at the UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, from complications following his Oct. 1 heart surgery. During and now after his 38½-year, near-dictatorial reign, the Mexico City-based WBC's undisputed power broker was showered with heaping measures of both fawning praise and scathing criticism. Decide for yourself which side of that philosophical divide you choose to be on.

If you are Mexican or of Mexican descent, there is a very strong likelihood you're pro-Sulaiman. The WBC's dictums imperiously delivered by Sulaiman routinely favored Mexican fighters, sometimes head-scratchingly so. That, of course, could be a fortunate coincidence for the beneficiaries, just as it would be if you were on the winning end of 15 or 20 consecutive passes of the dice at a Vegas craps table. Then again, if you kept coming up snake-eyes in disputes with the WBC (read Sulaiman), your opinion of the sanctioning body and its unyielding ruler-for-life probably is less than complimentary.

Where do I weigh in on the subject of Senor Sulaiman and his controversial leadership of the WBC? On various issues at various times, I have agreed and disagreed with him. But on balance, I'd have to say I opposed his rulings on far more occasions than I took his part.

There was the time, maybe 20 years ago, when I was surprised to receive a telephone call from Sulaiman, who wanted to know why I had again taken him to task in the pages of the Philadelphia Daily News, probably for another blatantly pro-Mexican decision that seemingly defied logic. "Why do you treat me so?" he asked, imploringly. "You are a Fernandez. Those of us who are Latin should always stick together, to be of the same accord."

I explained to my unexpected caller that, although I have a deep and abiding respect for many Mexican fighters – a generically tough and courageous bunch, as might be said of another gritty subset of boxing, Philadelphia fighters – I don't blindly pledge allegiance to any ethnicity based on my own genealogy. Which, I further explained, is Spanish-English-French-Irish-Swedish. I then asked Sulaiman if he would send me a copy of the WBC rulebook he so often referred to

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publicly, so that I could check for myself whether his decisions strictly adhered to the organization's stated policies.

Time passed, and I never received that copy of the WBC rulebook. To the best of my knowledge, no other American boxing writer ever has – and I know of several who made similar requests. But there were no more direct calls to me from the Senor, no more attempts to convert me to an acolyte preaching the gospel according to Jose. I continued to assess his decision-making on a case-by-case basis.

Whether you were for or against Sulaiman, or somehow straddling the fence, there can be no disputing that this son of a Syrian mother and a Lebanese father, an amateur boxer in his youth before a fondness for high-calorie edibles amply rounded and softened his physique, was a major force in the fight game for a very long time. During his stewardship of the WBC, the sanctioning body – which was comprised of just 11 member nations when it was founded in 1973 (Sulaiman was not among its launchers) –expanded to 161 countries. He was at the forefront in changing championship fights from 15 rounds to 12, the 1976 institution of anti-doping laboratory tests, and WBC grants for medical research to facilitate the prevention and treatment of brain injuries to fighters. Those and other WBC measures taken would have to be considered as positive steps, provided their implementation was fair, impartial and resistant to partisan influences.

Upon Sulaiman's passing, Duane Ford, the NABF president and a longtime boxing judge in Nevada, issued a statement to the Doghouse Boxing web site that lavishly detailed Ford's admiration and affection for his respected teacher.

"I thought about the times Jose took me by the hand and taught me to love and respect the fighters, and to work as an official with honor," Ford said. "I remembered the correction course he often gave me to help me improve my skills. Often, these lessons were painful because I had not made the correct decision. However, I was always grateful that he cared enough to take the interest in my personal development. I soon realized as a young judge that his belief in my abilities was much greater than my own.

"He has always been an icon, and a figure of strength and dedication to the sport we love. And now, he is an example of the heroic spirit and his love for his family and for the WBC. Jose taught me the importance of scoring a championship fight correctly. In that sense, I am scoring his battle against this illness a perfect 10."

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Henry Hascup, longtime executive director of the New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame, remembered Sulaiman as “a man of integrity, honorability and pure heart” and “a natural leader who would never give up.”

Touching tributes, to be sure, but not viewpoints that are universally shared. There are those who have likened Sulaiman’s June 10, 2007, induction into the International Boxing Hall of Fame to Willie Sutton or John Dillinger being inducted into the banking industry hall of fame. For sure, there were howls of protest when Sulaiman’s election to the IBHOF was announced, and it was most curious to see another inductee that year, Pernell Whitaker, squirming noticeably as Sulaiman was at the podium delivering a rambling, 20-minute address to the thousands of spectators that had made the trek to Canastota, N.Y., more to hear and see Whitaker, Roberto Duran and Ricardo Lopez.

Whitaker held WBC championships as a lightweight and a welterweight, but the out-of-the-ring battles in which he found himself pitted against the WBC were as notable as some of the wars he waged inside the ropes. Twice “Sweet Pea” and his backers were left slack-jawed at what they and many others considered to be horrendous decisions that went against Whitaker and to Mexican fighters.

The first took place in Levallois-Perret, France, on March 3, 1992, when Whitaker challenged WBC lightweight champion Jose Luis Ramirez, a Mexican and a member of the promotional stable of Sulaiman’s frequent ally, Don King. Most observers thought Whitaker had clearly outboxed Ramirez and would be awarded a unanimous decision and the title, but, although judge Harry Gibbs submitted a scorecard that had Whitaker winning by a 117-113 margin, that was overturned by the cards of Newton Campos and Louis Michel, who went with Ramirez by respective margins of 118-113 and 116-115.

Whitaker’s manager, Shelly Finkel, and co-trainer, Lou Duva, yelled like scalded dogs, even going so far as to publicly pronounce that the fix had been in. Sulaiman responded by filing a \$1 million slander and libel lawsuit, which was dropped after Duva grudgingly admitted he had no direct evidence that the WBC had prearranged for Ramirez to retain his green championship belt.

The second, and more notorious, assertion of outcome-influencing came on Sept. 10, 1993, in

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the Alamodome in San Antonio, Texas, where Whitaker, the WBC welterweight champion, was defending his title against Mexican national hero Julio Cesar Chavez. A raucous and staunchly pro-Chavez crowd of 60,000-plus filled the big indoor stadium that night, but JCC backers grew silent as, round by round, Whitaker controlled the action with his ring generalship and signature “duck walk” move, where he went down on his haunches to avoid Chavez’s punches instead of using lateral movement.

Although judge Jake Woodruff gave the nod to Whitaker by a surprisingly narrow 115-113 margin (many ringsiders had him winning more convincingly), all the slick southpaw from Norfolk, Va., was able to come away with was a majority draw as the other two judges, Mickey Vann and Franz Marti, called it a 115-115 standoff.

Again, all those with Team Whitaker protested loudly and demanded the WBC mandate an immediate rematch, but Sulaiman said that, because the American had retained his title on a draw, there was no need to order a return bout. Whitaker and Chavez never shared a ring again, even though a second pairing would again have done huge business.

Let it be stated here that the judging of prizefights is subjective, and it is not my intent to cast aspersions on the integrity of any of the aforementioned officials. Nor should there be any residual taint to Chavez, a truly great champion who considered Sulaiman to be almost a member of his family. Still, you know the old saying: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

The pattern of WBC rulings that seemingly helped Mexican fighters didn’t end there. Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. – who might be Sulaiman’s actual godson, although Sulaiman was quoted as saying he was merely “like a godson” – caught a major break when WBC middleweight champion Sergio Martinez, of Argentina, was stripped of the title for some arcane reason, opening the door for Chavez Jr. to fight for the suddenly vacant crown against Germany’s Sebastian Zbik. The younger Chavez won via 12-round majority decision on June 4, 2011, and joined his father among those to have climbed to the top of the WBC mountain.

More recently, an uncrowned Chavez Jr., whose struggles to make contracted weights are hardly a secret, appeared to get the worst of it last Sept. 28 in a 10-rounder with the smaller Brian Vera in Carson, Calif. As it was a non-title fight, the WBC had no apparent hand in the outcome, but Chavez’s unanimous decision by eye-opening scores of 98-92, 97-93 and, to a lesser degree, 96-94 again raised suspicions that he was still cloaked in some sort of protected

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robe.

Outside of the Chavez inner circle, Sulaiman almost uniformly issued statements of support to Mexican fighters who found themselves in shadowy areas. He declared that Antonio Margarito was “ABSOLUTELY INNOCENT without a doubt” of having any knowledge of the loaded handwraps he would have taken into the ring against Shane Mosley on Jan. 24, 2009 were it not for the detection of Mosley’s trainer, Naazim Richardson, who observed the wrapping, because fighters never have any idea of what goes on their hands, even if it’s something akin to Plaster of Paris.

More disturbingly, he once proclaimed that “the WBC is above the law, except its own” and came to the defense of Floyd Mayweather Jr., who is decidedly not Mexican, when Mayweather was facing charges of abuse against a former girlfriend in 2011. “Beating a lady” is not considered a “major crime,” he told a reporter, which must have gone over big with women’s rights groups.

Now Sulaiman is gone, and his legacy has yet to be determined with any degree of certainty. The Senor did some good stuff, some not so good – he was at the forefront of the proliferation of weight classes, which now stands at a ridiculously high 17, and the creation of dubious “interim” and “emeritus” championships. The common thread that runs through much of his handiwork is that more and more WBC-approved matchups came with demands for sanctioning fees, which puts Sulaiman’s organization in the same crowded boat with every other sanctioning body that can’t hand out enough bogus belts.

But my late mother always instructed me to speak well of everyone, whenever possible, so I will offer a prayer that Jose Sulaiman finds the everlasting peace we all hope to gain when our time comes. And I will take it on faith that that WBC rulebook I requested is in the mail.

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jzzy says:

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Hollywood 's most able screenwriter's couldn't conjure a character more suitable for his role. as El Presidente of Big time boxing, the theatre of the absurd. Under his near 40 year stewardship, Boxing has risen, fallen, risen. fallen etc.. to unprecedented heights and depths, not always pretty but ALWAYS compelling and incredibly interesting. Any critique of Mr. Suliaman has to consider the corrupt milieu in which he plyed his unmatched political skills and uncanny survival instincts in service of his agenda. So what if the WBC rules were scripted in pencil and some of his machinations on behalf of his fighters resembled a crime novel. This is Boxing and not unexpected. Jose's rulings were always rendered with abundant good will and charisma and we kept wathching, complaining and PAYING thru the decades. Mr. Suliaman served his countryand Boxing excelente !!!! We loved and admired the man and he'll be sorely missed. RIP.

brownsugar says:

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Best eulogy I've read on the TSS to date...RIP