

Fixing the Fix

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Growing up, I was a huge fan of pro wrestling. I cheered for heroes like Hulk Hogan and booed heels like the Iron Sheik. Like most hardcore wrestling fans, I was also extremely offended when someone claimed the sport was “fake.”

In 1998, my buddies and I watched the ‘Hell in a Cell’ match between the Undertaker and Mick Foley, which featured a 16-foot tall chain-link fence cage that enclosed the ring. The Undertaker threw Foley off the top of the cage not once, but twice, severely dislocating his shoulder and knocking his tooth out, which emerged from his nose.

That day confirmed for me that while the outcome of the match may have been preordained, wrestling was anything but fake. But the best evidence of wrestling being scripted took place a year earlier.

Because of financial trouble for the World Wrestling Federation, highly-paid legend Bret Hart was leaving for competitor, World Championship Wrestling. In his last WWF match, Hart squared off against longtime nemesis, Shawn Michaels. Hart was allegedly supposed to win, but when Michaels put Hart in his own signature move, the Sharpshooter, the referee went against the script and immediately called for the bell claiming Hart submitted.

Forever known as the ‘Montreal Screwjob,’ the match’s outcome was purportedly concocted by WWF owner, Vince McMahon. Fans were outraged; not that the match was scripted, but because it was clear that not all the actors had the same script.

The result was a huge blow to pro wrestling, as whatever legitimacy the sport developed over the past 20 years vanished when the bell rang. From then on, wrestling became known as ‘sports entertainment.’

It seems professional boxing may soon fall under that same category.

Last month, Timothy Bradley won arguably the most controversial split decision victory over Manny Pacquiao to win the WBO welterweight title. Bradley won 115-113 on two scorecards, while losing on the third by the same margin. Apparently, the two judges who awarded Bradley the win were the only two people on the planet who thought he earned it.

The loss ended Pacquiao’s seven-year unbeaten streak and caused Bob Arum, both fighters’ promoter, to demand a full investigation by Nevada officials. “I’ve never been as ashamed of the sport of boxing as I am tonight,” Arum said after the fight.

The Associated Press had Pacquiao winning 117-111. Because of the uproar, the WBO championship committee assembled a five-judge panel committee that unanimously favored the Filipino fighter in a video review.

Going one step further, Senators John McCain and Harry Reid introduced legislation to restore integrity to the sport by creating a special boxing commission to oversee all matches in the United States. And these senators know what they’re talking about. McCain boxed while at the U.S. Naval Academy and Reid is a former middleweight boxer.

Professional boxing is the only sport in the U.S. without a centralized association regulating it. Accordingly, the political pugilists’ bill seeks to establish the U.S. Boxing Commission, which would carry out federal boxing law, work with the industry and local commissions and finally license boxers, promoters, managers and sanctioning organizations.

Quoting sportswriter Jimmy Cannon, McCain called boxing the “red light district of sports,” and like Wrestling’s Montreal Screwjob, he said the Bradley/Pacquiao fight “is the latest example of the legitimate distrust boxing fans have for the integrity of the sport.”

Under the measure, any referee or judge participating in a championship or professional fight lasting 10 or more rounds must be registered with and licensed by the commission. A sanctioning organization, such as the WBO, could supply names of judges and referees it considers qualified for a match, but only the commission could appoint judges and referees to participate in bouts.

I just hope they don’t let Bobby “The Brain” Heenan on the commission.

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