

The Squared Circle: An Analysis of Professional Boxing Legislation and Antonio Margarito

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“Tales of corruption are as much a part of the folklore of boxing as legends of great fights, indomitable champions and intrepid underdogs” (Ehrlichman, 2010, p. 422). Aware of the sport’s longstanding issues, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) spearheaded the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996 in an effort to provide more public oversight of the sport, protect the rights and welfare of competitors who may be the unfortunate recipients of unethical business practices/exploitation, and to promote honest competition and improve the overall integrity of the sport (Baglio, 2000; Ehrlichman, 2010; Jurek, 2006; Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 § 3). With the original act amended in 2000, the two pieces of legislation together became formally recognized as the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 (Hauser, 2007). Yet even with the reform act intact for over a decade, “no one is enforcing the federal boxing laws” and cases such as Antonio Margarito’s warrant further analysis (Hauser, 2007, ¶ 1).

On January 24, 2009, welterweight champion Antonio Margarito lost by a convincing knockout to underdog “Sugar” Shane Mosley. Prior to the fight, Margarito was considered by many to be one of the most feared fighters in all of boxing (Ventre, 2009). However, after the fight all of Margarito’s accomplishments that occurred prior to that evening were called into question, as Mosley’s trainer, Nazim Richardson, discovered an illegal, plaster-like substance being wrapped into Margarito’s hand wraps before the bout. Immediately recognizing that plastered hands could be fatal to his fighter (Mosley), Richardson and other officials had Margarito’s mysterious wraps removed, his hands properly rewrapped, and then sent the removed wraps to the California State Athletic Commission (CSAC) for further analysis (Iole, 2009; Rafael, 2010a). Weeks later, Margarito had his California state boxing license revoked as it was discovered that the unknown substance in Margarito’s wraps was ‘plaster-of-paris,’ the same substance that is used in making casts (Rafael, 2010a).

As it presently stands under the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000, since Margarito was banned in the state of California he had to attempt to regain his professional boxing license in California before he would be able to fight anywhere else in the United States. With a super fight looming in Texas against international boxing icon Manny Pacquiao, pressures built because Margarito needed to be licensed to complete the deal. After pleading his case for six hours in August 2010 to the CSAC to have his license reinstated, Margarito’s request was justly denied. After the denial, a mockery was made of the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 by the exposure of a glaring loophole in the act (Hauser, 2007; Rafael, 2010a).

Margarito, who by appearing at the hearing and offering his dismissal of pre-existing knowledge of the plaster to the CSAC, satisfied the reform act’s requirement of seeking re-licensure in the state that initially revokes the license (Muhammad Ali Reform Act of 2000 § 6306). Having met this requirement, Margarito was free to seek licensure in another state via an appeal. Thus, with the super fight with Pacquiao at the newly constructed \$1.2 billion Cowboys Stadium hanging in the balance, the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) granted Margarito a license to fight Pacquiao. All Margarito had to provide to the TDLR was an application, medical documentation, and a \$20 processing fee (Rafael, 2010b). When asked about the department’s decision to permit Margarito to fight in their state despite his clear efforts to fight an opponent with loaded gloves in California, William Kuntz, the executive director of the TDLR, stated, “we need to look at our laws and rules and the facts presented to us and make a decision” (Rafael, 2010d, ¶ 20). Although Kuntz denied having been influenced or persuaded, skeptics asserted that the director was under tremendous pressure at the hands of powerful and influential boxing promoter Bob Arum, and Dallas Cowboys owner, Jerry Jones (Rafael, 2010d).

To the pleasure of many boxing fans, on November 13th, 2010 Margarito lost his bout to Manny Pacquiao in front of nearly 50,000 fans at Cowboys Stadium. Margarito, the self-proclaimed villain, experienced the beating of a lifetime and nearly loss his right eye in the process (Rafael, 2010c). After the fight, Margarito underwent surgery to repair a fractured orbital. Later, complications arising from the injury led to a cataract and Margarito had to undergo a

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second surgery, this time resulting in the insertion of an artificial lens (Rafael, 2011).

After suffering the defeat and the near loss of his eye, Margarito was out of the boxing limelight for nearly a year. Resurfacing again in the latter portion of 2011 to promote his rematch with the man whom he had long been suspected of badgering with loaded gloves (vs. Miguel Cotto [2008]), the bout was scheduled for December 3, 2011 at Madison Square Garden in New York. Initially denied a license by the New York State Athletic Commission (NSAC) due to concerns over his ability to see out of his eye, and admitting that they usually deny licenses to other fighters with similar health issues, the commission weeks later changed their position and approved Margarito's license to fight in the state after he agreed to an evaluation by a commission approved ophthalmologist. Not surprisingly, the fight occurred and Cotto defeated Margarito in the rematch via physician stoppage in between the 9th and 10th rounds due to Margarito's eye being effectively closed. After the fight, Margarito needed twelve stitches to repair his already compromised eye and later announced his retirement in June 2012 (Rafael, 2012).

Stories such as Antonio Margarito's are all too commonplace in professional boxing. Although Texas and New York officials complied with the law, loopholes in the legislation were exposed in an unsavory manner. Margarito, the man at the center of this analysis, came full circle with not a single official, manager, or commission looking out for his or other fighters' well-beings (e.g., plastered hands, loss of eyesight, etc.). Even with these circumstances and after the second brutal defeat he suffered in as many contests, Margarito's promoter, Bob Arum, who made tens of millions of dollars off of these two events, began making plans for Margarito's next fight before he ultimately retired (Rafael, 2012). All said, the events held in Texas and New York were of such high magnitude that no one involved wanted to lose the 'big-fight.' Quite frankly, with the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000 in place, Margarito's participation in the aforementioned events should not have occurred. The essence of the legislation was to do away with practices such as those outlined above. Without enforcement, corruption and misleading business practices on behalf of promoters, state licensing agencies, fighters and physicians, will expose loopholes in the law and continue to provide unnecessary harm to a once heralded American sport.

In June 2012, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Senate Majority Harry Reid (D-NV) proposed the Professional Boxing Amendments Act of 2012. Under the act, the federal government would develop the United States Boxing Commission (UBC) "which would oversee boxing matches around the country, administer and enforce federal laws on boxing, and fight conflicts of interest within the sport" (Strauss, 2012, ¶ 1). According to govtrack.us, the bill has a 1% chance of being passed.

The poster presentation outlined above will detail and provide discussion points on the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act of 2000, the latest proposed legislation, and highlight the shortcomings and non-existence of the enforcement of the law as it pertains to professional boxing. Also, other recent controversial boxing occurrences will be discussed within the context of the act. Additional discussion points on the future of the sport of professional boxing and how corruption and greed has led to the sport's demise will be provided.