

**Title Fights:
More is Less**
by Bernie McCoy
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(SEPT 7) A vaudeville skit: Guy walks into a diner and says, "I'll have some coffee." Waitress brings the coffee and the guy, glancing out the window, says, "Looks like rain," to which the waitress snaps, "Never mind what it looks like, it tastes like coffee."

Boxing is the only sport in which there is no mandate requiring the top athletes to face off with the top competition. In every other sport, the best individual or teams are matched up, by schedule, tournaments or playoffs, with the top competition. In boxing, occasionally, the two best boxers, in a given weight class, climb into the ring to fight for a title in well publicized bouts that brings exposure and, oft times, credit to the sport. More often, a top fighter climbs into the ring with an opponent, who bears little resemblance to a top contender, and easily defends the title. And the prevailing attitude of all concerned seems to be: "Never mind what it looks like, we swear it's a title fight."

In the second half of the last decade of the last century, the sport of Women's boxing underwent the beginning of a troubling trend that, today, has metastasized into an affliction that could, eventually, relegate the sport to irrelevance: some of the top female boxers, unencumbered by any requirement to fight other top fighters, simply began, in the mid-1990s, to systematically avoid top competition. Christy Martin and Lucia Rijker never met in the ring; Sumya Anani, possibly the best female fighter of that era, went through inordinately long periods of inactivity, sometimes extending to a year, because no one would agree to fight her; Laila Ali, who succeeded Martin, both in and out of the ring, as the face of Women's boxing, trolled the globe for opponents but never made any serious move in the direction of Houston, TX and Ann Wolfe. This trend, unfortunately, has burgeoned, today, into an almost "Business as usual" strategy in the sport and the result is there are far too many so called title fights, far too many so called champions and not nearly enough good bouts.

That may seem a contradiction in terms, but, in point of fact, title fights, once considered the crown jewel of boxing match-ups are now, too often, a misnomer attached to almost every bout featuring any prominent female boxer. Earlier last week, a breathless missive arrived detailing one Jessica Balogun's eight round TKO win over Angel McKenzie, in Germany, for something called the WFC welterweight title. Balogun came into the bout with a record of 17-1, compiled almost solely in Germany and almost exclusively against overmatched fighters with losing records, including a win over McKenzie in June, who came to the "title fight" with a 4-20 record. It's easy to dismiss this bout as a product of a very minor boxing sanctioning body, an aberration, uncommon among the major sanctioning bodies "overseeing" main stream

Women's boxing. If only!

In May, in Denmark, Cecilia Braekhus beat Victoria Cisneros in a ten round welterweight title fight sanctioned by the WBC, WBA and WBO. It was an unanimous decision, in which the three judges awarded all 30 rounds to Braekhus. According to some ringsiders, the bout wasn't that close. Up to the moment that Cisneros was anointed as a worthy contender for an unbeaten title holder, her career highlight had been coming out of the crowd to box ten rounds with Holly Holm after the Holm/Melissa Hernandez fight in Albuquerque ran aground. Cisneros came to Denmark with a 5-8-2 record, Braekhus was 13-0. The WIBA must have seen something in the bout that escaped almost everyone else, since three months later, in New Mexico, Cisneros was approved for an eight round title bout with Melissa Hernandez for WIBA interim lightweight title. This time out, Cisneros was awarded one round of the twenty-four on the three judges' scorecards. Thus, in two title bouts, sanctioned by the WBC, WBA, WBO and WIBA, Victoria Cisneros, according to the judges at ringside, won one of fifty-four rounds in what major sanctioning bodies, the supposed arbiters of what qualifies as quality in the sport they supposedly oversee, deemed bouts worthy of the label title fights.

Are these extreme examples of poorly matched title fights? Of course. Have these same sanctioning bodies also staged more competitive title fights? Yes, they have, although the recent NABF (WBC) featherweight title bout between Maureen Shea and Liliana Martinez and the WBA endorsement of the last three Kina Malpartida super featherweight title defenses have little chance of a long life in the archives of the sport. Is it fair to point out such mismatches posing as title fights, without also listing the good bouts. I think it is, and here's why.

A title bout needs to be a special bout. Not just some title bouts, all title bouts. Like airplane landings, if title fights are not done well, bad things happen, particularly to the sport. Every title fight should match the champion in a weight class with a top ranked challenger, not once in a while, every time "title fight" appears in the press release. If, however, the contender is a fighter with a losing record, a fighter the title holder has beaten recently, or a fighter without a win against a boxer with a winning record, the designation "title bout" should immediately be stricken from that bout's publicity. Simply stated, a challenger for a title should have a legitimate chance of winning that title, in every title fight, not just a rare few, such as the recent Jeannine Garside/Ina Menzer bout, sanctioned by the WIBF, WBC and WBO.

And today, in the sport of Women's boxing, given the deep talent pool of female fighters in almost every weight class it is not an overwhelming hurdle to find a title contender who like, Jeannine Garside, has a legitimate chance at winning the title. But, instead, there are simply far too many bouts that do nothing more than co-opt the label "title fight," to mask a mismatch in which any fan with a modicum of boxing sense knows the winner long before the first bell.

It's convenient and all too easy to lay sole blame on the sanctioning bodies, who oversee the sport and place their imprimatur on a the growing accumulation of mismatches posing as title fights. In point of fact, the sanctioning bodies, for the most part, have little, if any, input in making the match-ups. That's, usually, the result of negotiation between the fighter's management and the promoters and, in truth, the knowledge of the relative talent of professional female boxers rests, largely, with management. And while the vast majority of boxing management in the sport of Women's boxing

is composed of experienced, knowledgeable and dedicated boxing veterans, who form a large part of the backbone of the sport, when choosing title opposition for their fighters, they will, given the choice, err on the side of a winnable bout for their fighter.

It is at that point, the role of the sanctioning body becomes crucial. In effect these organizations are the last line of resistance between a mismatch being granted the elevated status of "title fight." The WBC, the WBA, the WBO are, literally, the names above the title. It's their title and these organizations need to exhibit pride in each and every match-up they endorse as title fights for their belts. They, alone, have the final "go/no go" call on the competitive efficacy of a title fight. These sanctioning bodies must answer the question "Is this the best possible title fight available," not just for some of the title fights they sanction, for all of the title fights they sanction. These organizations must leave open the option of withholding their seal of approval for a title bout when and if the proposed match-up shouts "mismatch" long before the weigh-in. These sanctioning bodies are in a position to restore the glitter to the label "championship fight;" they are in a position to restore the magic to the term "champion." Unfortunately, today, that type of oversight is a rare commodity in the sport of Women's boxing and the result has been a serving up of far too many bouts that may look like title fights, but seldom pass the taste test of fans.

Bernie McCoy