

IN THIS CORNER ...THE WBC

Several weeks ago there occurred a heavyweight title bout. An upstart called Leon Spinks toppled champion Muhammad Ali. The consequences seemed clear. Spinks had become the new titleist leaving Ali as a top challenger. Isn't that simple enough?

It was, but now a wrench has been thrown into the works. Something called the World Boxing Council (W.B.C.) declared that Spinks had agreed to next meet highly regarded Ken Norton. Leon, however, had other ideas. He decided that a rematch for Ali was the best idea. This verdict annoyed W.B.C. to the point where it has awarded Norton its recognition as titleist. The result, of course, is confusion. The boxing world has two champs. To the W.B.C. it is Norton, while to the World Boxing Association it is still Spinks.

The most interesting thing is the reactions of those involved. Norton is happy. He declared that he would have preferred victory in the ring, but since the top man wouldn't fight him, he'll take it any way it comes. "I promise to be worthy of the title," he said. "I'm going to do the best I can with it and fight all the top contenders right down the line." Spinks' side though, isn't quite as content. Bob Arum, leader of the group promoting him, is prepared to sue the W.B.C. and so is the fighter. Apparently the turmoil has just begun.

What is really disturbing is that the whole mess is part of a trend. More and more outside technicalities financial battles, and legal matters are interfering with professional sport. The attempted sale of the Oakland A's is a

recent example in baseball. Owner Charles O. Finley had an agreement with oilman Marvin Davis, but the deal stalled. Why? Because the team has a lease in Oakland and legal action was threatened if Davis moved the squad to Denver. Thus with the season about to open, the matter is barely settled. Again the result is confusion.

In hockey, similar things happen. One case is the current situation between the Detroit Red Wings and the Pittsburgh Penguins. The Wings had offered Derek Sanderson a tryout and the former Boston star leapt at the opportunity. Apparently, though, his enthusiasm faltered when he was stationed on a farm team. He then joined Pittsburgh and you guessed it. The Wings accused the

Penguins of tampering.


An even more significant incident involves the Winnipeg Jets and the New York Rangers. A few seasons ago the Jets acquired Swedish stars Anders Hedberg and Ulf Nilsson. Both players became stars each crucial to the team's success. Unfortunately their contracts have run out, and as so often happens, a bidding war began. The Rangers offered the Swedes contracts that Winnipeg simply couldn't afford to match. With cash registers ringing in their heads, Hedberg and Nilsson will come east. Once again hockey franchises are more affected by events off the ice than by those on it.

Politics also now influence the big leagues. Why even Toronto Maple

Leaf boss Harold Ballard was hit by Prime Minister Trudeau's price and wage controls! The Canadian Anti-Inflation Board declared Maple Leaf Gardens too profitable. To rectify the situation Ballard had to offer tickets to a Bob Hope show in Toronto free to hockey subscribers. Now really! What does Bob Hope have to do with hockey?

And do the initials F.A.N.S. mean anything to you? They signify Fight to Advance the Nation's Sports, the title of a new sports consumer organization backed by Ralph Nader. Though not necessarily a bad thing, it too will contribute to the trend. As his first project Peter Gruenstein, the group's president, foresees fan boycott of Buffalo Bills football games. He says the Bills have been chosen because of consistent mismanagement by team owner Ralph Wilson Jr. "Wilson," Gruenstein complains, "is propped up by the monopolistic structure of the N.F.L. In any other business with his mismanagement, he would have gone bankrupt by now. If there's a city where the fans have been treated worse than in Buffalo, I don't know where it is." Mr. Wilson can take that as a warning. Team affairs are no longer completely within his grasp. He had better shape up or bail out.

A list of similar impurities could go on and on. Outside technicalities, financial battles, and legal matters have become strangely prominent in sports. It definitely is a sad trend, but perhaps it is just a natural part of a growingly complex world.



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