

In late March 2020, I explored the long-term implications of COVID-19 for boxing.

Boxing Grinds to a Halt: The Past, the Present, and the Future

Boxing, like all live spectator sports, relies on the here and now for revenue. If fights don't happen, people don't get paid.

In recent weeks, boxing has ground to a halt. Fighters, trainers, managers, promoters, arena personnel, and others down the line are out of work. Even the sanctioning bodies (which are accustomed to win-win propositions) are losing money. Their sanctioning-fee spigot has been turned off and their 2020 conventions (if they occur at all) are unlikely to turn a profit.

The coronavirus pandemic has been compared to the 1918 "Spanish flu." For society at large, that's an apt comparison. But sports in 1918 were nothing close to the national obsession and moneymaking machine that they would become in the Roaring Twenties and are today. Some high school and college football games were canceled in 1918. The Stanley Cup finals ended midway through the series after a contingent of players on the Montreal Canadiens roster fell ill. But boxing was largely unaffected.

October, November, and December were the worst months of the 1918 pandemic. The sweet science was somewhat curtailed during that time. BoxRec.com reports that Harry Greb fought twenty-two times between January 4 and September 21, 1918, but not at all during the rest of the year. Benny Leonard fought twelve times between between April 8 and September 23, but not again until 1919. Jack Dempsey, who fought twenty-one times in 1918, took an eight-week hiatus from the ring toward the end of the year. But club fights carried on.

World War II also had an impact on boxing. More than four thousand active professional fighters served in the United States military during the conflict. Many of them were forever denied their chance for ring glory. They came out of the war with their bodies broken or didn't come home at all.

Joe Louis enlisted in the US Army in 1942. Rather than assign him to active combat, the Army placed him in Special Services, a role in which he participated in close to one hundred boxing exhibitions. There were no “champions in recess” or “champions emeritus” in those days. The Brown Bomber’s championship was frozen for the duration of the war. He defended his title on March 27, 1942, and not again until June 9, 1946.

Active fighters who served in the military during World War II included Ezzard Charles, Joey Maxim, Billy Conn, Gus Lesnevich, Fred Apostoli, Freddie Cochrane, Lew Jenkins, Bob Montgomery, Beau Jack, Marty Servo, and Tony Zale. Each of them was a world champion at one time or another during his ring career.

Meanwhile, boxing went on. Fight cards were filled by fighters who were too old or too young to serve in the military, had physical conditions that disqualified them from military service, or were otherwise ineligible to serve. Madison Square Garden (the Mecca of Boxing) was often reduced to featuring club-level fighters in main events.

It’s too early to predict with certainty how boxing will come back from the current crisis. We don’t know how severe the pandemic will be or how long it will last. But the sweet science will face strong headwinds when it returns.

Baseball was boxing’s only competition as a national sport after the 1918 pandemic and World War II. Now boxing is a niche sport. When arenas reopen, the sweet science will be competing with other sports for dates. Teams with season ticketholders will have first dibs on arenas. Concert tours will be rebooked.

In recent years, the live gate has diminished in importance as a factor in the economics of boxing in the United States. But it’s still a significant revenue stream.

What will happen to live attendance for sports in general when our games resume? Will people want to sit in close proximity to 5,000 or 20,000 or 50,000 other fans to watch a game? How will they feel about standing on long lines before putting their smartphones in dirty plastic bins and walking through metal detectors? Will they feel comfortable lining up at concession stands? Will the average fan have enough discretionary income to buy tickets? Will corporations still pay big dollars for luxury suites?

There has been talk of fights without spectators. But that would still

put the fighters' camps, state athletic commission employees, TV personnel, and others at risk. And unique to boxing—suppose a fighter is seriously hurt. Transporting him to an emergency room would be complicated by coronavirus precautions. And what would happen once the fighter is there? Emergency rooms are already overcrowded and not functioning as they should.

After 9/11, the norms changed. For example, airport security was never the same again. There will be new protocols for sports. We just don't know yet what they will be.

Boxing will have a more difficult row to hoe than many sports. There are no season-ticket packages in boxing. Each fight has to be sold on its own merits.

How long will it be before people feel comfortable getting on a plane, flying to Las Vegas, hanging out in a casino, and going into an arena with 16,000 other fans to watch a fight? When the reboot comes, will insurance companies deny coverage for certain coronavirus-related eventualities that previously have been covered?

It's unlikely that arenas will be full again until there's an effective vaccine to combat COVID-19. This means that the live gate for fights will be adversely affected for the foreseeable future.

Also, major sports have an institutional framework that will help them recover once the crisis has passed. Weaker teams will be helped by their affiliation with stronger ones. But not in boxing.

People in the boxing community might say, "We're all in this together." But some boxing people who are mired in quicksand will climb onto the backs of others and trample them down to save themselves.

By and large, the major promoters in boxing don't cooperate with each other. The television networks and streaming video services don't help each other out. Adam Silver can guide the NBA as a unified entity. Who will guide boxing in this time of crisis?

Right now, the money to underwrite boxing in the United States comes primarily from ESPN, FOX, DAZN, and Showtime. Boxing on television and streaming video will rebound before live gates do. But as part of this process, network-promoter contracts will be reinterpreted and adjusted.

Most contracts have a "force majeure" clause that relieves the parties of certain obligations in the event that unforeseeable circumstances intervene

on a grand scale. Without knowing more about how the various network-promoter contracts for boxing are written, it's impossible to know with certainty how they'll be affected by the coronavirus. In all likelihood, most of them already have been temporarily suspended and will be extended by the duration of the suspension.

Will the advertisers come back? Viewers will still be buying beer. But chances are that they'll buy fewer automobiles in the near future.

Meanwhile, just as ESPN, FOX, DAZN, and Showtime have contractual obligations to promoters (and vice versa), promoters have contractual obligations to their fighters. Many promoter-fighter contracts will also be affected by force majeure clauses.

Right now, the fighters are in a bad place. It's hard to train when gyms are closed. And in many areas of the country—especially cities—they're closed. Fights have to be planned in advance, but that's impossible today because no one knows when circumstances will allow for fights. Moreover, the bubble in license fees and purses occasioned by DAZN's entry into the marketplace is about to burst. For the foreseeable future, there will be fewer fights and, most likely, smaller purses.

There's a school of thought that pay-per-view fights might benefit from the coronavirus crisis because they're safe stay-at-home entertainment. But many Americans will be hurting financially. The Hispanic market—the most reliable component of boxing's pay-per-view base—has been particularly hard hit.

People will be struggling to pay for essentials like food, rent, and medical care. For many, paying \$79.95 for a fight won't make sense. Promoters will wax eloquent about “giving a gift to the fans” and cutting the price of a pay-per-view card to \$44.95. But that's not likely to convince people who have lost their jobs and seen their savings dwindle to pay up. They'll have more important things to worry about than fistfights.

The balance of power at the promotional level in boxing is likely to tilt further in favor of the haves over the have-nots in the year ahead. Many small and mid-level promoters who are already being squeezed might not survive. Most of them don't have TV contracts for their shows and are almost wholly dependent upon the live gate.

Also, large promoters have libraries that they can monetize to cushion the coronavirus blow. Top Rank already has a deal in place to exploit its

library on ESPN platforms. Don King Productions and Main Events (both of which have seen their clout in the boxing industry fade) can offer similar content. The Golden Boy and Premier Boxing Champions libraries have value. Small promoters don't have that asset.

Boxing fans hope that the country is going through what will be a relatively short period of economic and social disruption and that sports will soon return. An optimist might even say that this is an opportunity for the sweet science to reinvent itself. But a successful reset for boxing will require forceful, knowledgeable executives at the television networks and DAZN.

When fight programming resumes, what level of quality control will the networks enforce? Will matchups be better, worse, or the same as before? Will elite fighters be willing to go in tough? Will fighters and promoters take greater risks for the big score (which, with a few exceptions, won't be as big as it would have been before)?

It's a pipe dream to think that boxing or anything else will return to "normal" soon. The restoration of normalcy will be a long, slow process. No one knows how long it will take or what the new normal will be. Boxing could start up again and then have to shut down once more. All of us will be in danger until an effective vaccine for COVID-19 is developed. And then we'll wonder when the next pandemic might come.

Meanwhile, let's get our priorities in order. Health is #1. Restoration of the economy is #2. The fate of boxing is far down the ladder.