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HEADLINE: Where the Lions Are Afraid of the Rats

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BODY:

Boxing is the only jungle where the lions are afraid of the rats. Now there is a race going on involving the two biggest rats - Bob Arum and Don King - to see whether they die first or if they manage to kill boxing first.

The world's cruelest sport has become so corrupt from top to bottom that it has lost most of its fans, credibility, corporate underwriting, and access to free network television.

Arum and King have had a duopoly that leaves the fighters powerless, especially at the mid- and bottom levels; they are just told whom they will fight, and how much they will be paid.

But there is one last chance to change this and stop the sport from sinking to the sordid level of wrestling, extreme fighting, and dog fighting in garages.

A 20-month federal investigation that included electronic surveillance and undercover agents has gone public in Las Vegas, with a raid on the office of Arum's Top Rank company. Law enforcement and Las Vegas boxing sources agree that this time the feds have hit a mother lode of mendacity.

The undercover phase penetrated the bottom-feeder cesspool of boxing where minor fights are fixed, medical records and doctors' letters falsified, immigration and tax laws routinely violated, urine samples switched, fighters box under aliases, and employees of promoters double-dip fighters' purses as booking agents.

The investigation does not seem to include last year's Oscar Dela Hoya - Shane Mosely fight, as some papers have reported.

Until now, Arum was considered to be a cut above Don King because he was a former federal tax prosecutor under Robert Kennedy and a Harvard Law School graduate - while King got his education on the streets of Cleveland and the prisons of Ohio.

But prosecutors say extensive electronic surveillance of Arum's office has yielded substantial evidence that his senior employees were fixing fights, both in the United States and Mexico, on the Telefutera network. In 1995, two Top Rank employees tried to fix a fight at Madison Square Garden involving "Butterbean" Esch, a fat, white heavyweight. But Mitchell Rose says he rejected the \$5,000 bribe and knocked out Esch in two rounds. Rose, who trained in Brooklyn's Gleasons gym, is cooperating with the FBI. He says he was blacklisted after he refused the fix and retired because he couldn't get any more fights.

Butterbean's fights for Arum are a main focus of the probe. Prosecutors suspect dozens of them were fixed all over the country. Agents are also looking at the fights of a female boxer, Mia St. John, a former Playboy model.

Fixed fights under Top Rank's promotional banner are hardly a secret. Two years ago I got a phone call from a boxing insider who told me a fight the next night in Mexico was "in the bag." My informant told me, "Jorge Paez is going to knock out Verdell Smith in three. You can bet on the fight on the Internet, make a buck for yourself. Paez is drawing good ratings on Telefutera and Top Rank needs him to keep winning, but he is old and has a drinking problem."

Paez won in three, and now this fight is part of the problem.

Arum has fired his assistant matchmaker, Sean Gibbons, 38, who the FBI believes arranged many of the suspected fixed fights for Top Rank. But Arum employed and defended Gibbons for years despite stories saying Gibbons was a notorious fixer. In 1999, the Miami Herald quoted two heavyweights by name saying Gibbons had paid them thousands of dollars to lose fights.

Gibbons and Top Rank also played the matchmaker in getting Brad Rone into the ring as a last-minute substitute to fight in Cedar City, Utah, last July 18. Rone died during that fight. The overweight 35-year-old had already been denied a license to fight in Nevada because he had lost 22 fights in a row over four years. Gibbons was once Rone's manager.

A foundation run by New York trainer and TV analyst Teddy Atlas ended up paying the bulk of Rone's funeral expenses, rather than by Top Rank. "We paid most of it," Mr. Atlas said. "Top Rank was supposed to pay all of it, but they paid none of it. And they made the fight." Jim Rome on ESPN and several boxing writers this week nominated Atlas as the fearless crusader to be the national commissioner the sport needs.

Brad Rone was part of a circuit of "professional losers," and Gibbons is known in boxing circles as someone to call if you need a game loser to pad the record of some local favorite as a gate attraction.

Rone took the fight to pay for his mother's funeral, who died the day before. Instead there was a double funeral. After Rone's death, the Salt Lake City Tribune quoted Gibbons as saying, "If Brad couldn't defend himself, I'd be the first to tell him to stop. But that wasn't the case. I'd never seen this guy in any danger in the ring. He was fit to box."

But a Las Vegas columnist wrote that Rone "had no business being in a ring," and Rone's opponent in the fatal fight saw he was so weak that he whispered to him in a clinch, "Are you okay?" in the first round.

The career of Butterbean Esch is a significant part of the Top Rank investigation. The reputable BoxRec archive Web site names several fights in which Butterbean's opponent appeared to take a dive, including his matches with Marcus Rhode, Bill Johnson, and Bill Duncan.

Oklahoma suspended Duncan for faking his performance after he went down in two rounds. James Calvin Baker has admitted faking his 18-second knockout loss to Butterbean in 1996. BoxRec also says several of Butterbean's "opponents" appeared under false names. Darryl Becker (0-6) lost to Butterbean under the alias of Jack Ramsey. James Holly, who had a record of 3-41, fought a "no contest" with Butterbean under the alias of James Robinson.

Arum often awarded Butterbean prized, high-profile showcases on pay per view shows that gave him the status of a cult hero among unsophisticated fans. Arti-

ficial build-ups of "white hypes" are a carnival staple of modern boxing, where every great champion for the last 30 years has been black or Latino. Queens heavyweight Richie Melito was built up this way in the late 1990s, until Wallace Matthews and I exposed his fraudulent fame. The FBI is probing Melito's "wins."

In 2002, Butterbean had a real fight against 54-year-old former champion Larry Holmes, who came out of retirement and beat him badly, exposing him as just a bar-room blimp.

Boxing's small band of reformers view the emerging Top Rank scandal as perhaps the last chance to create a national commission to bring uniform rules, safety and medical standards, and judging and ratings integrity. There has to be a national commission to the slum of the sports world, because 48 of the 50 state commissions are inadequate, and in some states, like Utah, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Mississippi, the commissions are a joke.

In 2000, IBF President Robert Lee was convicted of rigging ratings in exchange for cash payoffs. The jury was shown videotapes of Lee taking bribes. But in a message of futility to reformers, Lee has never gone to prison.

In that same case, Arum admitted paying Lee \$100,000 under the table to sanction a George Foreman fight in New Jersey. Arum was never prosecuted - just asked to pay a civil fine.

When these Top Rank indictments finally come down in Las Vegas, the reprehensible facts might finally shame respectable society into doing something about boxing. Right now it is a dying, bottom feeder's racket, redeemed only by the courage of the fighters.

Only a strong national commission has a chance at driving the lowlifes out of the game. And reducing the odds on the vulture of death, who is always perched on every ring post.