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### BOXING'S FORMULA: BLACK (PLUS) WHITE (EQUALS) GREEN; THE SPORT HISTORICALLY HAS THRIVED BY USING RACISM TO SELL ITS FIGHTS; - WHAT'S MORE, NO ONE IS APOLOGIZING

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Start Page: 1

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#### Document Text

Promoter Don King's theme for the June 11 Larry Holmes-Gerry Cooney heavyweight title bout is "Pride vs. Glory."

"It means," said King, "that you have the champion, Larry Holmes, who rose as a poor black man to the top - only to play second fiddle to Muhammad Ali and now, again, to the contender - fighting for the pride of recognition; against Gerry Cooney, a fine white Irish- Catholic lad who could have been a salesman for GM or Exxon but who went into the Sweet Science for the glory of being heavyweight champion."

King mentions the color of both fighters even as he promises he is not merchandizing a racial showdown.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I don't have to. The fight is built on racism . . . it's a natural element. The best thing to do is let it go."

Some promoters are not as subtle as King. When, on the same card in 1972, Jerry Quarry fought Muhammad Ali and Mike Quarry fought Bob Foster, localclosed-circuit exhibitors advertised it as "Quarry Brothers vs. Soul Brothers." Closed-circuit exhibitor Don Elbaum advertised the Ken Norton-Cooney fight last year as "The Caucasian Assassin vs. The Great White Hope." The Cleveland Plain-Dealer complained to Elbaum that subscriptions were canceled because of the ad.

In the ring, white against black means big business. While racism is on the run across most of America, in boxing it is being chauffeured to the arena. No apologies are offered. Not in boxing.

"I get so irritated that people always try to read bigotry into race and religion," said Elbaum, an Atlantic City matchmaker. "There's nothing wrong with whites cheering for whites and blacks cheering for blacks. It's a matter of pride. They try to make people ashamed of what they are."

But pride is so close to prejudice that Jane Austen wrote a book about it. Promoters know that both emotions work in their favor.

Operating under that premise, the first axiom of promoting is: "Opposites attract." This can mean fighters of opposite styles, but it also means fighters of opposite racial, ethnic or nationalistic background. What do they attract? Customers.

"As long as you don't lie, any means of increasing business is permitted," said Cus D'Amato, veteran trainer and manager. "You have a business duty to appeal to all areas. The idea is not to whip up hatred but pride."

The psychology of fan identification can move mountains. Bert Sugar, editor of Ring magazine, has run a white man (Cooney, Rocky Marciano, Howard Cosell) on his cover three times. "Each time we tripled our sales," said Sugar. This is no commentary on boxing fans, Sugar insists. "I think it says something about people. Boxing fans are no different. Maybe they are tinged orbent just a little more in that direction."

The "White Hope" aspect to Cooney-Holmes is never far from the surface. Holmes, in fact, raised it first when he labeled Cooney "The Great White Dope." Holmes resents Cooney's questionable credentials as the No. 1 contender as well as the 50-50 purse split, \$10 million apiece. "Do you think Cooney would be where he was if he was black?" Holmes has asked. When it was suggested Holmes fight Cooney on March 17, St. Patrick's Day, Holmes refused, saying, "I'll fight one Irishman. Not all of them."

When Holmes dropped the issue, King subtly picked it up. "I think King is selling the racial angle," said New Jersey promoter Dan Duva, "by aligning himself with Holmes and setting himself against Cooney's camp. He's made it Us against Them." King has a vested interest in Holmes because he holds options on Holmes' future fights, while Cooney is a free agent.

Cooney himself has refrained from color-tinged comments. He lets Dennis Rappaport, his co-manager, do the talking. "The only one who has brought this issue up is Holmes," said Rappaport. "Is he a racist fanatic? No. I think he may be a programmed one. By that, I mean on a one-to-one basis he would talk to a white without any barrier. His racism is more conceptual. It's like lumping white people together. It's a convenient excuse for blaming his failures."

Boxing history is rich in racial lore. Race has long been a popular device for newspapermen to sell newspapers. An example:

"We are safe at present from having a black world champion. How long can we escape? Wake up pugilists of the white race or you'll permit yourself to be parried by the black race."

The preceding was written by Charles Dana, editor of the New York Sun and author of "Two Years Before the Mast," regarding black heavyweight Peter Jackson. The date was 1895.

In 1908, Jack London publicly called for James Jeffries to come out of retirement in Australia for the purpose of recapturing the heavyweight title from Jack Johnson, the first black man to hold it.

"Come back from your alfalfa fields," wrote London, "and wipe the golden smile off the black champion."

Jeffries, in fact, did come back to fight Johnson but was knocked out in 1910. Johnson, whose romancing of white women outraged the white public, was driven into exile on Mann Act charges in 1913. A white champion was proclaimed in his absence. Johnson finally lost the true title to Jess Willard in Cuba in 1915.

The cry for a White Hope did not occur again for many years. The next black champion, Joe Louis, was beloved by black and white alike. His defeat of Max Schmeling, Nazi Germany's hero, in 1938 enshrined Louis as a great American.

Successive black champions Ezzard Charles, Joe Walcott and Floyd Patterson also were respected by the entire public. Sonny Liston, a menacing ex-con, was not as popular. "I believe Liston let the gains of the black champions slide back," said D'Amato, who trained and managed Patterson. "He annoyed people, particularly the writers. I thought he reawakened a sleeping thing."

What Liston reawakened, Muhammad Ali brought screaming to a head. A Black Muslim whose religion was the basis for his conscientious objection to the draft, Ali outraged as many whites as he delighted with his wit and humor. He became a huge box office draw partially because of his racial politicization. "Ali was so charismatic that haters as well as admirers came to see him," said D'Amato.

When Ali returned from his forced three-year hiatus in 1970 to fight Jerry Quarry, racial feelings were high, particularly in Atlanta, where the fight was held. Quarry said, "This is the good white guy against the bad black guy. It means a lot to the country on just that. It's time a white man was on top in this game." Murray Goodman, a publicist at the fight, recalled, "Quarry didn't think much before he talked."

Ali did his part. "I can't do like Jack Johnson," he said, "coming up against a Great White Hope and losing."

Georgia Governor Lester Maddox, an outspoken white supremacist, said, "This is an insult to all Georgians who have fought for their country. Something must be done about this." Quarry's wife and sister received death threats be enacted in the event of a Quarry victory. Ali may have saved their lives by TKO'ing Quarry in three rounds.

When Ali fought Chuck Wepner in 1975, members of Wepner's entourage wore buttons that said "WIN." Privately, they explained that "WIN" was an acronym for "Whip the Insolent Nigger." Drew Bundini, Ali's cornerman, spent the fight screaming, "Kill the white man, kill the white man."

Today, the principle of cross-cultural matchmaking is more commonly applied to international fights. Ray Leonard-Roberto Duran, Wilfredo Gomez-Salvador Sanchez and Alexis Arguello-Ray Mancini were some recent major bouts profiting from this appeal. "When Arguello hugged Mancini after the fight," said Sugar, "the Italians fell in love with him. They were thinking He's one of us now."

Promoters realize that the ethnic, racial and nationalistic angle can be overemphasized. "Ninety percent of the fans pick a fighter because they like the way he fights," said Duva. "Five percent on either end pick a fighter for other reasons." Elbaum says he makes matches on the basis of fighting skills. "I don't leave somebody off the card because they're this color or that," said Elbaum. "I'm more interested in whether they can fight." He adds, "It's a good idea to have a Latin on the card."

Boxing is not immune to progressive thinking. Most promoters feel that injecting too much race into a fight can be harmful. "If you promoted a fight solely on race, you would turn some people off," said Duva. Rappaport sees another problem. "Let's say some local closed circuit exhibitor fuels the racial fires," he said. "Mr. Jones and Mr. Donzella and Mr. Schwartz and Mr. O'Reilly are going to have second thoughts about going. They'll think, What happens if this one wins, is there gonna be a problem?' It could deter them." King says he has no control over local exhibitors or their advertising.

If anybody loses in the selling of race, it is those boxers with good credentials but poor marketability. Promoter Butch Lewis says, "What about guys like Greg Page and Michael Dokes? They're both better than Cooney, have fought better opponents, and deserve title bouts before him." Lewis thinks that Cooney was ranked No. 1 by both the WBA and WBC, positioning him for Holmes' mandatory defense, because "they see the media hype and they see an avenue for great revenue for themselves."

The financial success of Cooney-Holmes is unlikely to change boxing's approach to marketing. If opposites truly attract, some strange matches may be on the horizon.

"Somebody approached me and said Lets find a good-looking gay heavyweight," said Elbaum. "I said I'll handle him. We'll make a billion dollars."

"You know we could sell out Madison Square Garden."

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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