

BLUE NIGHT AT THE HORIZON

It was a night off at the fights for me, sort of a busman's holiday. Our Philadelphia correspondent, Jeff Jowett, was covering the card. I sat up in the balcony with some friends—clapping, booing, and yelling at the fighters like any other fan at the **Blue Horizon** on the evening of January 13th, 1987. It's one way I like to relax. It felt good to forget the responsibility of covering a fight from ringside and concentrate on having a good time for a change.

It turned out to be a typically entertaining card and spirits were running high as we all filed out. Everybody seemed to be riding that natural high that accompanies a good night at the fights. Then, suddenly, the world turned upside down. The party became a nightmare.

Local preliminary fighter **Randy Jenkins** had lapsed into a coma in the dressing room and been rushed to Hahnemann University Hospital. He'd lost a four-round decision to **Darrell Underwood** in a middleweight bout.

It had been a hard fought match between a couple of guys with lousy records (Jenkins was 3-3 going in; Underwood was 0-2), but decent skills. You have a lot of fighters like that in Philly. It's such a competitive circuit.

Jenkins won the first round, held his own in the second, and then began to fade. Underwood worked him over pretty well in the fourth, especially the last 10 or 15 seconds when he pinned Randy in his corner and unloaded with a series of clean blows to the head. Referee **Joe O'Neal** looked like he was getting ready to stop it when the bell rang.

The fans gave both men a nice hand and the boxers returned to their dressing rooms under their own steam. According to Jenkins' younger brother, **Bobby**, Randy said his head hurt and took a **Standback** (a non-prescription painkiller). Shortly after that, Bobby went to get his brother another drink of water. When

he returned, 30 or 40 seconds later, Randy was asleep.

"I pushed him and said, 'Randy, wake up.' But he wouldn't answer me," said **Bobby** in an interview published in the *Philadelphia Daily News*. "Then, I could see his eyes looked funny. One of them was laying to the side and one was kind of rolled back."

Jenkins received prompt medical attention. One of the two ringside physicians was quickly summoned and an ambulance arrived about five minutes later. Jenkins was rushed to the hospital where emergency brain surgery was performed by a team of neurosurgeons. As I write this, about three weeks after the tragedy, Randy is still in a coma, his life hanging in the balance. He is hooked up to a life support system and doctors say it could be another six months before a fairly accurate prognosis can be made.

I remember how guilty I felt driving home the night Jenkins got hurt. The pleasure I'd received at his (and other's) expense had been replaced by a hollow, sickening feeling. It's something all of us who love boxing experience when a fighter is seriously injured or killed. But when you're actually there, not seeing it on television or reading about it in the papers, the impact is felt all the greater.

The normal instinct among us followers of the so-called 'sweet science' is to look for

reasons, ways to avoid such 'accidents' in the future. Sometimes in these cases, the cause is quite apparent. Most often, it is not.

On paper, and in the ring, the Underwood-Jenkins bout was a reasonable match. One could not accuse promoter **Russell Peltz** of staging a hero-versus-stiff setup, or anything of that ilk. But if there was one thing that should have sounded a warning bell, it was the name of **Johnny Barr**.

Regular readers may recall a piece I wrote for *The Ring* several years ago about a band of Philadelphia dive artists known collectively as the "Philadelphia Death Squad." Their scandalous behavior also prompted a series of articles by **Stan Hochman** in the *Daily News*. The man who drove the meat wagon and booked most of this rag-tag collection of frauds was **Barr**.

All the adverse publicity forced the "Squad" to disband and **Barr** faded into the woodwork for a year or so. But eventually, **Barr** returned to the Philadelphia area, picking up the pieces of his once lucrative racket. The amazing thing is that promoters, obviously feeling fans and commissions have very short memories, began to use his fighters again. However, the reasons were not always sinister.

"The 'Death Squad' were guys who went down without being hit, but sometimes some of the guys people like **Johnny Barr** deliver are at the same level as green novices just starting out," **Peltz** told *The Ring*. "They can make for good fights. **Barr** had another fighter on the same show, **Mike Gibbons**, who was 0-3. He was stopped by **Keith Jenkins** (no relation to Randy) in the third. He was 0-8-1! But it was a good fight."

What **Peltz** said about the **Keith Jenkins-Mike Gibbons** bout is true. It was a good fight. But is it worth the risk

making that kind of match? I'm not saying the fact that **Barr** booked **Randy Jenkins** is the entire reason the fighter is in the hospital today. But it's one part of the story that has an almost too predictable ring to it.

Pennsylvania Athletic Commissioner **Jimmy Binns** has called for the state to "suspend boxing until they can establish a medical advisory board." But adds, "I don't see any rule violations or anything to prompt an investigation. The fighter had a passport. The fight was even contested. There was no reason for the referee to stop it. But this is the most dangerous sport in the civilized world. And there just isn't enough being done to make it safe. This just seems to be part of this quote, unquote sport that everybody around it is going to have to live with."

Binns' last sentence says a lot. Despite the vast improvement in ring safety we've seen in recent years, as long as there is boxing, there will always be deaths and serious injuries—some preventable, some not. **Randy Jenkins'** case seems to fall somewhere in between, a borderline case. The guilt we feel when such a calamity occurs is part of the price we pay for our involvement.

Round One

by Nigel Collins