

Securing the title

The security operation at major boxing events today is carried out with near-military precision. That has not always been the case, however, and British promoter Frank Warren's team have seen it all.

By Ian McPherson

On the 10th September 1994 British boxing endured one of its darkest moments. WBC super-middleweight champion Nigel Benn was defending his title against Paraguay's Juan Carlos Gimenez at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham when small pockets of fighting in the crowd erupted into a full-scale riot.

"All of a sudden there was a noise that I've never heard, almost like a plane crash," recalls Andy Ayling, the event manager at Frank Warren Promotions, who was at the arena that evening. "It was almost like they'd synchronised their watches – every fire exit went at the same time. They call them 'the Zulus' in Birmingham, that's what it was like. They came from every direction and it just went. The chairs were getting thrown, the barriers were getting thrown, everything was getting thrown. We had one half of the NEC completely under riot conditions."

Instead of being the result of any Benn-Gimenez rivalry, the trouble that night was caused by fans of light-middleweight champion Robert McCracken, of Birmingham, and Steve Foster, of Salford, who were due in the ring after the Benn bout. Although the riot took place at a boxing event, much

of the tension stemmed from soccer rivalries. "Unbeknown to us there was a big 'off'; it had all been arranged between the Birmingham Zulus and the Salford whoever they were," explains Ayling, who estimates there might have been up to 1,000 fans fighting that night but admits it is difficult to know given the masses of rioters who stormed into the arena.

He says a number of factors were to blame for the problems that evening, with poor venue management and a resistance on the part of the NEC to collaborate on the security effort perhaps chief among them. In the end, despite deploying officers on horseback and helicopter support, the police struggled to contain the violence in Birmingham and were forced, Ayling says, to "let it go like a fire really, let it burn".

That was a wake-up call for boxing promoters everywhere to not leave the security operation purely to the venue.

Today the environment at boxing's showpiece events is very different, with alcohol regulation and stricter venue management integral to the turnaround. The British Boxing Board of Control (BBBoFC) moved to limit alcohol consumption inside venues as early as 1980 after Alan Minter's failed title defence against Marvin Hagler was followed by ugly – and beer-drenched – scenes of violence at Wembley Arena. Subsequently, legislation was drawn up to ban fans from drinking alcohol in their seats. While the regulations have been largely successful, Ayling argues they do not work at every event – and, as such, it is important to take each fight on a case-by-case basis.

"With boxing you want to drink, you might not want to watch the next two fights but you'll watch your mate who is in the third one and obviously you'll watch

Tyson, or whoever the big name may be," he says. "So you'll stand and have a drink, and you'll stay on the concourse." And that is where the alcohol restriction can cause tension, as venue concourses, which are only designed to hold large numbers of people for a short time, become very crowded for extended periods.

Ayling points to Mike Tyson's clash with Julius Francis at what was then Manchester's MEN Arena in 2000 as an example of where it was appropriate to relax the alcohol laws. Despite initial resistance from the BBBoFC – "Alarm bells went off everywhere; everything about it was wrong in their eyes" – the relaxation proved successful, with record beer sales and no crowd disturbance of note. "You can now apply, with good grounds, with good diligence, to have drinking in the arena," explains Ayling. While it worked in that instance, he adds that no two fights are the same and you need to approach every event with a "clean piece of paper".

In addition to alcohol regulation, improved stewarding and venue security have played a vital role in the changing face of boxing. Iain McCallister is the managing director of Man Commercial Protection, a Birmingham-based firm which has supplied the security staff for Frank Warren's fights for 20 years. He says the overall security operation is a collaborative effort and, today, it relies on the cooperation of all stakeholders.

"We sit down with the Board of Control, sit down with the promoters, sit down with the police, sit down with both sides," he says, describing the numerous meetings that take place before every major fight. "It's a lot to do with the accreditation, making sure the right people are in the right areas. Trying the ►



Nigel Benn's 1994 contest against Juan Carlos Gimenez was marred by serious crowd trouble

“They came from every direction and it just went. The chairs were getting thrown, the barriers were getting thrown, everything was getting thrown.”



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Man Commercial Protection has provided security at some of British boxing's biggest bouts, including David Haye's 2012 win over Dereck Chisora



The intervention of the notorious 'Fan Man', James Miller, delayed Riddick Bowe's 1993 rematch with Evander Holyfield and sparked a ringside brawl

best way we can to make sure you put all your checks in place.”

McCallister estimates his firm, which has a 900-strong staff and supplies security for a plethora of music festivals, concerts and corporate functions, has worked on “99 per cent” of venues in the UK. And that experience has given him an eye for trouble. “With 20 years’ experience you can identify certain areas,” he says. “What we do, prior to the fight, we’ll look at the seating blocks where the fighters are, making sure they’re not directly opposite or sat next to each other. If it’s a bigger venue, it’s ideal to keep them separated.”

McCallister’s team will handle the Frank Warren-promoted clash between Tyson Fury and Dereck Chisora in Manchester this July. He says Man Commercial Protection will use around 100 staff to cover that event, which has already sold over 20,000 tickets. Those staff will cover everything from the back doors

and VIP areas to the fighters’ walkway, and have already had a taste of what to expect. “We’ve already done Tyson Fury and Dereck Chisora at the Copper Box,” McCallister says. “Although they didn’t fight each other they were on the same bill, so it was like a dummy run for us to see the audience profile and see what it’s like.”

Indeed, a crucial part of modern boxing security comes down to crowd profiling – and that often centres on soccer connections. “We work closely with the police on the big shows,” explains Ayling, “They even do their homework on individual boxers now to find out where he spends his private time, his social life, associated fans, what football teams he follows. Is he known to have a group of friends who are category A, B, C, D football hooligans?”

Ayling acknowledges that soccer and boxing will likely always have crossover fans and there is a delicate balance to be

found between maximising ticket sales and avoiding a repeat of 1994. Using Manchester City devotee Ricky Hatton as an example, Ayling says: “If he decides he’s going to fight someone who happens to come from West Ham, straight away the guy from West Ham who might usually only sell 150 tickets suddenly sells 500 tickets. Then the alarm bells have got to ring: is it the event or is it some bigger, tribal thing?”

“The board of control are a lot more proactive now in security meetings, and it works now,” he adds. “I wouldn’t say it’s been eradicated, you’re never going to eradicate it, but it’s pretty much gone. That’s why there’s a lot more women coming in now, a much friendlier atmosphere. It’s gone from football grounds pretty much, although it tried to re-emerge a couple of years ago. It started to creep into boxing because they couldn’t get away with it at football, but they realised it didn’t happen at boxing.” ■