Englebrecht: veteran promoter, walkie-talkie ever in hand, talks with crew before a night of matches

OC's Fight Guy

How Englebrecht Makes Bucks on Boxing

By CHRIS CASACCHIA

2Pac's "California Love" bumps over the loudspeakers as Gennady Golovkin begins his walk to the ring, sending the sold-out crowd at the Forum in Inglewood into a frenzy.

Roy Englebrecht is on his walkie-talkie, pacing ringside as he ensures every last detail is ironed out before the opening bell of the middleweight championship event airing on HBO.

"The devil is in the details, so I make sure we cover all the details," says Englebrecht, whose duties for the match included securing the venue, working with fighters and the state athletic commission, collecting medical documents, and handling signage, among other chores—basically taking care of the front and back of the house.

This is his sixth stint working for Venice-based K2 Promotions in title bouts for Golovkin, a heavy-hitting Kazakhstani who many in the sport consider the best pound-for-pound fighter in the world.

Tonight Englebrecht is serving as event coordinator, a familiar role for the 70-year-old Newport Beach resident, who's spent the past three decades immersed in the sweet science.

He's known in Orange County as the King of Minor League Boxing.

The title doesn't do him justice. His Roy En-
Englebrecht

Englebrecht Promotions—which hosts the OC Fight Club cards every other month in The Hangar at the OC Fair and Event Center in Costa Mesa—is among the most successful boxing promoters in the country.

“When you’re a club promoter and you don’t have Gennady Golovkin fighting or Floyd Mayweather, you really have to over-deliver to your fans,” Englebrecht says in a recent interview at his Costa Mesa headquarters.

That means two ring girls instead of one, an overhead lighting truss, and multiple cameras that broadcast the action on a 40-foot video screen behind the ring, with replay footage of knockdowns and other memorable exchanges.

Season ticket holders, such as Joe Squillacioti, have been attending Englebrecht fights since the early Battle of the Ballroom days at Irvine Marriott in the 1980s and ’90s.

“It doesn’t have the original crowd like it does now—it obviously has caught on,” says Squillacioti, managing director of Ameriprise Financial in Long Beach.

Several hundred people attended those early fights, compared to about 1,400 at a typical event today.

“It’s a different experience,” he says. “When it comes to the fights, you can’t miss anything. I look forward to it.”

Squillacioti is among about 300 season ticket holders who pay about $60 per card, generating about $180,000 in base revenue. Most are OC businesspeople.

OC Fight Club’s permanent home at the Hangar—2017 dates were just confirmed—provides a big advantage in selling sponsorships and suites.

“There’s not a [another] promoter in the United States that knows where they’re fighting in 2017,” Englebrecht says.

The 12 suites at the Hangar, which go for $2,000 per event and include food and drink, were sold out last year, securing nearly $145,000 in the bank before a punch was thrown.

Nate Johnston has been attending Englebrecht fights since he was 12. Johnston, now 36, grew up in boxing clubs in Buena Park, Anaheim and Westminster. His company, Simpson Strong Tie, has been a dual suite holder for the past three years.

“It’s the most beneficial client entertainment activity that we do, and it’s probably our most affordable expenditure,” says the Riverside office sales manager at the Pleasanton-based home equipment maker. “It’s more unique than going to a baseball game and more memorable.”

Dan Callahan’s invitation list typically includes bankers, retired judges and various dignitaries, who have included local businessmen and former Yugoslavian Prime Minister Milan Panić, a longtime Newport Beach resident.

“It’s really a coveted ticket,” says the managing partner of Santa Ana-based law firm Callahan & Blaine, one of the biggest sponsors of OC Fight Club. “It’s a phenomenal experience when you’re sitting at the rat. The [fighters] are so close, you have to put napkins over your drink.”

In the Hangar

The crowd—a mix of men, women and children from different backgrounds and ethnicities—are starting to fill the Hangar for a five-card bout that will feature two mixed martial arts matches, a fighting style Englebrecht added shortly after California sanctioned the sport in 2007.

Each fighter is introduced as “The Final Countdown” plays in the background. Englebrecht nervously walks the floor, moves a sign that’s obstructing views from a suite area, and asks if “we can get a few good rounds here.”

“This is our fifth straight sellout,” he says of the crowd of 1,432 that passed through the turnstiles, some paying $30 for standing room only.

Meanwhile, Cashton Young unloads a hard right hook on Dakota Walker, sending the fighter to the ground. A flurry of combinations ends the fight a few seconds later as the crowd erupts for the second-round knockout.

It’s a longshot that Young will compete in a major bout someday, but more than 30 fighters who’ve stepped into the ring for an Englebrecht event have gone on to become world champions, including two-time champion Genaro Hernandez; five-time world champion Johnny Tapia; Carlos Hernandez; and “Sugar” Shane Mosley, who twice beat Oscar De La Hoya, Fernando Vargas and Ricardo Mayorga.

Filling seats and holding a strict budget is a delicate dance Englebrecht has nearly perfected since promoting his first fight in 1985.

“Perception is key,” he says. “Too many promoters want to get a bigger building, and they have 500 empty seats they can’t sell.”

His role in an increasingly niche sport isn’t for everyone. The ante to get into the game is about $50,000: Each fighter gets $1,000, plus a bonus for winners; officials, doctors and ringside people get $4,000; another $4,000 goes for medical insurance; fighter per diems are $1,500; lighting truss is $4,000; video screen, three cameras and production crew come to about $4,000; matchmakers are $2,000; ring rental is $1,500; plus the Hangar lease, box office staff and reserves, a ring announcer, and security, which includes three off-duty sheriff’s deputies.

“I don’t make dollar one until I get the $50K,” Englebrecht says.

The sellout crowd will bring in a little more than that on the gate this April night, an impressive draw, considering the endless entertainment options in OC and the sport’s declining popularity. Suites and sponsors bring in about $20,000 on top of that.

Concessions and parking go to the fairgrounds, while Englebrecht Promotions takes in a bit more on merchandise sales. Englebrecht clears about $22,000 in profit after general and administrative costs, office rental, and salaries for Roy and his son, Drew, who handles ticketing, marketing, social media, daily operations, and other jobs that come with a two-man outfit.

“That’s a nice piece of business. That’s why we don’t tweak it a whole lot,” Roy says. “Too many young promoters want to hit the homerun, and they think they’re going to make $100,000. And they lose 50.”

He knows how to put on a show, and his services are in high demand.

Englebrecht worked for Jack Kent Cooke for five years and Jerry Bus for two years as director of promotions for the Kings and the Lakers, a stint that got him a NBA championship ring in the Showtime era. The Laker Girls, who debuted in 1980, were his idea.

He previously headed public relations for the athletic department at University of California-Irvine.

His promotions company last year hosted four mixed martial arts shows at Marine bases. This year he’s looking to restart Fight Promoter University, a school for aspiring promoters.

He’s been consulting with officials at the Fairplex venue on the possibility of launching a fight club in Pomona in Los Angeles County and with interested parties in Atlanta to do the same there.

Englebrecht has run the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties’ annual Night at the Fights—an annual sellout black-tie fundraiser benefitting industry lobbying and a charity that helps disadvantaged Orange County youth—for the past 25 years.

And Englebrecht Promotions was recently hired to help sell tickets for World Cup Wrestling—a qualifying event for the upcom-
ing Olympic games—next month at the Forum, thanks in part to the 30,000-person database he’s been building since hosting his first fight.

His business acumen won over De La Hoya and Richard Schaefer, the head of GoldenBoy Enterprises, which acquired Englebrecht’s company in 2011 for an undisclosed amount. De La Hoya’s attorney, Stephen Espinoza, who now heads Showtime sports and programming, handled details of the contract, which included a three-year tenure for Roy as chief operating officer of upstart Golden Boy Promotions.

Englebrecht’s company “had about 20 shows, so Golden Boy became an instant promotions company,” Roy says. “That was catching lightning in a bottle.”

In the first year the shows were held primarily at Irvine Marriott, with a few at HP Pavilion in San Jose and a private event at Hyatt Regency Irvine, now Hotel Irvine.

The second year drew a deal with HBO Latino. By the end of the third year Roy was tired of commuting to downtown Los Angeles and wanted out of the business.

De La Hoya returned the OC territory and related assets to Englebrecht as part of an amicable parting. He also hired Englebrecht periodically over the next few years to handle smaller shows affiliated with a big-time bout in Las Vegas.

“So I became a promoter again,” Englebrecht says.

Assist from Ali

A random encounter at Englebrecht Promotions’ third fight in April 1985 turned the struggling startup into an overnight buzz.

Early on, ring announcer Danny Valdivia introduced special guest Pete Rademaker, the U.S. heavyweight gold medal champion at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia.

A few bouts in, some fans parted the room, and whispers of Muhammed Ali’s attendance spread like a flurry of body shots.

Roy spotted the recently retired champion, introducing himself and ushering him to the front.

Turns out Ali had met one of the night’s fighters at a gym and showed up to support him, while a boxing fan had invited Rademaker to the fight.

Ali, who won gold at the 1960 Summer Games in Rome, joined Rademaker in the ring before the main event. Ali took off his coat and went into his signature shuffle. Chants of “Ali, Ali, Ali” grew louder and louder as the champs squared off, threw some shadow punches and shook hands.

“You can’t hear yourself think,” Roy remembers. “It was an out of body experience. It still gives me chills.”

The next day in newspaper sports sections around town, there was little mention of the action inside the ring. Headlines instead focused on the back-to-back gold medalists gathered at a relatively unknown event.

“When they read that Ali showed up, it gave us instant credibility,” Roy says, “and the rest is history.”