

Negotiation and Professional Boxing

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Editors' Note: In this groundbreaking piece, a group of authors with unimpeachable expertise in one of the least likely environments ever considered for negotiation analyze what is actually going on in the professional boxing ring. Their surprising conclusions take the facile claim of our field that "everybody negotiates" to a whole new level. Not only does this chapter serve as a kind of extreme-case demonstration of why students should consider learning negotiation to be central to any occupation they may take up in future; it might well serve as inspiration for some new studies in other fields in which negotiation may previously have been thought irrelevant.

Introduction

Referee Judge Mills Lane, a former marine and decorated fighter in his day, was blindsided. Mills, a late substitution due to an objection from the Tyson camp, issued an early blanket warning to keep punches up. According to our own analysis of the fight video (Boxingsociety.com 1997), defending heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield gained an early advantage with a characteristic forward lunging style. Following a punch, Holyfield would lock up with the smaller Mike Tyson, shoulder-to-shoulder, applying force throughout. Holyfield finished the round clearly in the lead. At the 2:28 mark in the second, a

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leaning Holyfield popped Tyson's right brow with his head, causing an immediate issue of blood. Tyson appealed to Referee Lane, who called a timeout at 2:20. He separated the fighters and verbally confirmed that the cut resulted from a head butt rather than a legal blow. As the blood trickled unexamined and unchecked, Referee Lane called for immediate resumption to action. At the 1:39 mark, Tyson looked for Referee Lane for help as the head-forward, pushing style persisted. The referee called time at 0:36 after an obvious Holyfield shove that sent Tyson bouncing against the ropes. Judge Lane addressed Holyfield saying, "You know better than that!" The next tie-up took nearly twenty seconds for Lane to pry apart the fighters, as repeated instructions to "let him go" went unheeded.

During the break, the cut doctor spent the entire time working around the eye of Mike Tyson. After the bell for round three, Lane immediately called time and sent Tyson back to his corner for his mouthpiece. As action resumed, Tyson exploded with a flurry of targeted blows, prompting Holyfield to toss Tyson back to recover distance. Tyson immediately returned to the offensive, forcing Holyfield to backpedal for the first time. Tyson seized control of the ring. It took Lane nearly fifteen seconds to break a clinch and migrate from wrestling back to boxing. At 1:13, Holyfield delivered a blow, unseen by Lane, yet cited by the announcers as below the belt. After a series of crushing blows on Holyfield, Tyson missed with a left hook only to find himself in the familiar head-to-head clinch position. Tyson rotated his head at the 0:40 mark. Holyfield leapt back in a reactive circular motion to reveal a chunk of his ear now missing. Referee Judge Mills Lane called time at 0:35. Tyson followed the retreating Holyfield and heaved him into the ropes. Lane propelled himself between fighters to regain control of the timeout period.

After blood was rinsed from the ear, Referee Lane examined Holyfield without verbal exchange. A minute into the timeout, Lane found the boxing commissioner ringside and summoned him forward. Lane explained, "He is disqualified. He bit his ear. He is out. He is disqualified. He bit his ear. I can see the bite marks." When the commissioner questioned the disqualification ruling as appropriate, Judge Lane conferred with the doctor saying, "He bit his ear. Can he go on?" The Doctor replied a simple, "Yes." Lane immediately concluded the proper consequence was a two-point deduction. After nearly a two and a half minute delay, the round continued. Tyson resumed the role of aggressor, but after fifteen seconds, he found himself in proximity of Holyfield's opposite ear and bit down. The infraction went undetected until after the bell, at which point Referee Judge Mills Lane disqualified Tyson.

Through this vignette, we gain insight not only into the dynamics of a heavyweight fight, but also into the intricacies of conflict management as conducted by a professional boxing referee. Conscripted to enforce the rules for the integrity of the sport, to ensure the safety of the opponents, to score the fight in partial determination of the proper outcome, and to manage the flow of the competition for value to the fans and promoters, the professional boxing referee must be adept at making split-second conflict management decisions, with the ability to adapt to the dynamics of a fight and the situational needs of the moment. He must balance the needs: to be the ultimate authority on allowable behavior; not to dictate tactics, but to react to combatants' actions; to influence conformance in future behavior of people who come with premeditated goals to inflict physical pain and harm.

We see in the Holyfield-Tyson match Judge Mills (who, for a time, was a county court judge in real life) in the role of a boxing referee. At times, we see him making decisive judgments, negotiating with opponents, allowing questionable tactics, issuing warnings, conferring with officials, executing penalties, breaking the action to gather facts, reprimanding participants jointly and separately, and ultimately pronouncing the victor. We see the need for the impartial conflict manager to balance his roles as gatekeeper of the rules and arbiter of relationships in this contracted sporting event. To do so effectively, the professional boxing referee must exhibit not one conflict management style, but the situationally-appropriate style to influence the desired result. This is possible if the dominant style balances rules and relationships, such that the referee can increase or decrease either as appropriate, and temporarily adopt one of the more traditional styles in conflict management.

While "win-win" strategies are often valued in negotiation, in sports, and in particular, professional boxing, it would appear to the casual observer that certain conflict resolution styles might be absent, with combatants strategically pursuing a win-lose result. The boxing literature, also, has little to say on negotiation strategies as tools for conflict resolution, outside of contracts and fees. Still, both behind-the-scenes negotiations and persuasive tactics in the boxing ring itself between opponents, managers, promoters, and officials are rich in possibilities for analysis. The results of a little investigation suggest that previous conceptions of how "everybody negotiates" have, if anything, under-recognized the spectrum of conflict resolution styles active in professional boxing, and by implication, perhaps in other highly contentious environments.

In an effort to analyze what is going on in boxing from a negotiation perspective, we will make some adaptations to the well-known

Thomas-Kilmann instrument. While the Thomas-Kilmann tool has proven useful in analysis of negotiation styles for decades, we suggest some modifications and alternative imagery, to portray classifications pertinent to the sport of professional boxing. We therefore take the liberty of supplanting traditional conflict management style labels of competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating with *Fight Like a Spartan*, *Facilitate Like a Phoenician*, *Judge Like Solomon*, *Avoid Like a Politician*, and *Delegate Like a Diplomat*, respectively. In most cases, the new classification scheme simply adds clarity; however, the compromising and accommodating styles, seldom encountered in combative sports, and in particular by professional boxing referees, are replaced with more meaningful counterparts representing similar partitioning between cooperation and assertiveness. Anecdotal examples are pulled from boxing history to illustrate the complexity of the sport and how the adapted negotiation style tool can be used to classify social behaviors between participants. The intent of the tool is to assist boxers, referees, promoters, and managers in decision-making by recognition of styles and ramifications in this adrenaline-pumping sport of split-second judgments. This specific article focuses upon conflict management styles exhibited by the “third man” in the ring – the professional boxing referee. In a learning environment, the style descriptions and examples would be supplemented with video evidence, documenting behaviors across multiple learning modes for maximum teaching effectiveness.

Classifying Negotiation Styles

Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964) introduced a simple five-category scheme for classifying negotiation style, yielding the primary interaction styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. From here forward, we make the distinction between negotiation and conflict management style for reasons that will become apparent. The refined assessment tool by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1974) has been used extensively to identify primary modes of interaction in individuals regarding tendencies toward cooperation and assertiveness. The ability to identify style, and tactics characteristic of a specific style, can aid in developing appropriate strategies to get to closing. Indeed, self-evaluation to identify one’s own dominant style also holds value in both guiding successful negotiations and identifying skills for possible development. Conflict management styles can be dynamic, with multiple styles exhibited according to shifting needs. Thus, it is important to be familiar with techniques and methods that are flexible enough to avoid an impasse. Identification of styles is one such tool to guide the successful negotiator.

Win-win scenarios are generally not the ideal for either party in war and sports. Sporting events, such as the Olympics, have often superseded the political landscape, offering national pride to the winner, along with boasting rights that may not be possible on the battlefield. With much literature aimed at integrative negotiations, we step back to examine negotiations in sports. In particular, we evaluate negotiations and conflict management styles in a sport more akin to war than most – professional boxing. Through case studies and vignettes, we get an often behind-the-scenes look at the complex world of boxing decision-making. While professional boxers enter the ring with the intent to dominate their opponent by inflicting pain, they do so under contractual obligation to abide by a set of rules. Most rules in boxing are centered around the avoidance of unfair advantage. Thus, for example, we have weight ranges and prohibitions against illegal blows. We have preset time lengths and subdivision into rounds. Combatants agree to be assessed on a point system by predetermined judges, provided fighters are able to successfully complete the appointed maximum duration. The successful referee enforces the rules of engagement without drawing undue attention to himself. In some of the most successful bouts, the referee is the “invisible third man” in the ring.

Adapting the Classification of Conflict Management Styles for the Boxing Context

In sports, and professional boxing in particular, it is not readily apparent that parties cooperate with one another to any recognizable degree. Many would rather see only two of the traditional style designations as appropriate: competing and avoiding. As fighters are both vying for a win and working to incapacitate their opponent or his ability, nearly everyone in boxing would categorize a fight as maximum assertiveness without cooperation. Fighters, however, do cooperate to a significant degree to ensure a fair outcome, with significant value for themselves, their business partners, and the fans that ultimately finance the sport. In addition, they cooperate by agreeing to abide by the rules of boxing. They cooperate by agreeing to abide by the instructions of the referee, who serves as both observer and judge.

The referee is present for close-hand inspection of tactics, exercise of penalties, protection of participants, and adjudication. The skilled referee is constantly moving to get the best point of observation, and is ready to intervene in an instant, while avoiding interference. The referee is working with both participants, allowing them to spar within the agreed set of rules, but quick to act on either’s behalf should there be a violation or safety concern. The referee must command

the respect of fighters often double his size, and thrust into situations where emotion often overrides intellect as participants move in and out of positions of dominance. In the balance of this chapter, we focus on conflict management styles from the perspective of the professional boxing referee. But first, we adapt the traditional terminology of Thomas and Kilmann, to make it more recognizable within the context of a combative adjudicated sport (see Figure 1).

Competing – Fight Like A Spartan

The Spartans were ancient Greece's most formidable warriors, with a "win at any cost" attitude, solidified with viable, time-proven battle strategies and an unswerving sense of honor. Boxers will rapidly associate with this style, and exhibit it most often in pre-fight rhetoric and assertion of fight control in the ring. It will be most often conferred on the aggressor and is most visible between boxers content to go "toe-to-toe." The referee also must use this style, however, to command the respect of the fighters in order to maintain control of a bout. Overuse of this style by a referee, however, is not appreciated by fans, who want the fighters to control the outcome. The best referees will judiciously exercise their competitive style, choosing to exhibit enough authority to ensure safety and fairness without being the center of attention.

Collaborating – Facilitate Like A Phoenician

The style high in cooperation and assertiveness we re-label as *Facilitate Like a Phoenician*. The Phoenicians were an ancient Mediterranean people known for their negotiation skills (Chamoun and Hazlett 2008). In a prolonged period of regional conquest, the Phoenicians made themselves more valuable as business partners to the political and military powers in play than as a subjugated people. Thus, we associate conflict management styles that involve a high degree of cooperation and concern for effectiveness with these highly skilled negotiators of the past.

Boxers will not see themselves as collaborating in the ring, beyond the agreement to abide by the rules; however, this style is often exhibited unknowingly. For example, few fights will continue long without one fighter assuming the role of aggressor. Fans get unruly with sparse interaction, ultimately leading to one fighter assuming an alternate style. In fights where mutual respect has been substantiated, combatants may actually work together to conserve energy. The counterpunch is a reactive strategy that depends on actions of the other. Each fighter creates windows of opportunity for themselves and the other. As for the referee, he is an impartial judge; yet he is

ready to assist either combatant when unfair advantage has been levied through either an infraction of the rules or physical incapacitation. While physical domination is a fighter's goal, illegal blows include those when a fighter is unable to defend himself. Boxers and their corner representation make appeals throughout a match. The degree to which this information is processed into decision making is up to the referee. While this may on the surface resemble arbitration rather than negotiation, the professional boxing referee operating with this style is open to input from participants and is actively engaged with the fighters. The referee in this style could also be interpreted as negotiating with himself for the benefit of the fighters and the sport. The good referee works with both fighters, while not showing favoritism beyond the enforcement of fight protocol.

Compromising – Judge Like Solomon

This style is perhaps the one most in need of alternate imagery from the original language of Thomas and Kilmann. Compromising means making concessions to the other in order to gain ground on those terms most important to you. Sportsmen do not typically envision compromise as a useful style. However, if we examine the motivating forces (the axes in the style chart), we find a related style, also a balance between cooperation and assertiveness. This style can easily move into any of the other styles with small shifts in motivation. We choose to rename this style *Judge Like Solomon* to capture the keen sense of fairness exhibited by Solomon, as recorded in Hebrew scripture: in particular, the incident of the two women approaching Solomon with but one child, both claiming to be the mother. Exercising great wisdom, he called for the child to be cut in half (ostensibly a compromise), giving an equal portion to each woman. The woman yielding her claim, in order to save the child, was awarded the baby, as having shown herself to be the true mother. What appeared at first to be an extremely bad compromise was thus revealed instead to be judiciousness of a high order. We believe there is wisdom in the fact that the two *could* be confused.

While combatants may not claim to operate in the arena of compromise, the appropriate strategy strikes a balance between offense and defense, aggression and caution. The skilled fighter can operate with such a balance, reserving opportunity to both seize advantage and protect against disadvantage. Sometimes the best "cooperative" strategy is simply to wait, to prolong the window of opportunity. Meanwhile, the professional boxing referee seeks to use this conflict management strategy for preference, working with the combatants, but ever ready to interject himself between fighters as the authority

figure in the ring. We envision this style, therefore, not as one of compromise in its classic sense, but rather as one of judicious and decisive *balance*.

Avoiding – Avoid Like a Politician

We can easily identify the avoidance tactic with politicians who place reputation and votes over positions and policies. The avoiding strategy is often portrayed in boxing as both an offensive and defensive tool. Against a slower opponent, a boxer may choose to maintain advantage through constant motion. Avoiding can also be used to great advantage if there is a marked difference in reach. While the jab seldom results in a knockout, it scores points nevertheless. Avoidance could likewise be a tactic to counter an obvious advantage in power. A boxer knowing he cannot effectively trade blows toe-to-toe can exercise avoidance. From a conflict management style, *Avoid Like a Politician* is low on both the cooperation and assertiveness scales. That does not make it an ineffective strategy in boxing, as exhibited by the younger Ali in his extensive use of motion, captured in his mantra “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee”; however, it is not a desirable dominant conflict management strategy for a boxing referee. Such a referee fails to control a fight, endangering the lives of the combatants. Under some circumstances, a referee can avoid micromanagement of a fight without giving undue advantage; but a referee exercising avoidance too much will be seen as disengaged or ill-equipped for the position, especially at the professional level.

Accommodating – Delegate Like a Diplomat

The accommodating style is quick to please, surrendering leadership or control; but while this type of behavior is exhibited in sports, it is seldom seen in boxing referees. Thus, we have labeled this conflict management style as *Delegate Like a Diplomat*. A diplomat goes to great lengths not to offend and always errs on the side of relationship. This style is seldom effectively used by boxers, though there is historical precedent in Ali’s *rope-a-dope* strategy deployed against a younger, stronger, but less durable Foreman. The tactic coined as *rope-a-dope* by Ali refers to an invitation to the opponent to take uncountered punches while he assumes a low-energy, highly protective stance using the ringside ropes as shock absorbers. Using his arms and gloves as protective equipment to avoid debilitating damage, he planned to tire the opponent with extended invitations to *take their best shot*. Once his opponent’s energy was spent, Ali became the aggressor.

In general, to surrender (temporarily) to the opponent is almost always a defensive strategy by a hurt fighter trying to protect himself

just long enough to regain his faculties. A referee using the delegating strategy of conflict management may purposefully bend the rules to protect a fighter or counter an advantage.

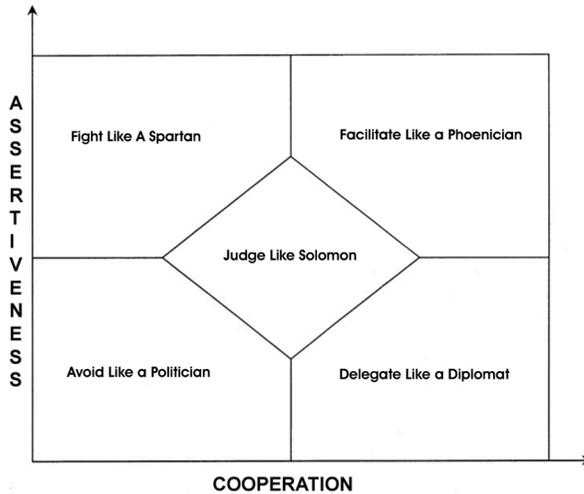


Figure 1. Proposed Thomas-Kilman conflict management styles reinterpreted for application in combative adjudicated sports.

A referee using this strategy can easily be viewed as one showing favoritism in the ring. Another form of delegation concerns scoring, knowing there are other judges scoring the fight. The referee could get so involved with other aspects of officiating as to lose track of his responsibility to score the fight properly. In this case, he is not delegating to the combatants, but rather to the other professional judges, who however lack the referee's ability to manipulate his frame of reference for optimal viewing angle. The professional boxing referee ought to have the most reliable assessment of scoring blows. Another example of delegating by the referee would be indirectly addressing conflict to preserve relationship or, as in the case of Holyfield-Tyson, seeking higher authority, as in a boxing commissioner or doctor.

Table 1 categorizes how each of these five conflict management styles would offer a different response to the delivery of a low blow by one fighter against another.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE	ACTION
Fight Like a Spartan	Stop the action and penalize the guilty fighter
Facilitate Like a Phoenician	Stop the action and verbally warn both fight
Judge Like Solomon	Stop the action, issue a warning, and assess the ability of the violated party to continue
Avoid Like a Politician	Let the fight continue as long as both fighters are physically able
Delegate Like a Diplomat	Stop the action and warn each corner

Table 1. Illustrative potential actions in response to an illegal punch.

In the *Fight Like a Spartan* style, the referee would immediately exercise a penalty based upon his observation and interpretation of the facts. In the *Facilitate Like a Phoenician* style, the referee would acknowledge the observation and recite the rules to both parties equally, to preserve relationships. In the *Judge Like Solomon* mode, the referee would stop the action and exhibit concern for both the rules and the fighters, especially the one who was placed at a disadvantage. In the *Avoid Like a Politician* style, the referee would apply the adage, no harm, no foul. As *Delegate Like a Diplomat*, the referee might fail to address the combatants directly, preserving relationships and choosing rather to allow the coaches in each corner to police the actions of their principals. These are all actions that can and do take place in boxing in response to the identical in-ring infraction.

Historical Precedents for Dominant Conflict Management Styles

While we have identified the preferred dominant style for conflict management for a professional boxing referee as *Judge Like Solomon*, all styles have found their place in history in prominent matches. For illustrative purposes, we will describe a few here. We note that dominant referee style can change with combatants, as well as changing with time and experience.

Case 1. Jersey Joe Walcott vs Ezzard Charles, June 5, 1952

This was the fourth meeting between heavyweights Jersey Joe Walcott and Ezzard Charles. Charles had won the first two fights. In their third meeting, Jersey Joe Walcott defeated Charles to take the title with what many analysts still list as one of the greatest knockouts in boxing history. This fight made history on many fronts. It was the first sporting event to be broadcast on national television. It also represented the first heavyweight championship bout to be refereed by

a black man, Zach Clayton. The fight went the distance with Walcott getting a unanimous, yet controversial decision. Clayton was heavily criticized for his role as referee. The August, 1952 issue of *The Ring* magazine ran the cover story, "Who Really Won That Fight? Joe or Ezzard?"¹ *Jet* ran an Inside Sports column by A. S. "Doc" Young containing a blistering rebuff of the referee.

Obruding all over the place, obstructing action as well as view, he [Clayton] unashamedly displayed his innate longing for the spotlight, a burning desire to be the star. . . He advised Charles against imaginary low blows, but allowed Walcott a punch to Ezz' thigh. Ignoring in-fighting as part of the game, he roughly separated boxers as soon as they touched bodies. He allowed Walcott to hit on the break. And, presuming himself to be a doctor, he went to Charles' corner and wiped a medicant from his eye. (Young 1952: 51)

Life magazine (1952) likewise reported, "According to a majority of the sportswriters at ringside, Charles easily outpointed Walcott, even though Joe was aided no end by Referee Zack Clayton, who kept nagging Charles about imaginary low blows while seeming to encourage the champion."²

While sports reporting (not to mention refereeing) can certainly be biased, we want to focus on the conflict management style(s) visible in these descriptions. Perhaps Clayton's behavior was affected by his unique place in history, or his knowledge of the national television broadcast. The contention that Clayton drew attention to himself over his role illustrates high assertiveness with low cooperation—which we would describe as a *Fight Like a Spartan* style. Thus, he competed with the fighters, controlling actions during and between rounds, and by some accounts overtly showing bias.

Case 2. Muhammad Ali vs George Foreman, October 30, 1974

George Foreman continued his march as decorated Olympic champion into the professional arena, and gained the heavyweight title by defeating Joe Frazier, setting up a fight between Foreman and Ali. Ali executed his "rope-a-dope" strategy, allowing Foreman to openly punch him while using the ropes to partially support his frame. Referee Zach Clayton allowed extensive use of holding on the part of Ali. When Foreman tired, Ali took the offensive. Foreman was floored in the eighth round. While Foreman quickly rose to his feet, appearing to beat the count, Clayton called the match at the 2:58 mark in the round. Though perhaps the count of announcer Bob Sheridan and Referee Clayton were out of synch, the broadcaster had only reached

eight. Clayton did not appear to evaluate Foreman when he got up. Clayton ended the fight rather than allow the match to proceed to the next round. While the decision remarkably did not draw much controversy, it is illustrative of a shift in conflict management style over the younger Clayton (see Case 1). The failure to intervene and strictly enforce rules demonstrates the *Avoid Like a Politician* style. Few believe that a longer match would have yielded a different result, potentially explaining the absence of a formal protest. Using his prerogative as referee, Clayton decided Foreman should not continue. The decisive action to end the fight exemplifies the Judge Like Solomon style.

Case 3. Andre Berto vs Freddy Hernandez, November 28, 2010

Freddy Hernandez was 29-1 going into the fight with welterweight champion Andre Berto. About a minute into the fight, Freddy Hernandez went down hard. Referee Russell Mora immediately intervened and sent Berto to a neutral corner. Hernandez struggled to his feet and spit out his mouthpiece. The boxer staggered toward Referee Mora who was evaluating the body motion and eyes of the challenger from close range. At the count of eight with a wobbly Freddy Hernandez on his feet, Mora called the fight.

While paying fans hate such brevity in boxing, and fighters find such early exits embarrassing, Referee Mora clearly portrayed the *Judge Like Solomon* conflict management style. Steve Carp, of the Las Vegas Review-Journal, wrote, "A left jab followed by a left hook followed by a big right hand dropped Hernandez, and after he wobbled upon getting to his feet, he was clearly in no condition to continue . . ." (Carp 2010). Mora asserted not only the right but the need to decide for himself that he was seeing a fighter no longer able to defend himself. While the ruling drew controversy, the style depicted is unambiguous.

Case 4. Robert Guerrero vs. Michael Katsidis, April 9, 2011

As center ring instructions are given, Katsidis yells to Guerrero, "What are you looking at?" The initial round was the beginning of a great chess match. In the second round, Guerrero has a glove touch the canvas after an exchange, but Referee Russell Mora ruled this a trip, and took no action. The commentators, Jim Lampley and Max Kellerman, repeatedly insisted that the referee missed a knockdown. The commentators continued to replay the so-called missed knockdown, but they were unable to see that both fighters' feet were entangled. While boxers score with knockdowns, slips and trips are not rewarded. However, the referee missed a glove wipe. Anytime a fighter's glove touches the canvas for any reason the referee must

wipe his gloves. By the end of the seventh round, Guerrero took an obvious lead. In the eighth, Katsidis hit Guerrero with an apparently intentional low blow.

When a boxer commits an intentional foul and has gained an unfair advantage, the referee may deduct a point for the intentional foul, as Mora did. Unfortunately, Katsidis continued his low blow attack, causing the referee to deduct yet another point. The second point deduction was more complicated, and was not understood by the commentators. An illegal low blow is not only one on the cup of a fighter, but also any punch below the navel or the hips. In the ninth round, Guerrero returns the favor and hits Katsidis with a low blow. The referee deducted a point from Guerrero, with the mindset that a strict enforcement of low blows was necessary to maintain a clean and fair fight. The strict enforcement cleaned up the fight. With no more infractions, Katsidis and Guerrero continued to fight hard until the final bell and a unanimous decision for Guerrero.

Whether accidental or out of frustration, low blows constitute a rules infraction by combatants and a break in the cooperative agreement. Recognizing this as such, and knowing the danger to fighters by blows that are deemed illegal, the referee had to regain control with decisive action. With cooperation at a low point, maximum assertiveness was required. The actions of Referee Mora shifted to *Fight Like a Spartan*, evoking maximum allowable penalties for each infraction without further warning. Exercising penalties brought the fighters into “cooperation” – i.e., the resumption of a fair fight.

Case 5. Yuri Foreman vs. Miguel Angel Cotto, June 5, 2010

Yuri Foreman faced Miguel Angel Cotto in his first defense of the World Boxing Association world light middleweight title, on the first boxing card in the new Yankee Stadium. In the seventh round, Foreman slipped when his braced knee buckled. As the fight resumed, Foreman heavily favored his knee. The injury compromised Foreman’s mobility, allowing Cotto to connect repeatedly. After a few more falls, Foreman’s trainer threw a towel into the ring midway through the eighth. At that traditional symbol of surrender, the ring was flooded by members of both corners as well as event officials. However, sensing no imminent danger, Referee Arthur Mercante Jr. conferred with Foreman, inquiring if he wanted to continue. Receiving an answer in the affirmative, Mercante cleared the ring, and the fight resumed. Foreman crumbled again early in the ninth, but this time it followed a solid left hook.

The referee promptly halted the fight. Defending his decisionmaking, according to ESPN boxing writer Dan Rafael (2010), Mercante

responded in a post-fight interview, “The towel came in the heat of the battle. They had a good exchange going. I felt it wasn’t necessary to stop it. I didn’t know where it [the towel] came from. There was no need to stop the fight. They were in the middle of a great fight. That’s what the fans came to see. I felt I did the right thing to let it continue.”

Faced with an unexpected symbol of surrender, Referee Mercante exercised both a high degree of cooperation and assertiveness. Following identification of the trainer as the source, he chose to disregard the opinion of the corner and consult the boxer himself to discern if the fighter could continue. Calling the fight because of a trainer’s action would have delegated his authority. Contrary to popular belief leading to the saying *throwing in the towel*, this action does not, according to the rules of boxing, trump the referee’s authority to end a match. Asserting his professional opinion and authority, he did what few would have done after everyone, including the fighters, had turned the ring into a post-fight ritual. Taking the opportunity to substantiate his assessment with additional information directly from the fighter, Referee Mercante exhibited the *Facilitate Like a Phoenician* conflict management style. Mercante elevated the option of the fighter to continue over the opinion of his trainer. When his opinion was later swayed in deference to the injured fighter’s well-being, he ended the match.

Case 6. Muhammad Ali vs. Joe Frazier, October 1, 1975

In a fight marketed as the “Thrilla in Manila,” Ali defended the heavy-weight title in this third matchup with Joe Frazier. Contrary to his early-career “constant motion” strategy and his “outlast him” strategy that secured the title from George Foreman, Ali was convinced that he could trade blows with Frazier. The early rounds went to Ali, but Frazier showed he still could muster respect at the highest level, taking the middle rounds. By the end of the fourteenth round, Referee Carlos Padilla, Jr. had to direct Frazier to his corner due to eyesight deterioration. Ali said later of his retreat to his corner (Kram 1975), “It was the closest thing to death that I could feel.” Frazier’s trainer, Eddie Futch, refused to let Frazier continue into the final round.

The choice of Referee Carlos Padilla, Jr. to officiate the fight had been a controversial one primarily due to his small stature (Samaco 2009). At 160 pounds, some challenged his ability to command respect, and thus control the fight between heavyweights, especially of this caliber. Padilla warned Ali against holding and was repeatedly seen pulling Ali’s arm down whenever it wrapped around Frazier’s

nape. Padilla exercised good balance between cooperation and assertiveness, representing the *Judge Like Solomon* conflict management style.

Conclusion

The reinterpretation of conflict management styles for combative sports, and professional boxing in particular, leads to specialized imagery that better fits the substance of what we argue is largely a disguised negotiation. In particular, the compromising style is replaced with a more meaningful interpretation, for competitive sports, of the balance between cooperation and assertiveness. Classification of styles aids in self-awareness, along with better management of interactions with others displaying tendencies identifiable using this schema. Conflict management styles can be dynamic, but dominant styles can emerge as primary. Sports examples help solidify terms and concepts for audiences who are not familiar or comfortable with negotiation theory or traditional classroom learning experiences. Roles that are typically projected to display only one or two styles, due to the win-lose nature of the game, turn out on examination actually to cover a wide gamut of possible styles. Perhaps the terminology as applied here to the professional boxing referee could be extended to other participants and other sports, revealing still more venues in which negotiation is pervasive if generally unrecognized.

Notes

¹ See http://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Ring_Magazine:_August_1952 (last accessed May 17, 2012).

² "Walcott staves off a challenger." *Life*, 16 June 1952, 33.

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