

The following excerpt is from a work-in-progress

Prelims: the Art and Science of Matchmaking

by Don Cogswell

Georgie Duke fought in 15 preliminary bouts before his inaugural main event, a six round draw with Charley Early on July 24, 1942, at National Hall. The house take that night was a modest \$463. (Six weeks later, the same venue would gross \$1369, the best gate to date at National Hall for promoter Frankie Scaler. Duke would fight that night, relegated to the undercard, against Santo Tringali (KO 5).

Over the course of those 15 preliminary matches, Duke fought at six venues in four cities. They were San Francisco, Sacramento, Oakland and San Jose, in order of frequency. Promoters he fought under included Scaler, Bennie Ford, Fred Pearl, Jimmy Murray and Mason Griffin. Six of those bouts were at National Hall, including 3 out of his last 4. He fought his main event opponent, Charley Early, twice before that night, at San Francisco's Coliseum Bowl in Duke's second fight (TKO by 3), and at National Hall, 2 weeks prior to his main event, a draw over 6. Could Duke have been piloted more effectively as a maturing preliminary fighter? What were the promotional strengths and weaknesses in the early stages of his career? The following example of classic preliminary matchmaking provides an appropriate context for addressing these questions.

Gabriel 'Hap' Navarro, sage of California boxing and former matchmaker for the phenomenally successful Hollywood Legion Stadium, discussed his approach to building a potential main event bonanza with two promising fighters, Andy Escobar and future champion Don Jordan, during their preliminary bout apprenticeships.

"Having been in charge of the prelims at the Legion for three years, I had a chance to really develop a lot of youngsters. I took care of the ones that showed promise and assured our club of a dozen or so main eventers in the process.



Hap Navarro as matchmaker at
Hollywood Legion Stadium
photo: Otto Jensen

"Jordan had a couple of bouts at South Gate before his first manager, who was friendly to us, listened to my advice, and allowed us to develop Don, with an eye towards a sell-out showdown with Andy, who was already in our camp.

"Andy only had one bout away from the Legion in his [entire] career when we loaned him out to Earl Beebe, a friend, who was promoting at the Wilmington Bowl.

"Andy had been National Golden Gloves Champ, as was his kid brother, Alfredo, a couple of years later.

"He was beautiful to watch, a picture boxer with a hefty punch.

"My intention from the start was to show them both regularly, keep them apart, then match them when they had earned a solid following. The record books will bear this out. Just check the number of straight wins that each had boxing for us."

Escobar fought his first twelve fights at Hollywood Legion Stadium, going 12-0 with 11 kayos. Jordan, after two fights at South Gate, fought his next six at Legion Stadium, compiling a record of 8-0 with 3 kayos. Both fighters set a measured pace, fighting from April to December on alternating cards, in a rhythmic promotional style akin to a skillful fighter's control of the ring.

The result; both young fighters added to their swelling ringside followings.

“They were appearing alternately on my undercards until December 16, 1953.” That’s when Navarro threw another log on the fire by pairing the two in separate bouts on the same card. “I co-featured heavyweights Jake Williams vs. Baby Dutch Culbertson, with Andy meeting Lavert Smith, both in eights. Don Jordan beat Dave Hernandez in a six preceding the Escobar bout.”

After a final pairing, the Hollywood matchmaker felt it was time for them to face one another. It would be both fighter's first exclusive main event.

“I pitted them alone on top for the first time early in ‘54. That was the focal point of the buildup. Great fight, great card.”

A sellout for the 6400 capacity venue.

“Jordan got the decision by an eyelash...setting the stage for a retake.

“In their second meeting Andy avenged the loss.”

“Their two main events drew an aggregate gross of around \$12,000.”

It was a textbook case of preliminary promoting graduating to main event status.

Of course, Hap Navarro's success wasn't restricted to just the Escobar/Jordan project.

“During the time that I was making up the prelim bouts at the Legion, a shower of money, in a run of 22 weeks out of 23- sometimes after more than one prelim bout of the same show- was tossed into the ring. Thirteen of my main events, in two years as headman, had a shower of cash as well. That had happened only once in the previous eight years at the Legion.”

Matchmaking on this level is more than matching fighters as targets of opportunity, or a simple pairing of win-loss records.

“Matchmaking for a major club has to be an art, much like a casting director's job in the film industry.”

A hands-on, active participation by the matchmaker himself, is essential.

“I would keep a journal on my kids, watch them in training, and talk to them in the presence of their managers.”

Despite all of the above, an attraction's longevity was not assured. A third “rubber” match never occurred, with Escobar and Jordan both ‘lost’ to the Legion in their own ways.

“Some time later, Escobar married his high school sweetheart, and that unfortunately coincided with the turning

point of his career. Andy was beating up on a game kid from Oakland, Ramponi, when he suddenly faded badly and was stopped in a huge upset. Then, after having Buddy Evatt down, cut badly, and on the verge of a knockout, he again tired badly and was surprisingly stopped! Keep in mind that Escobar had kayoed Evatt before, but both he and his manager, Jackie McCoy, saw a flaw in Andy's stamina, and asked for a second chance.

"Andy tried to come back but he was never the same. Johnny Hart, whom he had kayoed before, stopped him at the Legion to end his career.

Don Jordan was lost in a more conventional, quicker, and more prosaic, way.

"Jordan did not stay with me because his management was taken over by Harry Kabakoff, who was very close to the people at the Olympic (a 10,000 seat venue)."

Georgie Duke's peripatetic itinerary worked against top shelf matchmaking, and in Georgie's case, building his career. Duke gained broad exposure by seeding his fights in seven venues in six months, cashing in on the arenas that had seen him compete as an outstanding amateur. He had an early opportunity to work with most of the bay area's fight promoters. These potential benefits, however, were more than offset by the lack of a coherent plan of development. Bereft of a strategic promotional plan left Duke, and his loyal, albeit homegrown manager, Jimmy Smith, in a tactical, short-term-gain mode of operation.

Duke fought a three-fight series as a preliminary attraction against Oakland fighter Cupid Gordon. All three bouts were fought in the month of April '42. Rather than being the fruit of an ongoing, albeit rapid-fire, promotional plan, this scatter gun opportunism was epitomized by matching Gordon, not as a follow-up bout to their first meeting, but as a last minute substitute for Duke's original opponent. This second meeting followed their first by just two days. The venues were Oakland and Sacramento, two distinctly different boxing audiences, over 75 miles apart. Their third meeting, a week later, was held in San Francisco, which drove a stake into the heart of any promotional potential for this trilogy.

It was the antithesis of building a gate or a career.

Jimmy Smith's eventual success in hooking Georgie up with National Hall married their fortunes to the promotional abilities of Frankie Scaler. His venue was the oldest, and smallest, in the City. It would take the co-managing abilities of Billy Newman, in Duke's mid-career, to kick it up to another level of promotional potential, not all of which was ever realized.

SF Civic	Oak. Aud.	Sacto. Aud.	National Hall	Col. Bowl
Leonard Hodgson	Cupid Gordon 4/15/42	Cupid Gordon 4/17/42	Bob Smith	Babe Miranda
			Cupid Gordon 4/24/42	

A note on the level of competition. In Hap Navarro's buildup of Escobar and Jordan, their one common opponent, Gaby Macias, had, on the eve of fighting Escobar in their first fight, a record of 9-8-2, with 3 kayo wins and three stoppage losses (1954 Ring Record Book). A pedestrian record at best. This did not, however, prove detrimental to the promotional buildup. Quite the contrary. To the Hollywood Legion Stadium fan base it was becoming increasingly obvious, due to Navarro's promotional orchestrations, that Escobar and Jordan were on a collision course. Fighting a common opponent, regardless of his perceived capabilities, served as a barometer for both fighters' partisan supporters, adding grist to their promotional mill. (Escobar would kayo Macias twice on back-to-back occasions, with Jordan doing the honors shortly thereafter.)

Few fighters' early careers are as successfully promoted as those of Escobar and Jordan at the Hollywood Legion Stadium. Then again, there was only one Hap Navarro.

Smith and Duke may have made the most of the hand they were dealt but the lack of an overall plan left them *reacting* to opportunities rather than *creating* them, a situation prone to fighter demoralization as well.

The graphics above show each fighter's record of preliminary opponents, from their pro debut to their first headlining main event. Included are their venues in various colors. Jordan's and Escobar's places of work are obvious to see, as consistent as a cloudy day. Duke's is a rainbow. Unfortunately for Smith and Georgie there was no pot of gold.



Georgie Duke with manager Jimmy Smith

South Gate		Hollywood Legion Stadium					
Ray Serna	Al Barbero	Chi Chi Martinez	Chi Chi Martinez	Gaby Macia	Marvin Smith	Marvin Smith	Dave Cervantes

Don Jordan's first eight opponents and venues

← Hollywood Legion Stadium →											
Bobby Matison	Henry Johnson	Kid Poncho	Eddie Banks	Babe Mathis	Gaby Macias	Gaby Macias	Pinky Cowen	Eddie Johnson	Johnny Hart	Dave Hernandez	Lavert Smith

Andy Escobar's first twelve opponents and venues

Coliseum Bowl		L St. Arena	SF Civic	Oak. Aud.	Sacto. Aud.	National Hall	Col. Bowl	SF Civic	Sacto. Aud.	National Hall		Sacto. Aud.		
Benny Santiago	Charley Early	Clay Rohan	Leonard Hodgson	Cupid Gordon	Cupid Gordon	Bob Smith	Cupid Gordon	Babe Miranda	Louis Martinez	Jack Daniels	Eddie Munyer	Babe Miranda	Charley Early	Eddie O'Neil

George Duke's first fifteen opponents and venues