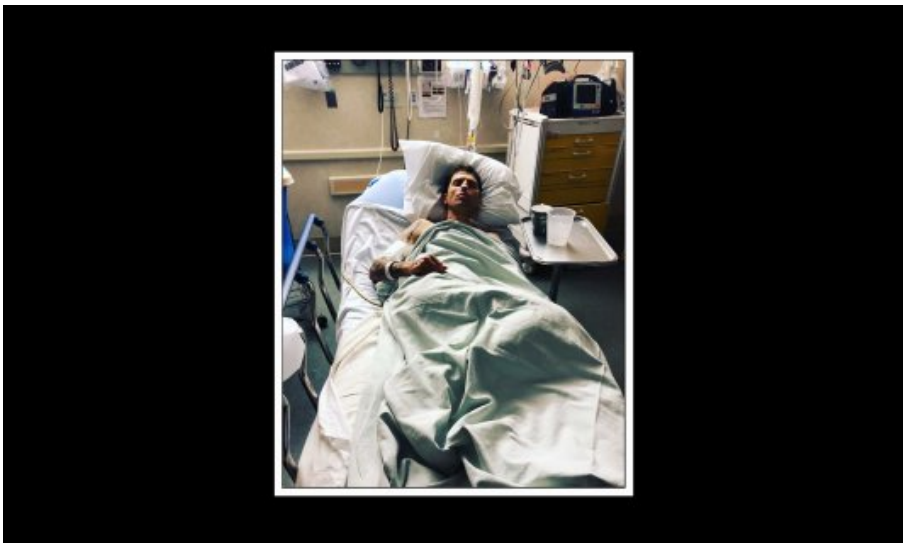
The Weighting Game: California State Athletic Commission Exclusive

By Caryn A. Tate on July 12, 2018



The authority for this proposal comes from the Muhammad Ali Act. (Danny O'Connor)

> "It's not a boxing politics issue. If we make it so that this is just now part of boxing, we're protecting our athletes better..."

Last Friday, Danny O'Connor (30-3, 11 KOs) was scheduled to weigh in for his first world title fight versus WBC junior welterweight champion Jose Carlos Ramirez (22-0, 16 KOs) in Fresno, California. It was the main event for a Top Rank card to be broadcast on ESPN.

On Friday morning, **O'Connor struggled** to lose the final two pounds to make the 140-pound limit. He spent four hours in the sauna to no avail. Afterwards, Joe DeGuardia, O'Connor's promoter, said the fighter was incoherent and looked severely dehydrated. An ambulance was called and O'Connor was given IV hydration before being taken to the hospital.

The jarring photographs of O'Connor lying prone on the floor of his hotel room while being attended to by EMTs have been widely circulated on social media. Per Bernardo Osuna on Saturday's ESPN broadcast, it took seven bags of IV fluid before O'Connor was able to urinate. He spent the night at the hospital and was released on Saturday morning.

Thankfully, it appears O'Connor will recover. But this instance of dangerous weight-cutting is far from being an anomaly; it's becoming more and more common in boxing and in MMA. Frequently, we hear about a fighter who struggled to make weight, who nearly killed himself or herself to make the weight limit, or missed weight entirely.

In May, UFC fighter Darren Till missed weight by a whopping 3.5 pounds. A video posted online revealed a weakened Till in the sauna, unable to stand. Later, the fighter told his team he couldn't see (loss of vision is a known symptom of severe dehydration).

Just last week, UFC featherweight champion Max Holloway was hospitalized for "concussion-like symptoms," and his fight with Brian Ortega was scratched. Now, **perhaps unsurprisingly**, the theory is rising to the surface that perhaps Holloway's concussion was caused by a severe weight cut.

While some people blame the fighters for "unprofessional" behavior, the truth is much bigger than that. Like so many things in boxing, drastic weight cutting is a known and common issue, yet the state commissions and sanctioning bodies by and large haven't implemented policies to help mitigate the problem.

The issue has not only continued but escalated. In both boxing and MMA, fighters frequently miss weight, sustain concussions, and have kidney failure. It's also often tied to performance enhancing drug use. To those with medical backgrounds or experience around combat sports, they know these connections are not coincidence.

Finally, one organization is taking it upon itself to try to make more significant changes. The California State Athletic Commission (CSAC) recently held a meeting with representatives from each of the four major sanctioning bodies in boxing (WBC, IBF, WBA, and WBO) to discuss extreme dehydration and rapid rehydration in the sport, and the dangers therein.

CSAC Executive Officer Andy Foster spoke with me by phone about the background of the meeting, their 10-point plan, and what the commission is trying to accomplish. “I had some hypotheses and I turned out to be wrong,” Foster said. “I thought weight-cutting was primarily an MMA problem. I was wrong. It’s *more* of an MMA problem, but my data shows it’s a boxing problem. We’ve had 19% of every athlete that we weighed here in California over the last couple of years put on more than 10% of their body weight back in the next day. Almost half put on 8% or more.”

The CSAC has examined 754 boxers over the last couple of years in 377 fights. In California, fighters are not only weighed at the weigh-in, but upon their arrival at the venue on fight night. Of the 754 boxers in the study, 164 gained back more than 10% of their body weight during that time frame.

“The biggest offender weighed in at 125.8 and the day of event weighed 149.2. It was an 18.6% change,” Foster said. “A welterweight weighed 173.4 the next day [on fight night].”

Foster elaborated on what the percentages actually mean. “Over 8% is not good. Anywhere from 10-15%, doctors recommend potential hospitalization to rehydrate.

“If you’re more than 10% above where you were the day before, you’ve dehydrated to make the [contracted] weight. So you gained a weight class (higher than the one) designed for your safety.”

The connection between severe dehydration and brain trauma is well documented. **Research shows** that water loss in the body is tied to an increase in the volume of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). CSF is a fluid surrounding the brain that serves as a cushion. CSF is also present in the ventricles, a network of cavities located inside the brain. While mild dehydration leads to a decrease in ventricular volume, severe dehydration results in an increase in ventricular volume. As the volume of the ventricles swell, they apply increased pressure to the cells lining the outer layers of the brain. Damage to those cells can result in subdural hemorrhaging, or bleeding between the surface of the brain and its outermost protective layer. This appears more likely to occur when the ventricles are enlarged.

A major part of all fighters’ training camps is sparring, which of course includes at least some unavoidable blows to the head. If this is combined with dehydration, it spells trouble.

“I think this weight-cutting shortens careers,” Foster said. “I think the reason heavyweights can go longer than lightweights, historically in their careers, is because they don’t have to do all this crazy weight-cutting all the time.

“I have medical data on this: drastic weight-cutting is not good for your brain. And getting hit in the head is not good for your brain. So when you combine those two things… I can’t do anything about getting hit in the head. That’s part of boxing. But we can make it somewhat safer.”

Of course, the crux of the issue is that many fighters are trying to squeeze down to make the lowest possible weight they can, regardless of safety, in order to have a size advantage over their opponent. It's understandable. A fighter's job is to defeat the opposition any legal way they can. And boxing has allowed weight-cutting—including drastic cuts—to remain legal, with no real repercussions for the fighters who may miss weight or rehydrate a dramatic amount overnight. The only common penalties for missing weight are the loss of the opportunity to fight for the world title (if it was on the line); the loss of the world title if the fighter who missed weight was the champion; and the offending fighter being forced to pay their opponent and/or the commission.

In short: the heavy fighter can simply pay to be bigger than the contracted weight.

Typically, the fight takes place anyway, though the opponent usually has the right to choose to cancel the bout since there was a breach of contract. The injured party often doesn't want to be denied the payday (for himself or his team) or the opportunity, particularly after enduring eight weeks of arduous training camp, often away from his family, preparing for the contest.

Keep in mind, too, that when this decision must be made, it is the fighter's decision on paper; however, managers and promoters are always involved, and sanctioning bodies and television networks frequently have money on the line too, so one has to consider how much pressure the boxer is under to go through with the fight.

The CSAC is striving to use the data it has collected over the years, combined with medical research showing the connection between severe weight-cutting and an increase in danger of concussion and brain trauma, to work together with the sanctioning bodies to establish more effective rules surrounding the weight issue. This will, Foster hopes, make the sport safer for the athletes whose already brief careers are often being cut even shorter by dangerous weight cuts combined with inevitable blows to the head.

The 10-point plan details specific recommendations for combat sports taking place in the state of California. It includes making the second weight check an official thing for 10- and 12-round bouts. Said Foster, "Our 10-point plan document [asks], 'What's the lowest weight class that you intend to compete in?' Then the doctor has to sign off on that. That's one of our proposals."

Foster and team will discuss their 10-point plan at the CSAC meeting on July 24. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, later in July, Foster will be bringing specific recommendations for ratings changes to the conference of the Association of Boxing Commissions and Combative Sports (ABC) for a vote.

Foster also serves as the chair of the medical committee of the ABC. The committee is recommending a **ratings criteria** change with the organization that states that a second-day weigh-in be required for 10- or 12-round championship bouts, and that boxers cannot exceed 10% of their contracted weight; a minimum fine for missing weight on either day of at least 10% of the offender's purse that shall go to the other boxer; and that any rated boxer who exceeds the contracted weight for any championship bout should be removed from the ratings of all sanctioning bodies and won't be ranked in that weight class until he/she makes weight in that division in a future bout. If the ABC chooses to adopt the proposal, the changes will take effect on January 1, 2019. According to Foster, the authority for this proposal comes from the Muhammad Ali Act, which first and foremost protects the rights and welfare of boxers.

The ABC is the owner of the Unified Rules of Boxing, which are enforced by the majority of state commissions in the country. It's the closest thing to centralized organization that the sport of boxing has. If the ABC approves of the proposal put forth by the medical committee, it could mean significant changes for the sport and how it deals with dangerous weight cuts.

In Foster's experience, most fighters are able to safely make the weight limit of the division they're fighting in based on their body frames. For those boxers who do miss weight or have difficulty making the limit, Foster asked, "Is it really because they can't make that weight, or is it because they haven't done the right things to make the weight? I know these guys are active, but it takes a certain amount of discipline from a diet perspective.

"I don't see a lot of guys who can't make a weight class based on their frame. It's usually the fact that they get near the fight and they're 15 to 20 pounds above where they need to be, and they try to suck the rest of it out through water."

Former world champion and certified sports nutritionist **Chris Algieri agrees**. He believes dramatically limiting the amount of water a fighter drinks in the weeks leading up to the weigh-in is the wrong way to cut weight. An athlete needs to be hydrated to perform at his or her best, and in fact **Algieri recommends** drinking more water in the weeks leading up to a fight in order to lose weight the healthy way: cutting body fat rather than water weight.

If more effective rules are implemented in boxing, nationally at least, it may result in fighters learning to make weight via safer and healthier methods. Making weight will always be a part of combat sports, but with education and better oversight, it can be done much more safely.

As Foster stated, "It's not a boxing politics issue. If we make it so that this is just now part of boxing, we're protecting our athletes better."

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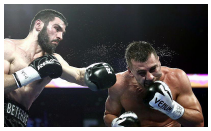

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