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In Their Corner:

Creating More Opportunities for American Boxers

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Subcommittee on Workforce Protections
Committee on Education and Workforce

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I. Introduction

Chairman Mackenzie, Ranking Member Omar, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections, thank you for the opportunity to express my support for *H.R. 4624*, otherwise known as the *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act*. My name is Lawrence Epstein. I am Senior Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of UFC, the world's premier mixed martial arts organization.

I have worked in combat sports for nearly three decades-- first as a private practice lawyer representing clients across combat sports on regulatory issues, fighter contracts, and media rights. And now as an executive with UFC, where we have spent many years and invested billions of dollars building the sport of mixed martial arts, fueling a global industry that has benefited thousands of athletes, local communities, and fans.

I deliver these remarks as a proud boxing fan. My father first introduced me to the sport in its golden era in the 1970s and 80s, when I watched American legends of the sport like Muhammed Ali, Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Marvelous Marvin Hagler. Their bouts weren't just fights; they were cultural events that brought people together and captured the attention of the sports world. In that era, the best boxers fought frequently against each other, achieving crossover appeal with everyday Americans.

II. The Decline of Professional Boxing in America.

However, it is undeniable that professional boxing in America has suffered a steady decline in popularity and status in the United States, as the sport's evolution and growth have been stifled, reducing opportunities for boxers and undermining the fan experience.

Boxing has regressed into a niche sport that has lost the mass popularity it enjoyed for decades. Boxing's growth has been undermined by the inability of promoters to regularly put on

the best possible bouts amidst squabbling with the sanctioning organizations over “mandatory challenges.” Fans often must wait years to see the best fight the best and then lose interest when the promised bouts don’t materialize.

Boxing’s media infrastructure is crumbling. HBO, Showtime, and ESPN have all exited the sport. The financial foundation that once supported boxing has eroded, leaving fewer opportunities for everyone except the handful at the very top.

Sadly, professional boxing has become a “going-out-of-business sale.” Boxing may be the only sport in the world where billions of dollars have been spent and there is nothing to show for it. The "mega-event" model might work financially for a few fighters at the top, but it's not sustainable for the sport's growth, and it has contributed to the problems boxing faces today.

III. The Root of the Problem

Boxing’s decline in popularity can partially be attributed to the sport’s fragmented structure, presided over by the four main governing bodies that sanction high-level professional boxing matches.

In 2000, the very first finding of Congress in passing the *Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act* (*‘Ali Act’*) was that boxing’s challenge was the absence of a “*private sector association, league, or centralized industry organization to establish uniform and appropriate business practices and ethical standards. This has led to repeated occurrences of disreputable and coercive business practices in the boxing industry, to the detriment of professional boxers nationwide.*”¹

¹ Sec. 2(1) of Pub. L. 106-210.

IV. **The Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act is the Solution**

I believe the Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act (H.R. 4624) is the solution boxing needs. *H.R. 4624* will create space for new, innovative models called **Unified Boxing Organizations (UBOs)** that will offer boxers more freedom, choice, and opportunities. Allowing the UBO model would solve the problem of boxing's historical lack of a "centralized industry organization" as identified by Congress twenty-five years ago.

UBOs would be an alternative. UBOs would not replace sanctioning organizations. UBOs would be a separate, parallel system that would produce additional boxing events and give fighters more choice and opportunities to compete.

H.R. 4624 lets fighters decide. Boxers would have the freedom to choose which of the two systems – the sanctioning organizations model or the UBO model – is best for them.

UBOs would give boxers more control over their careers and increase competition for their services. Under the UBO system, boxers will have freedom to sign competitive multi-year contracts, which enhances their ability to better plan their careers and secure long-term, stable income. Boxers will have freedom to negotiate contracts with UBOs to maximize their value outside of the traditional sanctioning bodies system. More bidders for boxers' services will lead to higher purses.

UBO boxers would have additional health and safety protections. The *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act* closes a thirty-year gap on health and safety standards. For the first time, Federal legislation would provide a detailed list of medical tests required to measure a boxer's overall health condition and fitness to compete safely. The bill also requires more licensed physicians and ambulance units present at each event and provides accident insurance for injuries sustained during training.

The *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act* preserves the original *Ali Act*.

H.R. 4624 does not change one word in the *Ali Act*, which would still apply to promoters and boxers who choose to compete under the sanctioning organizations system.

The *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act* will benefit all boxers by requiring:

- First-time national minimum payment of \$150 per round for all professional boxers, which prevents fighters from being exploited. Uniform standards are needed, as six states have minimums less than \$150 per round.
- First-time national minimum of \$25,000 of health coverage for injuries - higher than the current minimum in 43 states.

The *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act* requires UBO's to have high integrity standards, including:

- Comprehensive anti-doping testing program that would ensure no boxer has an unfair advantage over his or her opponent.
- Strict anti-betting policies to safeguard the integrity of competition.
- No fees charged to boxers for placement in the rankings or the right to participate in championship matches.

V. UFC is the Gold Standard in Health and Safety in Combat Sports

It is also very important to note that my company, UFC, already has extensive experience operating a best-in-class combat sports organization. For more than two decades, we at UFC have worked to become the gold standard for athlete health and safety in combat sports, continually reviewing and strengthening our health and safety protocols to protect the athletes who compete in the Octagon, and we would certainly bring our expertise to bear in managing a UBO.

For nearly fifteen years, UFC has partnered with the Cleveland Clinic to advance brain injury research in professional athletes, including identifying early indicators of CTE and post-concussion syndrome among combat sports athletes. UFC has been the largest financial supporter of the Cleveland Clinic's Professional Athletes Brain Health Study, the largest study of professional athletes exposed to repetitive head trauma. Athletes in the study also receive free, ongoing assessments of brain health and function, including MRI scans.

UFC also maintains the most effective and progressive anti-doping program in professional sports—one which is independently administered with no-notice testing, both in and out of competition, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year.

Finally, a foundational element of UFC's health and safety system is the UFC Performance Institute, a state-of-the-art MMA training and development facility that supports hundreds of athletes from UFC and other sports all-year-round in the areas of strength and conditioning, nutrition, and physical therapy.

UFC operates three such facilities around the world in Las Vegas, Mexico City, and Shanghai, with other locations potentially opening in the future.

VI. Conclusion

The *Muhammad Ali American Boxing Revival Act* does not impose a heavy-handed solution across the entire boxing industry. Instead, it simply provides boxers more choice and opportunities. If the sanctioning model is beneficial for certain boxers, they can choose to stay in that system. If boxers prefer the alternative UBO model, they can freely decide to enter into an agreement with a UBO. Fighters can decide their own career path.

We respectfully urge Congress to enact *H.R. 4624*, as we believe it is the best legislative remedy to help restore boxing to its rightful place of prominence in America and ignite growth of the sport across this country.

I want to thank the Subcommittee again for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.