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## The Ethics of Knowing the Score: Recommendations for Improving Boxing's 10-Point Must System

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# The Ethics of Knowing the Score: Recommendations for Improving Boxing's 10-Point Must System

John Scott Gray and Brian R. Russ

## Abstract

The sport of boxing has been a mainstay in urban settings since the late 19th century. Although there have been changes in the sport to enhance safety and justice, the 10-Point Must scoring system continues to be problematic. Given the amount of money at stake at the highest levels of professional boxing, as well as the health of the fighters themselves, this paper will argue that professional fighting has a moral obligation to bring their judging system into the 21st century. Ethical principles such as justice, autonomy and nonmaleficence demand this revision, as the current scoring procedures are systematically problematic. In this article, recommendations are made to improve the 10-Point Must System, including an argument for open scoring.

## Keywords

Boxing, Ethics, Open Scoring, Cognitive Bias

## The Scope of the Problem

While Joyce Carol Oates might rightly describe boxing as a sport both in crisis and “a sport *of* crisis,” professional boxing has long been ridiculed for poor decisions stemming from the wide range of judges’ scores that can result from a fight going the distance (2006, viii). A recent pay-per-view fight between Gennady Golovkin and Canelo Alvarez was called a draw, after one judge had the fight won by Golovkin 115-113 (seven rounds to five) and another judge had the same fight 118-110 (ten rounds to two) for Alvarez, amounting to an astonishing five round difference in scoring.

Another example of a scoring discrepancy can be found in the 2004 Courtney Burton vs. Emanuel Augustus match, which prompted an investigation. ESPN play-by-play man Joe Tessitore during the fight even warned those watching at home, “the Michigan judges have been known to come up with some curious results.” Augustus landed 71 more punches than Burton (302-231) over the ten-round fight that legendary ringside commentator Teddy Atlas unofficially scored 97-92 (eight rounds to two) for Augustus. Surprisingly, Burton won the fight via a split decision, with one judge seeing the fight nine rounds to one in favor of Burton (99-90); another had it seven rounds to

three for Burton (97-92), and one judge, having some connection to reality, scored the fight 94-98 for Augustus. Atlas yelled after this decision, "This is a travesty here.... This is a disgrace.... This is what's wrong with boxing. This is what chases our great fans away from this great sport." It is difficult to fathom how that wide a disparity could exist in the scoring of a boxing match.

Experiments have been conducted to make the judges' scores public by announcing them at various times during the fight itself, so that the fighters involved are at least aware of how the judges see the fight DURING the fight and have the ability to adjust their game plans accordingly. Those experiments have not been adopted throughout the professional boxing ranks, leaving boxers to guess how they are doing (or more clearly, how the judges THINK they are doing) during the fight itself. Knowing how one is doing in the eyes of judges may have a great effect on a corner's tactics as the fight progresses, certainly including the risk/reward analysis of whether a fighter should continue and fight aggressively or throw in the towel. The present article will examine the current state of judging in boxing, including ethical concerns related to issues of justice for the boxers and explore suggestions on how to improve the current judging system.

### **How Boxing is Scored**

Scoring a boxing match is a difficult task that requires a high degree of cognitive complexity. Professional boxing matches are comprised of three-minute rounds for men and two-minute rounds for women, with championship bouts lasting up to 12 rounds. During each round, judges are observing data on a second by second basis. Not only are the boxers exchanging blows that last in the tenths of a second, but they are also making subtle, nuanced maneuvers to gain offensive and defensive tactical advantages. While scrutinizing the action, judges are determining a winner of each round using the 10-Point Must system. A judge awards 10 points to the winner of each round and nine points to the loser; however, boxers can also lose points for getting knocked down or by fouling an opponent. Adding to the complexity, judges must utilize convoluted criteria to decide who won each round by considering four distinct elements of a boxing match: clean punching, effective aggression, defense, and ring generalship.

In the first dynamic, clean punching, a judge will evaluate the number of punches that a fighter lands in the scoring area (the forehead to the waist, not including the arms or the back) and compare it with the opponent. It is generally accepted

that harder, cleaner punches are weighted more than softer punches. To illustrate, if Boxer A lands 15 power punches in a round and Boxer B lands 20 jabs, the judges will generally award the round to Boxer A. The judges have the difficult task of determining when a punch is causing more damage, which is often left open for subjectivity. Secondly, effective aggression is a measure of efficiency, and boxers are rewarded for aggressive behaviors only when they are viewed as effective. If a boxer is moving forward, throwing punches, but not landing clean blows, a judge would not award them extra consideration for a round. Conversely, if two boxers are landing punches at a similar rate, but Boxer A is acting in a more aggressive manner, the judges will likely award the round to Boxer A. The third element, defense, is scored in a similar fashion. If Boxer A is vastly superior at defense than an opponent, Boxer A should receive more consideration in a round. That being said, judges will reward a fighter for defense only if it sets up a boxer's offense. If a boxer is simply avoiding punches and not attempting to counterpunch, judges will often award the round to the boxer's opponent.

Finally, ring generalship is the degree to which a boxer implements a strategy to control the action of a bout. For example, some boxers utilize a defensively oriented counterpunching style where they attempt to make their opponents miss punches so they are open to a counterpunch, while other boxers employ a volume punching style where they attempt to overwhelm and tire their opponents with the number of punches they throw. If a counterpuncher was boxing a volume puncher, whoever implemented their style more successfully in the bout would be awarded more consideration by the judges. Since there are a multitude of styles and strategies that can be utilized by boxers, judges must be knowledgeable about each approach and be able to identify when an approach is being successfully implemented.

At the end of each round, the boxing judges will individually consider all of the data they collected and determine a winner. This decision is made in a matter of seconds; and generally, the judges do not reveal their scores until the end of the fight. This is called closed scoring and is nearly universally used in boxing. In the rare instances when open scoring is utilized, judges reveal their scores in between rounds to inform the boxers, their teams, and the audience of the actual score in the bout. Most often, the scores are not announced following each round; but, instead, there are periodic updates, usually following the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> rounds. Although open scoring has received a fair amount of discussion and has been implemented on occasion by different boxing commissions and sanctioning bodies, the boxing community has resisted universal implementation.

### **Judging the Judges: What's Wrong with the System**

Although the 10 Point-must system is universally used in professional boxing, it is also problematic with notable issues that need to be addressed. Firstly, the scoring system is inherently based on a subjective interpretation of the four scoring criteria by each judge. Although there is a general understanding of how the scoring criteria are operationally defined, there are still missing elements necessary to objectively score a boxing round. For example, it is unclear whether the four criteria should be weighted the same, or if clean punching should be prioritized. It is also unclear whether a boxer can win a round in which he or she lands fewer blows but has a superior aesthetic to the blows that he or she lands. In other words, do boxing judges have the ability to judge a boxing round on artistic principles? Secondly, the judges do not reveal their scores until the end of the bout, preventing the boxers from making adjustments during the boxing match. Knowing the score is a fundamental aspect of nearly every sport, and this knowledge dictates how athletes make competitive decisions. Without this information, participants are simply flying blind. Finally, the judges have an excessively sophisticated task to complete in a short amount of time, due to the degree of information occurring in each round and the complexity of the scoring system. Therefore, judges rely on what Tversky and Kahneman (1974) identified as cognitive heuristics or mental shortcuts that allow for individuals to make complex decisions quickly to score each round. Although these shortcuts allow for greater efficiency, they are also prone for cognitive biases.

Cognitive biases emerge from quick decisions, and judging in boxing is no exception. For example, a judge may have a preconceived notion of who will win a bout they are scoring, and as the boxing match takes place, the judge may experience a confirmation bias. According to Plous (1993), a confirmation bias is where an individual favors new information that confirms a preexisting belief. If a judge believes that Boxer A will beat Boxer B based on previously viewed performances of said boxers, then the judge will recognize the clean punches, effective aggression, defense, and ring generalship of Boxer A more than Boxer B, even if Boxer B was objectively superior to his or her opponent in these categories. Similarly, a judge may prefer a particular boxing style, and therefore, score more favorable for boxers who exhibit those styles in a bout. To illustrate, if a judge prefers a counterpunching style more than a volume puncher, the volume puncher will have a more difficult time being viewed objectively in the areas of effective aggression and ring generalship by said judge, ultimately, putting him or her at an unfair disadvantage in the fight. In a similar way, a judge may be misled by a representativeness heuristic during a fight. Tversky and Kahneman (1974)

explained that individuals make decisions by selecting options that best represent their stereotyped idea of what they are trying to identify; and therefore, if a boxer is representing those traits most associated with winning a boxing match, a judge may award him or her the victory.

Suppose that a hometown boxer has a fan-friendly aggressive style, exudes confidence, and is the current champion in his or her weight division. He or she may receive louder applause from the audience, lift his or her hands in the air, and shake their heads in contempt when hit by a clean punch (all signs associated with winning a boxing match), and therefore, lead a judge to score him or her more favorably. However, these characteristics have little to do with the criteria for scoring a round in the 10-Point Must System and could lead a judge to incorrectly assess the dynamics of the boxing match. Furthermore, it is often believed that judges will give close rounds to the current champion, simply because they hold the title.

Questions regarding the reliability and validity of subjective scoring in sports is not unique to boxing. In the 2004 Olympic Games, Yang Tae-Young, a South Korean gymnast, was demoted from a gold medal to his bronze due to a 0.1 judging error on his parallel bars routine. The error was discovered shortly after the event, and unfortunately, the decision was not able to be reversed due to the requirement that all scoring disputes be made before the end of the competition. The repercussions of the decision extended beyond the gymnasium. The South Korean government has awarded Olympic medal winners a monetary incentive consistent with the type of medal won; and therefore, Yang has received a decreased monthly stipend since the incorrect decision. Although this loss of income is undoubtedly an issue of justice, the justice concerns in boxing should be prioritized as the risks in boxing are inherently greater. Not only are there justice concerns related to the financial impact of the scoring of a boxing match, there are concerns related to the health of the boxers. Therefore, resolving these fundamental issues is paramount.

### **Finding an Ethical Framework**

Given the amount of money at stake at the highest levels of professional fighting, as well as the health of the fighters themselves, this paper argues that professional fighting has a moral obligation to bring their judging system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ethical principles such as justice, autonomy, and nonmaleficence demand this revision, as the current scoring procedures are systematically problematic.

It is important to begin this section of the paper by pointing out that we do not wish to engage with the important and ongoing conversation in the literature regarding whether or not boxing is or can ever be a moral undertaking. Whole shelves have been written about this topic, and we do not intend to amend them here. To take just one example, Robert Simon's landmark book *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport*, says of boxing that it involves the use of physical force with the intention of causing harm to another as an act of violence, so henceforth "boxing surely is ethically problematic," (2010, 209). These positions, while worthy of consideration, are set aside as we believe our question is a significant one regardless of whether or not the sport of boxing is itself ethical. We instead have turned to a practice within the sport itself, attempting to continue the type of reform that C. D. Herrera discusses in their "The Moral Controversy Over Boxing Reform." Herrera reminds us that boxing has already undergone massive changes in its thousands of years of history, for boxing was originally "staged in sandpits, with no time limits or weight categories," (2002, 165). While the sport has evolved with changing social attitudes, Herrera reminds us that as a sport its core has remained the same.

Instead of defending boxing itself, this paper sets the focal point of our analysis on the way in which many matches are decided. Taking autonomy as our first principle to consider, we recognize that some have argued that simply allowing boxers to compete fits with this principle. Still, for an action to truly be autonomous necessitates an atmosphere of informed consent. In the case of boxing, informed consent is often understood to apply at the signing of a contract agreeing to fight, including the setting of various rules for the fight, such as the size of the ring and the weight of the gloves. We assert, however, that every new round offers an opportunity for the fighters at hand to re-affirm their assent. For this assent to be an informed consent in line with the respect of each fighter's autonomy, it only makes sense that the fighter has a sense of how they are doing.

One must remember that the fighter has the most at risk when a professional fight takes place. The fighters risk life and limb in pursuit of making a living for themselves and their families, as part of an industry designed for the entertainment of fans and the personal profit of promoters. This risk is compounded when one considers that most professional fighters emerge from poor urban environments with boxing serving as one of the few paths out they see for themselves and their families. From a Utilitarian perspective, one might argue that allowing fighters and fans the chance to know the judges' scores during a fight might lead to less exiting matches or less tension concerning the events in the ring; yet, that concern pales in comparison to

the risk/reward that the fighters themselves face. While as outsiders, we might view the proceedings as entertainment, it's a sport and those competing within that sport should know the parameters of the altercation. Imagine a football game in which we did not know how many points a touchdown was worth and could not know until after the game was over. Knowing the score of the football game does not make that game itself less exciting. Given how much both football players and boxers risk in terms of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), there is a moral obligation to provide them all the relevant information so that they determine how they should proceed. This assertion follows from both utilitarian and deontological perspectives, for Kant would appear to support the argument that purposely withholding information from relevant parties cannot be universalized and furthermore risks using the boxers as mere means toward the entertainment of others. These moral principles not only give us reasons to be disturbed by how judges scores are kept secret but also increase our concerns about how judging biases sometimes give fighters an unfair decision.

A moral right to have access to the information of how well a fighter is doing may be drawn from an alternative reading of John Rawls' two principles of justice, especially as it is expressed in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001). In his second principle, Rawls asserts that those in the Original Position should only accept social and economic inequalities that are to the benefit of all. I assert that a similar rule can apply to information, regardless of whether or not it slightly reduces the tension and resulting enjoyment of fans. During a bout, the system purposely withholds information from those who could be most directly impacted by possessing that knowledge, resulting in a situation that is certainly not to their benefit. A concert is no less enjoyable if one knows the set-list in advance, and the ninth round of a boxing match can still be dramatic even if we know one fighter is significantly ahead on the scorecard.

### **A Path Toward A More Just Judging System**

Due to the highlighted justice concerns inherent in boxing scoring, it is recommended that all levels of boxing commissions implement one primary and two secondary measures to improve the 10-Point Must System. First, open scoring is recommended to enhance transparency for the boxers during the bout. Boxers should have the right to know how the judges are scoring a fight, so they can make informed decisions about when to box more aggressively and risk their health for a greater chance of winning and when to box more defensively and protect their physical health. Boxers also should be made aware of instances when a boxing strategy is not being

rewarded by the judges, so they can adjust their approach to obtain a more favorable outcome.

To further illustrate the benefits of open scoring, readers should consider the 1999 boxing match between Oscar de la Hoya and Felix Trinidad. In a highly anticipated bout between two undefeated fighters, Felix Trinidad defeated Oscar de la Hoya after de la Hoya switched from an aggressive strategy to a defensive approach late in the fight. Thinking that he had won enough rounds early in the fight, de la Hoya elected to forfeit the final few rounds by focusing solely on defense in order to ensure that Trinidad would not knock him out late in the bout. What de la Hoya did not know was that the judges' scores were very close, and that he did not have a sufficient lead to give away the late rounds. Trinidad ended up winning the fight and keeping his undefeated record. It is impossible to overlook the possibility that if de la Hoya knew he was in a close fight, he could have continued to fight aggressively and potentially defeat Trinidad.

Another primary example supporting open scoring can be found in the 2018 heavyweight championship fight between Deontay Wilder and Tyson Fury. Going into the final round, Wilder needed to knockdown Fury and secure a 10-8 round to obtain a draw and retain his title. Fury, not knowing the score, left himself open for a devastating punch from Wilder that put him on the canvas. The extra point from the knockdown led to a 10-8 round for Wilder and produced a draw. If Fury had been aware that losing the final round 10-9 would have guaranteed him the victory, he could have been extremely cautious and not only won the bout but also avoided the extra damage from Wilder's vicious punch. Clearly, knowing the score would have had an impact on a fight that ended in another controversial decision, with one judge scoring it 115-111 for Wilder, and another judge scoring it 114-110 for Fury, and the decisive judge scoring it a draw at 113-113.

Although there are many examples supporting open scoring, the general boxing public has been opposed. In a 2018 article, Sares demonstrated a lack of support to change the current system to open scoring in his survey of boxing insiders. The arguments presented predominately supported the experience of the boxing public, as it was postulated that open scoring decreases drama and promotes cautious behaviors when a boxer is decisively winning a bout. At the core of these arguments is the concern that open scoring will change the essence of boxing by making it less exciting. That being stated, one could argue that requiring boxers to wear padded gloves decreased the excitement of the sport; however, few would suggest that bare knuckle boxing has a place in modern sport. Open scoring should become a similar

phenomenon simply due to our current understand of brain trauma. Under open scoring, boxers will be able to decide when to protect themselves from unnecessary punishment. Altering a sport for the safety of the participants should never be viewed as unacceptable.

There were also concerns noted by Sares (2018) that open scoring puts boxing judges in a dangerous position if an audience disagrees with their decision. However, the article failed to recognize that the boxers are putting themselves inherently at risk, and therefore, should have the right to be able to decide if they want to know the score throughout the fight. One suggestion to mitigate the risk to the judges would be to provide scoring updates only to the boxers and their trainers. By excluding the audience from knowing the score, not only would the safety of the judges be intact, but also the dramatic announcement of the final scores would remain. Since the justice issues noted in the present article are directly related to the boxers, it is irrelevant if the audience is aware of the scoring prior to the end of the fight.

A secondary recommendation is that the definitions of the four boxing scoring criteria (clean punching, effective aggressiveness, defense, and ring generalship) be revised and enhanced to produce more objectivity among the judges. Indeed, simply by clarifying if the four criteria are to be scored equally or if one or more criteria should receive stronger consideration by the judges, the scoring would be more reliable and valid. With this in mind, further improvements could be made by exploring the interpretation of the scoring criteria guidelines among the population of licensed boxing judges. This exploration could uncover additional discrepancies that could be addressed through further clarification of the scoring definitions.

A third recommendation, which could be used in accordance with open scoring, suggests that boxing increase the number of judges involved in scoring a fight. Instead of having three judges on three of the ring's four sides, boxing could instead have five judges, with one on each side of the ring and a fifth watching a closed-circuit camera angle from directly above the ring. This would help prevent times when the angle of an altercation in the ring prevents the majority of judges from seeing the action. In addition to having five judges, the final decision could involve having the two most extreme scores (high/low) excluded from the final decision.

Finally, it is recommended that boxing judges take steps to manage the cognitive biases that may impact the objectivity of their scoring similarly to the way qualitative researchers manage their biases. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers should use active trustworthiness strategies to address their implicit biases during an inquiry. One pertinent strategy that could be used by boxing judges is to

write an epochè or an account of their personal beliefs and experience that could impact a particular judging assignment directly prior to judging the bout. By exploring and identifying ones' implicit biases, they will increase awareness, and hopefully, bracket or suspend the preconceived presuppositions of how a boxing match will be determined. It would be more productive to identify and address potential biases as opposed to simply striving for objectivity without an established plan.

### **Conclusion**

We conclude that these revisions to the process of judging boxing matches allow for the event to transpire in a more transparent and ethical manner. Imagine if a baseball umpire did not announce whether a pitch was a ball or a strike until after a batter strikes out or walks. Not only would batters be unable to adjust their approach during the at-bat, but the pitchers would have no idea on where to throw their pitches. Although this idea seems ridiculous, not knowing the score during a boxing match is considered normal. Boxers are unable to adjust their strategies or tactics throughout a bout, and the audience is often left puzzled as to why the judges' verdict is different from their own perception of who won a bout. Through scoring reform, boxing will begin its transition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Without changing the nature of the sport itself, boxing could instantly be made more ethical and just.

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