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## **Fancy Footwork: How Impresario Of Fight Events Evades Regulation**

**Toughman's Dore Shuffles Formats To Keep State Officials Off-Balance**

By **JOSEPH T. HALLINAN**  
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On what turned out to be the last night of her life, Stacy Young thought she would do something fun. The 30-year-old mother of four drove to the Sarasota, Fla., fairgrounds, laced on a pair of boxing gloves and entered a Toughman fighting contest.

"She really surprised me," Chuck Young says of his wife, who stood 5-foot-6 and weighed 235 pounds. He watched from the stands as she lasted one round, then another. But in the third, a punch from her female opponent dropped her to the canvas, ending the bout and leaving her woozy.

"All of a sudden, she just fell back and started having seizures," says Mr. Young. "And that was it." His wife lapsed into a coma and never recovered.

Some 1,500 people paid \$15 each to watch the fight that killed Mrs. Young, even though Florida has been trying since 1988 to ban Toughman tournaments. But the impresario of this popular form of combat entertainment, Arthur P. Dore, has built a business, now called AdoreAble Promotions Inc., by deftly evading state regulation.



**Arthur P. Dore**

Twenty-four years ago, Mr. Dore founded the boxing equivalent of karaoke: Toughman contestants -- often out of shape and in poor medical condition -- climb into the ring and slug it out. Mr. Dore's skill in ducking oversight has been critical to the success of his brutal fight shows, which take place in cities and towns around the country and can gross \$20,000 or more in an evening.

States, rather than the federal government, are the main regulators of professional boxing. But Mr. Dore says that avoiding state supervision is sometimes as simple as labeling Toughman contests "amateur" events. "Then we don't have the jurisdiction of the boxing commission," he says.

Amateur boxing is governed by USA Boxing, based in Colorado Springs, Colo. But that private organization takes no responsibility for Toughman, either. In fact, USA Boxing bans Toughman participants from its sanctioned amateur bouts.

Florida bans fighting matches involving "a combination of skills." So Toughman events in that state, including the one in which Mrs. Young fought, allow only standard boxing punches -- no kicking or karate chops. That is enough to dodge the ban, says Florida's boxing commissioner, Chris Meffert. His agency oversees conventional professional fights in the state but doesn't regulate Toughman.

In other states, including Illinois, Toughman contestants are specifically told to kick their opponents. This transforms the event into "kick-boxing," which most state boxing commissions consider outside their purview.

In some states, Toughman simply holds bouts without informing the boxing commission. Idaho Athletic Commissioner Jon Vestal says he knows this, but lacks the resources to go after Mr. Dore. "We're run by a group of volunteers," says Mr. Vestal. "Myself, I'm a full-time Realtor and appraiser." Other states report similar manpower problems.

Mr. Dore's latest strategy in Michigan and elsewhere is to hold fights at Indian casinos, where states typically have no authority to regulate fights. At least eight states, including Florida, have tried to outlaw Toughman and its imitators, without much effect.

Mr. Dore, 67, has gone from running a struggling contracting company in his home town of Bay City, Mich., to presiding over a nationwide entertainment empire he says has generated more than \$50 million in revenue since its start. During an interview at his office in Bay City, he leans back in his chair, black cowboy boots propped up on his desk. He doesn't deny that he tries to sidestep state regulation, because he believes the rules are wrong.

He argues that Toughman, which puts on about 100 fighting contests a year, leads to fewer deaths than professional boxing. Mr. Dore won't say exactly how many fighters have died from Toughman-related injuries since he founded the event. But eight are known to have died since 1981. During the same period, at least 14 professional boxers have died after competition in the U.S. The comparison is of dubious value, however, because there isn't a reliable count of how many individual bouts there have been in either category of fighting.

State regulators say that professional boxers better appreciate the risks they are taking and that conventional professional fight promoters make a greater effort to monitor the health of their boxers and provide high-quality treatment for injuries. Moreover, Toughman deaths appear to be escalating, with four of the eight known deaths, including Mrs. Young's, having come in the last year.

Mr. Dore says his events are as safe as they can be and that many of his detractors are simply jealous of his success. He says he feels bad for participants who have been injured or killed. But he makes no apologies. "If they want to get their ass kicked," he says, "it's their right."

The first Toughman event was held at Mr. Dore's former high school in Bay City in 1979. Two years later, Dore & Associates Contracting Inc. filed for bankruptcy-court protection. But by then, Mr. Dore was traveling the country, promoting Toughman bouts. He often went to small, economically depressed towns -- "wherever we feel we can make a buck," he said in a 1983 deposition. People want to see bloody combat, he says in an interview. "It sells tickets, and that's what we do."

Toughman events typically involve 40 fighters, weighing up to 400 pounds apiece. They square

off in a two-day elimination match, usually held on Friday and Saturday nights. Each fight consists of three one-minute rounds. The winner of a local match often gets \$1,000. If a fighter advances to the Toughman "world championship," which is usually carried on pay-per-view television, he stands to win \$50,000.

Unlike sanctioned amateur and professional bouts, where opponents' weights are rarely separated by more than 10 pounds, Toughman competitors can be outweighed by 100 pounds or more. Weight disparities increase the odds of a knockout, and that, say fans, is what they pay to see. "I like sitting up close and watching guys beat the crap out of each other," said Kevin Close, 36, while watching a Toughman bout recently at a county fairground in Kalamazoo, Mich.

Boxing officials generally agree that Toughman fights pose extraordinary dangers to competitors. "I believe that the Toughman bouts are probably the most dangerous that we have had here in Nevada," says Dr. Margaret Goodman, a neurologist and ringside physician who heads the Nevada Athletic Commission's medical-advisory board. She has served as a doctor for both Toughman and mainstream professional boxing in her state. But Toughman hasn't been permitted to hold a fight in Nevada since at least January, when the state's athletic commission asked Mr. Dore to withdraw his application for a promoter's license.

Many Toughman contestants, Dr. Goodman says, are novices who unknowingly face vastly more experienced fighters, sometimes with devastating results. The contestants are afforded almost none of the protections normally accorded amateur and professional boxers. They are seldom insured, there sometimes aren't physicians on hand at events and prefight medical certificates are sometimes left incomplete.

The Detroit News and Free Press in May reported on deaths and injuries related to Toughman and the inadequacy of medical care.

Toughman's popularity has gained steadily, especially since 1992, when Mr. Dore signed a deal with Viacom Inc.'s Showtime Entertainment Television to carry fights nationwide on a pay-per-view basis. That deal was followed by the emergence of Toughman's first real superstar, a 330-pound bald-headed sensation from Alabama named Eric "Butterbean" Esch.



Eric Esch

"It didn't take him long to become a household name," says Tim Lueckenhoff, administrator of the Missouri Office of Athletics and president of the Association of Boxing Commissions, a national group. "Everybody in boxing was talking about Butterbean."

Showtime dropped Toughman in 1996, citing unfavorable news reports about the competitions. At different times since then, News Corp.'s FX cable channel and In Demand, a pay-per-view joint venture majority-owned by an arm of Comcast Corp., have televised Toughman bouts. Currently, Toughman doesn't have a national television contract.

As Toughman's fame grew, imitators appeared, and Mr. Dore has gone to court to protect his franchise. One suit filed in 2000 in federal court in Fayetteville, Ark., resulted in a judicial order permanently blocking rival promoters from putting on an event called Rough Neck. In an affidavit in that case, Mr. Dore's daughter, Wendy, who helps run the business, said that advertising expenses for Toughman over the years had topped \$8 million. Today, the Toughman trademark is owned by AdoreAble Promotions, which Mr. Dore

says is owned by his eight children.

The lack of state oversight allows Toughman to dispense with the most basic safety precautions. At Mrs. Young's bout in Sarasota, there was no physician ringside, even though at least one is required by Florida law at all professional boxing matches.

Mr. Dore, in an interview, said there was a physician's assistant on duty at the Young fight. A paramedic team was elsewhere in the arena. In an interview before Mrs. Young's death, Mr. Dore said a physician isn't necessary at a fight. "Really, an EMT [emergency medical technician] is a hell of a lot better to have in case anybody gets hurt anyway," he said. "You know, doctors don't know what they're doing." At another time, though, he said there is always a doctor on duty at Toughman fights.

In February, without informing the Illinois boxing commission, Toughman held a bout in Peoria. After Illinois Boxing Commissioner Sean Curtin learned of the event, he sent two investigators to Toughman's next venue, in Rockford, Ill. But when the pair arrived, they learned that the fighters had been told they could kick their opponents. The occasional kick that night put the event outside the jurisdiction of the state's boxing commission, which doesn't regulate kick-boxing. The inspectors had no choice but to let the show go on, Mr. Curtin says, adding, "That was a real tricker."

By avoiding regulation, Toughman has been able to slash costs and boost profits. Professional boxing promoters generally must post bonds to assure fighters get paid and that fans will get their money back if events are cancelled. The promoters also have to buy various insurance policies and obtain state licenses that can cost \$1,000 or more per fight. Mr. Dore pays for none of these. He also doesn't have to pay taxes to state boxing commissions that typically run about 5% of gross ticket sales.

Mr. Vestal, the Idaho athletic commissioner, figures Mr. Dore saved about \$5,000 at an unregulated Toughman event in Boise last year. That tournament resulted in the death of Art Liggins, a 44-year-old train conductor and father of four.

Like Idaho, the state of Louisiana has conceded that at times, Toughman has operated without any oversight. During the early- and mid-1990s, the Louisiana boxing commission was nearly insolvent. "We let them do their own thing," Leonard Miller Jr., then the commission's chairman said of Toughman in 1995. He made his statement in a deposition that was part of a lawsuit brought in Lafayette Parish state court by Sonya DePue, the widow of Bobby Troy DePue, a Toughman contestant who died after a bout in 1994.

Mr. DePue's opponent was Terry Vermaelen, then a Baton Rouge, La., locksmith. At the time of the fight, Mr. Vermaelen said in a 1996 deposition, he had competed in 56 amateur fights and had won three Louisiana Golden Gloves titles. He said he had discovered in previous Toughman competitions that referees allowed fighters to use a variety of techniques that would be illegal in sanctioned boxing. One was holding the back of an opponent's head with one hand while hitting him with the other.

As soon as he entered the ring, Mr. Vermaelen said, he could tell Mr. DePue was in over his head. "You could just see it in his eyes," he said. By the second round, Mr. Vermaelen said he was able to punch at will, holding the back of Mr. DePue's head with his right hand and pummeling him with his left. Finally, he testified, Mr. DePue turned to the referee and said, "I've had enough."

The referee stopped the match, and Mr. DePue's brother helped him from the ring. They made it just a few feet before the fighter collapsed, Sonya DePue says in an interview.

The following day, Mr. Vermaelen said in his deposition, he got a call at home from a Toughman promoter. "I wanted to tell you before anybody else had a chance to tell you," the caller said. "The kid died last night."

In January, Toughman held an event at the Soaring Eagle Casino in Mt. Pleasant, Mich., which is owned by the Saginaw Chippewa tribe. At the time, Toughman was under a cease-and-desist order issued by the state of Michigan. But Mr. Dore, who worked as ringside announcer at the event, says that order didn't apply on Indian land. "That's a sovereign nation," he says.

For that event, which In Demand televised nationwide on pay-per-view, Toughman invited fighters from across the country. Scott Wood, 31, divorced and shampooing carpets for a living, rented a compact car and drove 1,400 miles to the casino from San Antonio, Texas.

But Mr. Wood was in no condition to fight. His systolic blood pressure, according to a copy of his incomplete prefight physician's certificate, was a sky-high 170. Anything above 150 disqualifies a fighter from sanctioned amateur boxing.

Soon after Mr. Wood's final bout, he began to lose control of his body, says his opponent, Jason Pyles. Mr. Wood was shaking and stuttering, and his eyes were bulging out of their sockets, Mr. Pyles says. After 16 days in a coma, he died.

After Mrs. Young's death in Florida in June, AdoreAble issued a new set of guidelines for Toughman contests, saying it would more closely hew to the rules of the states in which its events are held.

But just within the last year, Mr. Dore has resisted statehouse efforts to tighten those rules. After the Toughman-related death last September of 26-year-old Michael Kuhn in Texas, state Rep. Jim Pitts introduced legislation that would have banned Toughman in Texas. But the legislation was defeated, Mr. Pitts says, after an influential lobbyist and former speaker of the house, Gibson Lewis, intervened on Toughman's behalf.

Messrs. Dore and Lewis confirm the latter's lobbying mission for Toughman. "That's the American way, isn't it?" Mr. Dore says.

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