

Joe Cortez's 20/20 System

By Caryn A. Tate on August 22, 2017



"When these judges told me that, I thought I'm on to something." (Isaac Brekken/AP)

You and 11K others like this.

When Cortez first started as a professional referee in 1977, he had dual duties: refereeing and judging simultaneously...

When was the last time you watched a fight that resulted in a decision you didn't agree with?

If you watch much boxing, it probably wasn't that long ago. And Hall of Fame referee and judge Joe Cortez has a solution.

When Cortez first started as a professional referee in 1977, he had dual duties: refereeing and judging simultaneously. At that time, there were two judges who sat ringside while the referee served as the third judge from inside the ring. Cortez performed this dual role for ten years, and became accustomed to his in-ring view to determine which punches landed cleanly. According to the Association of Boxing Commissions and Combative Sports (or ABC), which is responsible for the broadly implemented rules and criteria for boxing, clean punching is the number one criterion for scoring a round in boxing. Hence, being able to determine this criterion as accurately as possible is of the utmost importance for judges. The other three criteria (effective aggressiveness, ring generalship, and defense, in that order) should only come into play if the clean punches landed are similar in number by both combatants. These remaining three criteria are often easier to determine, as they aren't generally as difficult to see.

"The referee has the luxury of being in a better position because you have to position yourself

at the center of the fighters at all times,” Cortez explained. “For me it was a lot easier to score a round than it would be for the judges sitting outside the ring because they have angles where they’re not able to see—because of the ropes, the lights, or the fighters themselves blocking the punches that were being thrown.

“So after 10 years [of this dual role], I was able to perfect myself a lot better in judging than the normal judges because of the position I was in. Watching boxing throughout the years, I would say to myself, Being a judge outside the ring, as opposed to being a judge inside the ring, it’s almost like day and night. I could see a lot better being in between two fighters.

“So what’s the best position I could get besides being a referee? Next best position to see the fight would be raising myself a little higher. I got that from watching fights on television. I could see almost all the punches that are being thrown, because they’ve got cameras up above looking down, and you’ve got better angles. Less obstruction of the punches that are being thrown. I can see everything!”

With his personal experience in mind, and an eye towards improving the sport he loves, Cortez began to formulate an idea. “I said to myself, Why not try to do this with real judges and raise them up higher like the view you get [from] the lens of a camera? So I got six judges. I measured to see which is the best position, and I found that 8 feet from the eyeball to the ring apron was the perfect position to see all the punches that are being thrown [and landed] by both fighters.”

Cortez explained the exact process of his judging study, and it’s clear that he put a lot of thought into ensuring the true results were captured. He accounted for human error and simple flukes.

“I got three 12-foot ladders,” Cortez explained, “and I put them up on three different sides of the ring, right over the three regular judges sitting at the standard position. Three judges on the bottom, three on the top. I got two fighters and myself in the ring as a referee. And I got six clickers. These clickers were given to the judges, and I told them, ‘I want you to click not when there’s a connect—I want you to click when a punch is thrown and you don’t know whether that punch connected or not.’

“So we did the first round, and when that was completed I called time. I went to all six judges, the ones on the top first. ‘How many punches did you miss?’ ‘One.’ The other judge—how many did you miss? ‘Two.’ ‘How many did you miss?’ for the third judge. ‘One.’

“Judges on the bottom. Same position, only lower [elevation]. ‘How many punches did you miss?’ ‘Seven.’ ‘Nine.’ ‘Twelve.’

“We did that round after round, for four consecutive rounds, but changing the positions of the judges. So the judges on top came down to the bottom positions, and changed them up for four different rounds. And the results were identical. No more than two punches were missed on the top, and anywhere from 7 to 19 punches were missed on the bottom.

“The judges’ comments were, ‘Oh my God, this is the best position I’ve ever seen. It’s 80% better from here than the standard position.’ Other judges said, ‘I’m impressed. This is where I see the best.’ And other positive comments like, ‘This is what we need in boxing.’ When these judges told me that, I thought, I think I’m on to something.”

Cortez’s straightforward but highly effective judging concept has begun garnering some much-needed attention in the industry. “I gave a seminar in Mexico City, and somebody asked a question about why there are so many controversial fights, with so many professional, experienced judges? I explained my study, and [World Boxing Council president] Mauricio

experienced judges. I explained my study, and [World Boxing Council president] Mauricio Sulaiman's eyes opened wide and he said, 'Joe, I love the idea, I want to start doing this study in Mexico with preliminary fights so we can get this thing going. Let's meet about it.' We met about it, we've spoken about it and I'm just waiting for him to make his move now."

Cortez has also planned for arguments against his study, right down to practical issues that are likely to arise. "So the other question we might get, on the negative side, is: if you have the judges sitting up higher, aren't you gonna obstruct the view for the fans at ringside? So I came up with a solution for that as well. And that is [clear] acrylic tennis referee chairs. Something similar to that. We can be more sophisticated but that would be more costly, which would be added to the expenses [of the fight]. So I say why don't we just do it with an acrylic tennis referee chair.

"The reason why they put the umpires in tennis up higher, and why is it that baseball and football commentators are up high in their booths looking down? Because they can see all the plays from up there. You can't see it from the ground level. So it's simple. You move the position of the judges and raise them up higher, and you're gonna get better results."

When asked what he hopes will result from his study, particularly as it relates to Sulaiman's interest and the potential interest from other sanctioning bodies, Cortez said, "You have more draws in 4 and 6 round fights than longer fights. Once they do a study they'll see how many draws are in 4 or 6 round fights compared to the same length fights the previous year, and you'll see you won't have as many draws as you did before with the judges able to see more punches that are being landed. They'll see they'll get better results, then they'll go to 10 round fights, and so on. And little by little, you're gonna see [fewer] draws and controversial endings. Then maybe they can do it with NABF title fights, Intercontinental title fights, and graduate to the world championship level, hopefully with all of the sanctioning bodies. It's not gonna happen overnight but they have to start the study somewhere."

Mauricio Sulaiman of the WBC responded to my inquiry regarding this topic with the following statement:

"The WBC has found with great interest the proposal by iconic ring official Joe Cortez of having the judges be placed in an elevated seating as that would provide a clearer vision without the current normal problems that judges have with low chairs, photographers in their way, referee blocking partial images, etc..."

"There are several challenges for this and the WBC is in the process of having a pilot program proceed for a study. The challenges are:

- How to climb the high chair if official has any impediment...
- How the fans will be affected by the judges obstruction of the vision...
- Logistics in communications and delivery of scorecards

"We must look into any idea that has the intention of making boxing better."

Another area of increasingly questionable accuracy are the punch stats which are tracked by CompuBox operators during bouts and shown to television viewers. Cortez believes that, again, the apparent lack of precision by CompuBox is directly related to their seating positions at ringside. "CompuBox [operators] sit at ringside at the same level as the judges. So I don't believe the CompuBox numbers are as accurate as they should be for the same reason. They are not at a high position. They're at a lower, standard position, so they're missing a lot of punches themselves. So there are gonna be a lot of punches they show as connected, but technically, they were on the gloves.

"So, being that the punch stats are not as accurate, maybe they could start by putting them in

so, being that the punch stats are not as accurate, maybe they could start by putting them in a room, watch it on a TV monitor, and see how their punch stats compare to what they got in person. Because they'll get the better angles with the cameras, looking down, and they'll be able to see a lot clearer."

It's abundantly clear that Cortez is passionate about this study purely because he loves the sport, and like any of us, it hurts when a controversial decision occurs that upsets and disillusion fans. "You're baffled by these [controversial] decisions, like, 'What were they watching? I saw that guy get hit with so many punches!' And you are 100% right, I tell the fans, because you saw what the judges there couldn't see because you had a better angle with the cameras at home. You saw more punches that were missed by the judges at ringside.

"If we don't change this with judges we're gonna continue to have controversial fights. If I was a manager or promoter, I would want my fighter to have judges on the upper position. Let me get a decision scored by judges who missed [fewer] punches that were thrown than those who miss so many punches.

"I've done my homework for this study," Cortez continued. "Being a veteran in boxing for over 60 years of my life, I leave no stone unturned. I'm trying to create something different in boxing so that it makes boxing better, it brings it up to a better level so the judges can enhance their skills—so the fans at home will say, I'm more satisfied now, making the fighters and the fans happier with the outcome of fights. I think this is something that's definitely a good start. I've been doing this for so many years, I want to make sure the fans get a fair shake and we don't have any more black eyes in boxing with these controversial decisions."

The veteran referee, who officiated top level professional fights for 35 years, is also well-known for his catch phrase, "I'm fair but I'm firm!" So well-known, in fact, that he registered the phrase as a trademark. If anyone knows how to market a slogan, it's Cortez, and this proposed change to judging that he's so passionate about is no exception.

"Me being fair but firm, I say, If you want to be fair but firm with scoring fights, [use] Joe Cortez's 20/20 system. I call it that because I created the idea, and you can see 20/20. You go by that, the fans get a fair but firm decision."

Special thanks to Jack Reiss for his help with the facilitation of this interview.

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