

KING, CHAMP SLUG IT OUT IN COURT

By DEVLIN BARRETT

Shock-haired boxing promoter Don King went toe-to-toe with lawyers for Lennox Lewis yesterday over whether the heavyweight champ should be stripped of one of his belts for backing out of a fight.

Lewis is suing King over the contract he signed for his rematch with Evander Holyfield last year for the undisputed heavyweight title.

The opening round of the trial began in Manhattan federal court, where Holyfield — the former champ — had a ringside seat to watch his promoter slug it out with his old ring nemesis.

Lewis, who is to testify today, agreed in the contract to fight the World Boxing Association's top-ranked challenger — at the time Henry Akinwande — if Lewis beat Holyfield.

Lewis' lawyers say the contract contains an escape clause that allows him to fight someone else if the WBA agrees — while King argues that he must fight the current No. 1 contender, John Ruiz.

Lewis is now set to fight Michael Grant, ranked No. 5 by the WBA, in Madison Square Garden April 29.

If Judge Lewis Kaplan rules in favor of the British boxer, the Grant fight will likely be for the undisputed heavyweight title.

But if the judge declares King the courthouse victor, the Grant bout will be for two of the three championship titles.

Outside court, Holyfield took a swipe at Lewis for evading Akinwande.

"The Real Deal" Holyfield said Lewis is putting his own selfish interests before the good of the sport.

"He thinks he's bigger than boxing and that's just wrong," said Holyfield. "The

honor of the game is to have yourself positioned where people can't duck you."

Holyfield, who had a chunk of his ear bitten off in an infamous fight with Mike Tyson, said he came "to support Don King."

"But the big thing is, the rules are the rules," said Holyfield.

Lewis' lawyer, Scott Gelfand, argued in court that King knew any requirement for a bout with Akinwande was "a deal-breaker" for the Lewis-Holyfield rematch.

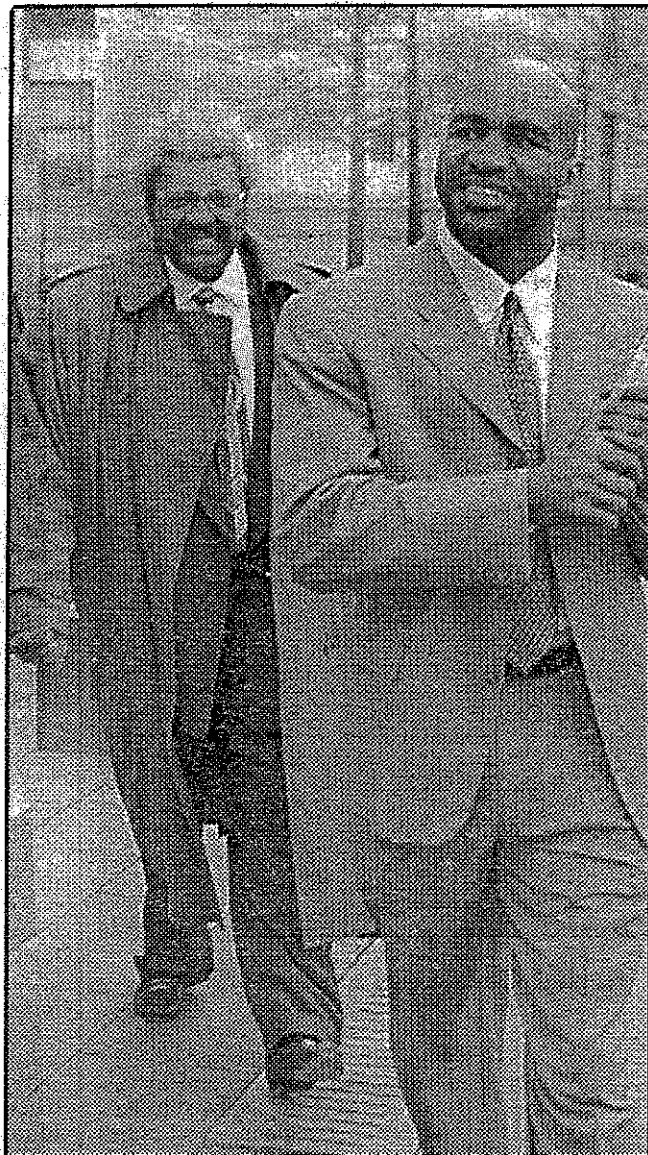
Gelfand said King backed off his demand for an Akinwande bout after an angry phone call with Lewis' promoters.

But Gelfand took some early pounding from the judge, who accused the Lewis camp of "tap dancing" around the issues in the case.

"You are busy throwing up all kinds of baloney on a great many subjects," fumed Kaplan.

King sat in the back of the courtroom reading a philosophy book before slipping out as the afternoon session began.

He may testify as early as tomorrow.



IN HIS CORNER: Former champ Evander Holyfield leaves Manhattan federal court yesterday with Don King. Holyfield said he had come to support his promoter, who is being sued by Lennox Lewis. N.Y. Post: W.A. Funches Jr.