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INSIDE STORIES

An on-the-ropes event punches back

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Joe Higgins is looking to next year. Jamie Austin is not, understandable given the way his bout with Matt Silver turned out.

Those were upshots of the Long Island Fight for Charity, held last week after getting sanctioning from a local chapter of USA Boxing, the sport's amateur governing body. The event, which raised about \$100,000 for charities in its first two years, had been on target to raise another \$100,000 when it was shut by the New York State Athletic Commission hours before fists were scheduled to fly in November. It was revived after organizers reached an agreement with Higgins, president of USA Boxing Metro. That resulted in shifting of some pairings to match ages and weights, as well as creation of surreal, parallel universes in which celebrity judges held up gag signs rating bouts while officials collected but did not tally scorecards collected from the USA judges.

Left hanging was the annual pairing between Austin, vice president of his family's travel agency, and Silver, owner of Ultimate Class Limousine. It was the surprise headliner two years ago and comic relief last year (they fought in inflatable sumo wrestler suits). We wondered whether this meeting would come off, given their weight difference. But Austin tipped the scale at 201 pounds, making him eligible to fight the well-into-the-twos Silver. How was not disclosed; we got a "you're-on-the-right-track" look after suggesting gravity boots.

In the ring, Austin employed a rope-a-dope-minus-the-rope strategy. Silver, breathing as if he trained at a Lamaze class and not at Farmingdale's Powerhouse Gym, countered with King-Kong-on-the-Empire-State-Building, getting in a few good swats before the three-rounder mercifully ended. We sneaked a peek at the USA judges' cards, and let's just say that if it were an election, nobody would be calling for a recount.

Higgins said he was surprised at the quality of the bouts. "I'm going to think of ways to make it better," he said of the event.

While we expect Austin to remain on the organizing committee, his days in the ring are over - at least if he's a son who keeps his promise. During the fight, Eileen Austin held up a sign that said,

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"You promised this would be your last fight." Jamie Austin signed it and reaffirmed his vow in talking with us. "I am retired," he said.

Financing in the fast lane

At a time when his industry is struggling, David Jacobson is prospering - which tells you that when it comes to selling cars, his GrooveCar Inc. is the better mousetrap.

"In the past six months, we've gotten a much larger piece of a much smaller pie," Jacobson said about his company, which matches credit union members and dealers in an effort to make car buying a smooth and consumer-friendly process.

How big a piece? Jacobson said GrooveCar processed 40,000 applications last year, up from 15,000 in 2004 and 5,600 in 2003. He estimated GrooveCar will have a hand in more than \$2 billion worth of Long Island car sales this year, the company's sixth in business, as it moved from rented quarters in Melville to a larger building it just bought in Hauppauge.

Jacobson is a former automobile salesman, finance manager and dealership owner who also wrote a book, "Non-Confrontational Power Selling," that he says is used as a training manual for car sales representatives around the country. He describes GrooveCar as "a complete automotive resource and buying support program for the credit union community, predominantly, but also valuable to everyone on Long Island ... a one-stop shopping experience" in which customers can shop for a car with no haggling and get financing approval from a credit union without leaving the dealership. And if they don't belong to a credit union, the customers can join one on the spot. GrooveCar's network includes 20 local credit unions and more than 250 car and motorcycle dealerships.

"The buyers like the rate, they like the credit union, they like the simplified process in buying a car," Jacobson said. "The dealers like it because they can give more competitive rates," as well as a somewhat steady stream of customers into their showrooms.

And the credit unions? "For us, it's been tremendous," said Nick Laceterra, president of Hauppauge-based People's Alliance Federal Credit Union. "It's a way for us to get new members. ... We're getting a lot of car loans. It's been quite successful for us."

Doing business the old-fashioned way

In an era of PDAs, BlackBerrys and Internet cafes, the statistic is stunning: 55 percent of the companies in the Hauppauge Industrial Park with fewer than five employees connect to the Web using dial-up, even though an assortment of broadband options is available. That's what a survey by the Hauppauge Industrial Association found. "I'm surprised," said Bruce Germano, LIPA's vice president for retail sales and HIA first executive vice president, "in the sense that people need to understand that there is capability that can help them. We have to get everybody to understand that it's a core business strength."

The HIA began the education process at a breakfast meeting last week. At one point, the audience was asked how many had wireless networks in their homes. About two-thirds raised their hands, leading to the conclusion that the people who needed to hear the presentations stayed home.

Maybe they overslept when their wind-up alarm clocks didn't go off.

THE TICKER

SAVVY TOT. Fresh from signing a contract to coach the New York Jets, Eric Mangini and family chowed down with his new bosses at the Garden City Hotel, where the story was not what he ate (the veal chop; Jets owner Woody Johnson had salmon), but how Mangini's son, Jake, 2, wowed the staff with his football knowledge. Assessment: He may not have learned his ABCs, but he know his Xs and Os.

A RINGING SENSATION. Embarrassing moment of the week: A meeting of the Association for a Better Long Island at Blumenfeld Development Group in Syosset was interrupted by a ring from a cell phone of Audiovox founder John Shalam. Our sources tell us it took Reckson Associates chief executive Scott Rechler to show Shalam how to put his phone in "silent" mode. Now we know why Audiovox got out of the cell phone manufacturing business.

WEARING 2 HATS. Howard Weitzman is not only in charge of overseeing Nassau County's finances, but apparently its hatcheck rooms as well. The comptroller sent out an e-mail last week noting that left behind at his inauguration ceremony this month was a woman's beige winter coat, while missing was a beige man's raincoat. Call his office if you can help reunite coats and owners. No embarrassing questions will be asked. At least, not by him. We make no promises.

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