

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sports, Parks & Rec Boxing Returns To St. Croix, But Why Did It Leave In The First Place?

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The Virgin Islands Department of Sports, Parks & Recreation (SP&R), under the leadership of Commissioner-designee Pedro Cruz, has revived its boxing program on St. Croix after eight years of the sport disappearing from the roster of options for the island's youth.

Cruz made the revelation in a far-ranging interview with *VI Consortium* last week.

The department's boxing program resumed operations on Monday, Feb. 9 at the Estate Profit community center, where it had long been housed, and will be headed by Feliciano Cintron, who was the coordinator for the program well over a decade ago.

When asked why the St. Croix District boxing program had been out of commission for so long, while the sport appeared to be thriving in the St. Thomas-St. John District, Commissioner Cruz, who has been on the job for about one month, said he did not know why the program was "out off" and could not speak to the decisions that were made by the predecessor, St. Claire Williams.



Sports, Parks & Recreation

resumes boxing program on St. Croix at community center in Estate Profit

However, he said he was happy that the sport was back.

"I am interested in having the kids practice and exercise their preference sport, so I gave orders to Mr. Cintron to coordinate and organize and tell me what is necessary to have this program start over again," Cruz said.

But, while the SP&R boxing program had been offline, other independent boxing clubs on St. Croix say they had been fighting for the sport to once again have a presence on the island and for boxers training on St. Croix to compete in local, regional and national competitions.

At the center of the fight has been Ghazi Abdulghani, president of the non-profit St. Croix Sportsman Club (SCSC) located in Orange Grove, Christiansted.

He told *VI Consortium* he believes he and his counterpart in Frederiksted, Simeon Cobb of the Youth Boxing Club, is being "stonewalled" from gaining membership into the Virgin Islands Boxing Federation (VIBF), the only recognized governing body for the sport in the territory.

When asked why he believes this to be so, Abdulghani, who has been at the helm of SCSC since 2012, said at first he thought it was a personal attack on him.

"I used to think it was a personal issue they had with myself and my gym, but there's another gym in Frederiksted, the Youth Boxing Club, and they treat them the same," he said, adding, "It has everything to do with St. Croix not getting anything and St. Thomas getting everything."

But VIBF officials in St. Thomas are calling foul on Abdulghani's claims, saying that it's not a "St. Thomas-St. Croix thing." They say they have been working diligently behind the

scenes for eight years to get a first-class boxing program re-established on St. Croix.

VIBF President Jose Tony Rosario said St. Croix's SP&R boxing program phased out, not because it was formally shut down by government officials, but due to a lack of participation from local coaches. He also said youngsters enrolled in the boxing program were not being properly trained by the coach, who was Cintron at the time.

"[The coach] wasn't training and he won a trip to come to St. Thomas for the Caribbean Games and those kids were not in shape, and those kids were getting hurt," Rosario said.

During that tournament, Rosario said officials stopped each fight the St. Croix boxers participated in, and after speaking with the youngsters, officials came to realize "those kids were never, ever close to supposed to being in that ring because they could have gotten seriously hurt."

He continued, "[St. Croix's] boxing program did not fail because of us, you know, it failed because the kids stopped attending. After a while, when a coach or somebody is not doing the right thing, what happens, they stop coming. Maybe you don't care because those are not your children, but they are somebody's children, and if those children get hurt, it's our [the VIBF] responsibility and Parks & Recreation for letting a child go into the ring who was never supposed to be there."

Following that incident, Rosario said, the VIBF decided it would not "acknowledge anything that Cintron does. Nothing."

Noting that the incident took place back in 2005, Rosario said that Cintron, who he described as a skilled and knowledgeable boxer, even calling him "a good fighter," could



St. Thomas Sports, Parks &

Recreation boxing program, headed by Julian Jackson

"If the [new] commissioner says he wants to start [boxing] again, I applaud him for that," he said. "I am willing to give [Cintron] a chance. I am a man of God; if [Commissioner Cruz] wants to give him a chance, I'll give him a chance. Once he can listen and adhere to the rules, I don't have a problem with that. The problem we had with Cintron is that he needs to change his ways if he's going to deal with children."

When the de Jongh administration took office in 2007, Rosario and boxing great, Julian Jackson, VIBF vice president and SP&R boxing coordinator for St. Thomas, said they encountered significant roadblocks from the administration when it came to securing financing to employ the right person to head up boxing in St. Croix.

That person they had been lobbying for, Rosario and Jackson told *VI Consortium* in a telephone interview, was first "Sugar" Ray Seale and then, in more recent years, Otoniel Ortiz. They said both men are prolific boxers from St. Croix who they believe had both the skill and the temperament to train the island's new generation of boxers.

"We had been into the administration countless times," he said. "We [the VIBF] have had a leased property on St. Croix, all we needed was the government's help."

He continued, "Julius Jackson, John Jackson, we sat with the governor and they promised us. We went in there, not about the boxing program for St. Thomas, but for St. Croix, and begging and imploring, 'We need to get St. Croix up and running'. And promises were made, but promises were never fulfilled."

However, after years of political wrangling, Rosario said the former governor "made it happen before he left." Rosario did not make clear, however, if funding, and how much of it, had been made available for the boxing program in St. Croix by the de Jongh administration.

In a brief telephone interview from California, Julius Jackson, Julian Jackson's son, told *VI Consortium*, "He [Governor de Jongh] said he would do his best to appropriate the funds for the position we were asking for to get a coach over there in St. Croix."

Rosario also said former Commissioner Williams "tried everything within his power to get the program running again. When he first came in, he really didn't know what was going on. Everything came from higher up."

Emails, Letters and More

As an independent club not associated with SP&R, Abdulghani is currently operating from a building leased by the VIBF and is using the Federation's equipment, along with other items on loan to him from SP&R to outfit his gym.

Abdulghani told reporters that after writing email correspondences, some dating as far back as Dec. 2012 -- 16 of which have been provided to *VI Consortium* -- and placing telephone calls to VIBF officials in St. Thomas about gaining membership in the VIBF and securing funding for St. Croix's boxers, he and Cobbs reached out to the Virgin Islands Olympic Committee to intervene on their behalf.

"We went to the Olympic Committee and asked them to mediate and the Olympic Committee asked us to write them another letter, meaning the Federation over in St. Thomas. We wrote them a letter and it came back refused. I asked the post lady what does this mean and she said they refused the letter," Abdulghani explained. See letter [here](#).

Rosario did not comment specifically on Abdulghani's returned letter.

In one of Abdulghani's emails addressed to former Commissioner St. Claire Williams and dated "September 23, 2014," Abdulghani wrote about the need to revitalize St. Croix's boxing program. Most significantly included on the list of recipients were Rosario; Julian Jackson; Angel Morales, VI Olympic Committee president; former Lt. Gov. Gregory Francis, and members of the 30th Legislature.

The full contents of Abdulghani's email is reproduced below (emphasis added):

Good Morning Commissioner Williams,

Firstly, we want to thank you for your participation in our grand re-opening and congratulate SP&R and USVI Boxing for putting on an exciting boxing event this past Saturday. Two positive steps for boxing two weeks apart. Boxing is making a comeback in the West Indies and the meeting hosted in Barbados earlier in was a major step in that direction.

With that said what plans does the Department and USVI Boxing have for St. Croix? USVI Boxing announced a gym opening in 2012 yet going on three years later nothing has come to fruition. In fact, there has not been a major event since 2006 and all of the popular Boxing In Paradise-which attracted international participation have taken place on STT. Furthermore a building was recently given to USVI Boxing, again on STT.

All funds appropriated for USVI Boxing are to be "equally divided" between the STX and STT/STJ Districts. In reality St. Croix is being shortchanged and the youth of the Big Island are missing out of the opportunities afforded by the program. Now more than ever our young people need mentorship, guidance and direction.

For this reason we ask SP&R, Property & Procurement & USVI Boxing for the following:

- An accurate break down of how monies are spent toward boxing on St.Croix***
- Details on how funds are awarded to gyms and availability.***
- Details on boxing and athletic equipment for boxing and availability.***

We await your reply and reply from USVI Boxing.

Thank you,

Ghazi

Based on that email chain, it did not appear that the former commissioner responded to Abdulghani's email. However, a response, also addressed to Commissioner Williams, was sent to Abdulghani two days later, on September 25, 2014, from Rosario's email account, containing a message written on official V.I. Boxing Federation letterhead and signed by VIBF vice president, Julian Jackson.

In his two-page response, Jackson listed a number of "inaccuracies that needed to be clarified" in Abdulghani's email, stating (emphasis added):

Mr. Abdulghani is not a member of USVI Boxing and has no authority to act on behalf of USVI Boxing. We are enclosing communications from The Olympic Committee, AMBC and USA Boxing to verify that Mr. Abdulghani is not associated with AIBA, AMBC or the VI Olympic Committee and cannot act on our behalf and therefore is not knowledgeable of any ongoing efforts by USVI Boxing to revive boxing in St. Croix of which there have been many in recent years.

And...

There have been several ongoing efforts to revive amateur boxing in St. Croix, including most recently a meeting with the Governor to secure a Recreation Coordinator for boxing through Sports, Parks and Recreation.

And...

Mr. Abdulghani is not privy to any ongoing negotiations by USVI Boxing on behalf of the revitalization of boxing on St. Croix. Furthermore he has made no official inquiry with USVI Boxing to be informed of ongoing efforts to revive boxing in St. Croix.

And...

We shared Mr. Abdulghani's concern for boxing to be active on St. Croix and have been lobbying for several years on how to ensure that the youths of St. Croix have equal opportunity as those in the St. Thomas/St. John District. However key to this happening is the placement of an experienced Boxing Coordinator in St. Croix. The Government of the USVI has not provided funding for this position in the St. Croix District. Efforts by USVI Boxing, to have this position filled, dates back to 2007 with the Virgin Islands very own Sugar Ray Seales. Several other qualified names have been offered to fill this position; however, due to limited funding it has not been filled.



St. Croix Sportsman Center

housed in VIBF building in Orange Grove

Of Jackson's response, Abdulghani told *VI Consortium*, "This does not address the very straightforward questions we posed to them."

In a recent email dated "February 2, 2015," Morales provided a response to Abdulghani regarding his club's membership in the VIBF. The full contents of the email are provided below (emphasis added):

Mr. Abdulghani,

I had a discussion with Mr. Rosario concerning how the Federation will address membership request, in particular clubs from St. X last week. He has assured me he will reply in writing outlining the steps the Federation will take in addressing the development of boxing, including club membership. As soon as the VIOC receives this correspondence we will get in contact with you and Mr. Cobb.

Regards,

A. Morales

In another unusual twist, Abdulghani told *VI Consortium* he has trained with Julian Jackson at his gym in St. Thomas. However, both Julian and Julius Jackson tell *VI Consortium* they have no knowledge of him ever training with them.

Show Me the Money

As for the funding St. Thomas' SP&R boxing program receives, both Rosario and Jackson said much of it comes from fundraising, personal donations, donations by private citizens, sponsorships and the like. Rosario said although funds have been appropriated to both the St. Croix and St. Thomas-St. John boxing programs through SP&R, they had not been released.

The *VI Consortium* contacted the Senate's journals department to identify funds appropriated to the SP&R boxing program in both island districts during the de Jongh administration. The information is being gathered, but had not been made available to *VI Consortium* as of press time.

Rosario said both his and Julian Jackson's passion and focus is children -- all of the children of the Virgin Islands. He said being a SP&R boxing coordinator entails much more than knowing the techniques of the sport.

"During the day, Julian goes to the schools, he does seminars, it's not just boxing. At the end of the day, he reports to the Federation -- 'how can we best fix this, how can we attack this'," Rosario said.

Rosario says he is working to bring the same kind of care to the St. Croix boxing program.

"They want to send athletes from the United States to come to the Virgin Islands and train -- world-class athletes -- to train here," he said. "St. Croix is ideal for doing that."

Although Cobb and Abdulghani's gyms are independent entities that can secure funding on their own through private or government grants, or by other means, Commissioner Cruz has pledged his full support of the men's efforts to raise the interest in boxing on St. Croix. He sees the benefit of them all working together.

To that end, Cruz said he has arranged a private meeting with Julian Jackson, Rosario, Cintron, Abdulghani and Cobb that will take place after his Senate confirmation hearing is held. The meeting is not open to the media.

"The intention is to have them understand what the Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation expects from them and what the VI Amateur Federation expects from them so that all of us can be members of the Federation and then we can have this inter-island competition and go and compete with other countries," Cruz said.

"My intention is to create a team, so that we will prepare our kids in the Virgin Islands to compete against other countries and do not have this sentiment of just competing between St. Croix and St. Thomas. The main goal is to prepare our kids and have them compete against other countries representing the Virgin Islands," he concluded.