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STATES OF GREAT: THE STARLET

And Now, the Biggest Entertainer in Entertainment

By Carlo Rotella

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Floyd Mayweather Jr., the welterweight widely regarded as pound for pound the best boxer in the world, is about as rich and famous as a 147-pound fighter can get these days. People who don't know anything about boxing beyond Mike Tyson and Muhammad Ali recognize him on the street (Who's that little guy with all the bodyguards?), although sometimes it takes an extra second or two. (It's that boxer who was on "Dancing with the Stars.") Mayweather, who used to be known as "Pretty Boy" and now answers to "Money," is famous, but he's not famous famous. He won't settle for that. He wants to be bigger than boxing today can make him.

"Boxing is Floyd's platform, but it's not a mainstream sport anymore," says Leonard Ellerbe, his manager. "To get into the mainstream, you have to do mainstream things." Mayweather has "elevated the brand and expanded the fan base" and become "an A-lister," as Ellerbe puts it, not only by winning all of his professional fights and earning a fortune ($50 million in 2007 alone), but also by dancing with the stars, palling around with 50 Cent and Mark Cuban, starring in a reality show on HBO, rapping, venturing into music production, promoting concert tours by Beyoncé and Chris Brown, waving the green flag at the Indianapolis 500 and appearing on TV talk shows. Ellerbe promises that more such dabbling is on the way, including movie deals and a "stimulation beverage." It is all part of what Mayweather and Ellerbe both refer to as

Mayweather's "ultimate goal" of turning himself into "a Fortune 500 company" and becoming "the biggest entertainer in entertainment" kind of like what the Joker has in mind in "Batman" when he says he wants his face on the dollar bill.

But Mayweather's notoriety and income still rest primarily on one increasingly esoteric talent: hitting and not being hit. Astonishingly fast, shrewd and confident, he's a sophisticated defensive technician who throws precise combinations and seems immune to fatigue. His opponents rarely extend him, and he trumped his one controversial victory (a decision over José Luis Castillo) by convincingly winning the rematch. At the age of 31, he has a gleaming record: 39-0 with 25 knockouts; victories over champions and former champions; and world titles in five divisions, from super featherweight (130 pounds) to light middleweight (154). Title belts have lost value as they have proliferated in the age of multiple sanctioning bodies, but still, Mayweather has collected a lot of them.

Raised in a boxing family, schooled almost from birth in the mechanics of winning a fight, Mayweather seems to have been destined to become a great boxer. He's not shy about comparing himself favorably to the best of all time. "No disrespect to Sugar Ray Robinson," he told me, "but was he undefeated? Did he win six titles in five weight classes?" Well, no, but Robinson, the welterweight and middleweight of the 1940s and 1950s who is generally regarded as the pound-for-pound king, won 175 fights (against 19 losses and 6 draws) in an era when boxers fought much more often and there were fewer titles and the weight classes were deeper and fewer. It's almost impossible for today's stars, for all their gaudy belts, to build up a record comparable to those of Robinson and his golden-age peers.

But having fought to the pinnacle of his declining profession and taken control of his career, Mayweather appears to be pursuing mainstream fame and money à la Paris Hilton more strenuously than he's chasing Sugar Ray

Robinson and all-time greatness as a boxer.

On the evening of March 30, Mayweather was lying on a bed in the back room of a trailer in a roped-off area outside Florida Citrus Bowl Stadium in Orlando. In the stadium, a crowd of nearly 75,000 roared as professional wrestlers staged titanic blows and falls amid laser shows, fireworks and loud music. The occasion was WrestleMania XXIV, and World Wrestling Entertainment's cameras and microphones were transmitting every engorged muscle, dire rasping pronouncement and stirring turn of fortune to more than a million pay-per-view subscribers.

In the trailer, the lights were down and an anticipatory hush prevailed. Recumbent, Mayweather talked about balancing boxing and extracurricular activities. "I'll be honest, boxing comes so easy to me I don't even think about it," he said. "I'm here to entertain. . . . Work is work. I'm gonna make a lot of money, but this is also a learning stage of my life. I'm learning different ways to promote." Pronouncing himself happy to be doing business with the hard-selling W.W.E., he smiled and stretched, affecting the manner of a cat who has just burped up a canary feather. Ellerbe, a chesty fellow with a shaved head, leaned in from the doorway to add, "Boxers have such a short window of opportunity to earn a living as boxers."

Tyson, Ali, Joe Louis, Jack Dempsey and other heavyweight champions had some harmless profitable fun appearing in pro wrestling shows, so why begrudge Mayweather the chance to do the same? He might even recruit wrestling fans to boxing. Boxing and wrestling are blood brothers, after all, sharing a lineage that goes back to the bare-knuckle era, when matches typically combined punching and grappling. The two amateur sports still have much in common, but the professional versions have evolved as polar opposites. Boxing wraps a veneer of showbiz around the craft of fighting, while pro wrestling wraps a veneer of fighting around the craft of putting on a show.

Mayweather in his gym in Las Vegas. Born into the family business of boxing, he grew up at the gym.
Finlay Mackay

There are good welterweight boxers to fight, and Mayweather the entertainer isn't fighting them. Even when he does deign to box, he has been taking big-money fights against relatively easy opponents like Oscar De La Hoya, who is popular and long past his prime, and the undersize, overmatched British scrapper Ricky Hatton. But "to be the best, you got to fight the best," as Shane Mosley, an elite welterweight, says. Mosley and other critics ask how Mayweather can call himself the best fighter, or even the best welterweight, when he has not fought even one of the current top men in his weight class. First among them is the no-nonsense Miguel Cotto, from Puerto Rico, who is unbeaten, too, but there's also Mosley, who's as quick and tricky and experienced as Mayweather, and there are others in what may be the sport's deepest division. Mayweather can require them to battle for the right to meet him, and Mosley concedes that "you don't knock him for trying to make a little extra money." But at some point his refusal to fight other top welterweights begins to undercut his claim to superlative greatness as a boxer, and the cachet of Mayweather's brand rests on that claim.

Mayweather, who made $25 million when he beat De La Hoya in 2007, had recently reached an agreement in principle to a rematch in September. De La Hoya, who tends to fade in the later rounds, does not have the speed or stamina to keep the pressure on Mayweather. Why fight Oscar again when Mayweather could prove he's the best by fighting the best?

Mayweather snorted in disgust and looked to Ellerbe, who stepped in close to me and said: “A fight has to make sense. The other guy has to bring something to the table.” In other words, the opponent must prove that he can attract a pay-per-view audience. “We’re the industry leaders,” Ellerbe said. “People are going to take shots at us, but it’s like if there’s a crap game and Floyd has a million dollars and these guys have $200, why’s he gonna play with them? How can Cotto say he has a fan base when he fights on pay-per-view and does 160,000 buys with Zab Judah at Madison Square Garden?” (HBO, which televised the fight, says that figure is low.) Mayweather sat up on the bed and said, “If Cotto’s such a big guy, why doesn’t he fight in Las Vegas?”

Our discussion of Cotto, who has already beaten Mosley, irritated Mayweather. Having abandoned his pose of smug feline ease, he remained sitting on the bed, reaching up to thump my chest with the back of his hand for emphasis as he refuted point by point the argument that he’s an overrated media darling who avoids guys who can beat him. Ellerbe chimed in urgently, leaning in from the other side to poke my arm. They wanted me to see the situation properly.

Having bought himself out in 2006 from Top Rank, his longtime promoter, Mayweather promotes his own bouts and owns in full what he earns in the ring. The most celebrated fighters of the past could not say that. From Louis the national hero to Ali the antiestablishment icon to Tyson the bankable bogeyman, they turned over the greater part of their earnings to promoters, managers and backers, took their lumps as directed and made a nice living while it lasted. Louis died broke; Tyson is working on it; Ali has hung onto a mere fraction of the profits he generated.

“We’ve established the model on how a boxer conducts his business,” said Ellerbe, who, along with the music promoter Al Haymon, helps Mayweather plot the course of his career. “Floyd is in control. He already paid his dues and fought who he had to fight. Now he can decide what he’s going to do.” De La Hoya, who not only promotes his fights but also owns The Ring, the venerable

boxing magazine, has similar autonomy. When Mayweather and De La Hoya fight, it's the only matchup of true free-agent stars in the sport's history. "I can write my own ticket in boxing," Mayweather said. "Money Mayweather like to be outside the box."

His opponent at WrestleMania, in a match billed as a showdown between the Biggest and the Best, was Paul Wight, a k a Big Show, a fleshy giant with a rumbling basso voice and a smooth skull like the dome of a statehouse. The W.W.E. listed Big Show at 7 feet and 441 pounds, equivalent to exactly three welterweights. If he wasn't quite that big, he was still enormous. He entered to his fake-bluesy theme song, wearing a one-strap singlet that made him look like a cave man in the "B.C." comic strip. Mayweather entered in character: swaggering, accompanied by black-clad bodyguards and Ellerbe, in a white suit.

The bout opened with a cat-and-mouse phase in which the boxer eluded the giant's lumbering rushes and countered with combinations. Even his mock punches looked shockingly crisp in contrast to the steer-killing blows the wrestlers had mimed all evening. Big Show finally caught Mayweather and worked him over at length, delivering a ringing slap to the chest, body-slamming him, mashing his exposed limbs and at times simply standing on him. Mayweather screamed pitifully while Ellerbe rushed around the ring apron, shouting, "He can't do that!" A couple of bodyguards jumped in to save their boss, but Big Show crushed them.

Mayweather (in chinchilla) and World Wrestling Entertainment's Shane McMahon at WrestleMania in Orlando, where Mayweather tangled with the wrestler Big Show (listed height: 7 feet). Leonard Ellerbe, the boxer's manager, walks behind.
Finlay Mackay

Just when all seemed lost, Mayweather seized a metal folding chair and beat Big Show to the canvas. Removing his right boxing glove with a flourish, Mayweather retrieved a gold-painted mock knuckle-duster from where it hung around the neck of one of his K.O.'d goons and used it to finish off his conveniently kneeling opponent. Outraged boos rolled down from the broader fan base that Mayweather, who had obviously enjoyed playing David as a heel, was trying to reach.

Mayweather's boxing pedigree would have been fairly common back in 1926, say, but it is exceedingly rare now. Floyd Mayweather Sr. led his younger brothers Roger and Jeff to the gym in Grand Rapids, Mich. "Floyd Sr. was, like, a troubled teen," Jeff says. "He was getting in fights, he beat up a teacher and got in trouble, and one day he went to the gym and fell in love with it. Roger followed him, then me. It became like a family business."

The three brothers acquitted themselves remarkably well in the ring. Sugar Ray Leonard, the great welterweight of the 1980s, who beat Floyd Sr. by technical knockout in 1978, describes him as "a very fast, smart, competent boxer who lacked power and had fragile hands. I remember the quickness and snap of his left jab." Roger, the best of the brothers, won a pair of world titles. Jeff won a minor super featherweight title. If they never did beat the very best, the Mayweathers mixed it up with some of the most accomplished fighters of

their time. “They never backed down from anyone,” Sugar Ray Leonard says. Now all three brothers work as professional trainers, passing on the craft to younger men.

Floyd Jr. grew up at the gym. His father says: “I used to take him down there when he was in the crib, and as soon as he was out of the crib, when he was in the baby chair, I had him putting his hands up. It was in the blood, shoulder rolls and all.” The shoulder roll is a punch-shedding move integral to both father’s and son’s defenses.

The son “almost didn’t have a choice,” Jeff says. “It was the only thing he knew, and people were praising him for it.” The boy took to boxing with a verve that promised greatness. Jeff says, “It was like watching a young Sammy Davis, a young Michael Jackson.” Floyd Jr. tore through the amateur ranks, compiling a record of 84-6. After the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, where he won a bronze medal after losing a disputed decision, he turned pro at the age of 19.

Roger permanently replaced Floyd Sr. as Floyd Jr.’s trainer in 2000. Floyd Jr. no longer speaks to his father. “He acts like he made me by himself,” Floyd Jr. tells me. “He left when I was 16” to go to prison on drug trafficking charges “and came back when I was 21, and he thought everything I had was his.” Floyd Jr. doesn’t speak to his uncle Jeff, either. “Not since 1999,” he says. “Put his hand in the cookie jar without me knowing. Then I found out.” Jeff says he did a lot of unpaid work for his nephew and had to cover his expenses.

The family drama of estrangements, intrigues and feuds will be at center stage in the run-up to Floyd Jr.’s rematch with De La Hoya in September. This time, De La Hoya is being trained by Floyd Sr., who promises that he has a strategy to beat his unbeaten son. Roger, training Floyd Jr., resents his older brother’s claims to have taught Floyd Jr. everything he knows. The hard feelings are real, but everyone involved also understands his role in selling a fight. The promotion for the first Mayweather-De La Hoya bout centered on “De La

Hoya/Mayweather 24/7," a reality show that aired on HBO on Sunday nights, after "The Sopranos" and "Entourage." Mayweather played the boastful jerk; De La Hoya brought birthday cake to his wife. Together they sold a record 2.4 million pay-per-view buys of the fight and, with the gate receipts and other profit, generated a record gross of more than $150 million. But, as Jeff points out, "the fight itself was horrible" mostly because Mayweather played it safe. "People thought it was close, but I wouldn't pay $60 to see that again. Your key to selling the rematch is the father. People are into that, and the media can build it up all over again."

Floyd Sr. agrees: "I know for a fact that fight ain't nothin' without me, Floyd Joy Mayweather." He accentuates every syllable of his name.

The boxer Floyd "Money" Mayweather Jr. wants to be a one-man brand.
Finlay Mackay

The Mayweathers play the showbiz game, but something harder and more darkly specialized moves beneath their mugging for the camera. They're craftsmen who have given and taken millions of blows in the ring, in the gym and beyond. Floyd Sr. and Roger have done prison time, and domestic violence has been a recurring theme in the family drama. Floyd Sr. was famously shot in the leg by another of Floyd Jr.'s uncles, his mother's brother, as he held the year-old Floyd Jr. in his arms. The accumulated effect of all those many doses of force has transformed these men. To watch Floyd Sr., who at 55 can still make the bags jump, is to become intensely aware of the resilient, much-pummeled skull beneath the leathery face, the lean frame and outlook singularly adapted to fighting. Roger has that same wolflike look. Jeff, who

attended college and has more meat on him, does not seem quite so starved and ready, but he shares with his brothers a quality of having been annealed by violence.

Floyd Jr., wearing shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, was in a nail salon in Las Vegas with his bare feet immersed in a tub of blue water, softening them up for a pedicure. His personal assistant, a young woman known as Vegas, sat in the next chair. Four bodyguards lounged in the waiting area. Leonard Ellerbe was standing off to one side, reiterating that if they couldn't find a fight that made sense, then Floyd just wouldn't fight anymore, no matter what his enemies said. "To organize your livelihood, to be an entrepreneur, that's what it means to live in a free society," Ellerbe said. "Two years ago, the promoters weren't saying Floyd is scared, 'cause he was with the company. Now, suddenly, he's scared and won't fight nobody?"

Mayweather said: "Other fighters have to fight. I don't have to fight." He doesn't need the money, obviously, but what about other needs the glory, the challenge, the love of craft? "I already went through that stage when I fought 90 fights for free," he said. "I already proved it to myself. Once you reach pound for pound, you already proved everything."

Ellerbe said: "That's why we're out there grinding, creating opportunities. Boxing is still his main source of income right now, but all the stuff we've been doing prepares for postboxing." Two weeks before, in his trailer at WrestleMania, I asked Mayweather if he might train other fighters when he stops boxing. "No," he said. "I see myself more behind a desk." Now, as a young woman bent over his feet with a paring device, I asked him what he would do behind that desk. "Call the shots," he said. "People come in and I say, 'Deal with that,' and they deal with it." Then he added, dreamily, "Be on the computer all day," which struck me as odd, considering how many people who sit in front of

computers all day must fantasize about being star athletes. Ellerbe cut in to return our discussion of Mayweather's postboxing life to the party line: platform, mainstream, entertainment.

When Mayweather moved to the manicure table, limping from the sweet soreness in his calves left by the pedicurist's massaging fingers, the conversation turned to the subject of family. He is unmarried and has four children, who live with their mothers. "You punish your kids?" he asked. "I don't believe in whuppin' 'em. My dad beat me, and when it was time to talk to him about important things, I didn't want to. So I don't put my hands on my kids. I want them to be able to talk to me." This was a "24/7" intimacy, more brand management for the media, but it was also as honest as he gets in an interview. He really doesn't want to turn into his father.

Right then, though, I could see his father in him. Mayweather is remarkably unlined for a man of 31 who has been hit often, and when he smiles he looks literally half his age, but seen up close in profile, the lines of his skull seem to press against the skin as if Floyd Sr. were emerging from within. The small gap in his left eyebrow and other signs of scarring around the eyes remind me that he has been boxing since he could walk. It's as if he has been worn smooth by the blows. His supremely capable body, too, bears the marks of the nearly three decades of training and fighting that produced it. The shots, the sit-ups, the miles all accrue. He has the look.

After the nail salon, Mayweather, who lives in Las Vegas, visited a commercial property he was thinking of buying, and stopped by a jewelry store. He and his crew traveled in a caravan of S.U.V.'s, like elephants marching trunk to tail. By the time we got to the Fashion Show mall, he had changed into a colorful long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans with "PB" (for Pretty Boy) in silver on one back pocket and "$" on the other.

Mayweather spent the next few hours trying on clothes and accessories, examining himself minutely in store mirrors. When strangers asked for an autograph or a picture, he obliged. Two shapely young women he knew showed up along the way, each departing with a gift or two in a shopping bag. His entourage of 11 watched him, ate food-court junk and carried his purchases. By evening, some of his bodyguards had three or four bags in each hand.

Mayweather and his crew went off to dinner and whatever came next. He likes to stay up late and go out, but he doesn't drink, so he can train whenever he wants. He'll run or drop by the gym at 3 a.m. if he feels like it. Sometimes he feels like it.

Afterward, I thought, So that is what Floyd Mayweather Jr. will do with his life and his millions if he can't find a matchup that "makes sense"? That's what he's going to do with a boxing talent that could, if he insists on fighting the best, still transcend the limitations of his era and produce a career of all-time significance? He's at the peak of his powers right now, and it won't last forever. When he retires, he'll have all the time in the world to shop, wrestle and dance on TV. The boxing fan in me wants to tell Mayweather to get busy and fight Cotto. If it's close, fight him again fight a trilogy. Fight Mosley and whichever young contender emerges next from the pack. If you clean out the welterweights, move up and try a bigger man. I want him to be true to his craft, to deliver in full on his talent and training. On the other hand, nobody got hurt during his circus turn at WrestleMania or his marathon shopping session, and he owed me nothing more than the on-message patter he'd been feeding me. By what right did I wish more hard fights upon a man who has given and taken so many blows already?

Two weeks later, Mayweather and his crew, in formal attire, occupied a couple of big round tables in a banquet room at the Millennium Biltmore, the grand old hotel in downtown Los Angeles that decades ago used to host the Oscars.

He was there to pick up the fighter of the year award from the Boxing Writers Association of America at its 83rd annual awards dinner. You could argue that other fighters deserved the honor more and that Mayweather really should share self-promoter of the year with De La Hoya, if such an award existed, but his fame and riches had dazzled the voters.

In addition to fighters, cornermen, matchmakers and other guests, there were scores of boxing writers in attendance, but no more than a handful made a full-time living at it anymore. Even more than boxing itself, writing about boxing has receded into a niche market.

So the gathered writers, lacking mainstream clout, could not help make Mayweather famous famous. But their opinion still matters to him, in part because they play a role in determining his place in the sport's history. "There's only two reasons to fight," Ellerbe told me more than once. "Business and legacy." Business comes first, but legacy counts, too, if only because it affects the brand. Members of the B.W.A.A. will vote Mayweather into the International Boxing Hall of Fame on the first ballot when he's eligible, but they will also take the lead in debating whether and where he belongs in the unofficial rankings of the top fighters of all time in his weight class and the exclusive canon of pound-for-pound greats.

Sugar Ray Robinson tops both lists. To understand just how high a standard he set, consider that he fought the indestructible middleweight Jake LaMotta, a bigger and stronger man, six times. They met twice within three weeks in February 1943, and between those two bouts Robinson beat "California" Jackie Wilson, who was no slouch. That single month was tougher than any entire year Mayweather has had to date, and Robinson's all-time standing does not suffer from his having lost once to LaMotta by decision. Going 5-1 against LaMotta means infinitely more than beating Ricky Hatton or the faded De La Hoya once or twice.

I recently asked LaMotta what he thought of Mayweather. (Robinson died in 1989.) He said: “I fought 13 years, 106 fights, and I made $750,000, total. Fighting all the time keeps you strong, makes you able to take a shot better, but I would have fought less if I made more money.” He added that he would have wrestled, danced, whatever, if anybody had asked him to and paid him for it. The old-timers and all-timers I talked to were divided in their opinion of Mayweather. Some, like Sugar Ray Leonard, thought he would do well in imaginary matchups against the best of previous eras. Others, like LaMotta and Carmen Basilio, who are both now in their 80s, thought he didn’t have enough experience against strong competition. “He would have been in a lot of trouble,” Basilio told me.

When the fighter of the year award was announced, Mayweather mounted the stage. He had shed his tuxedo jacket. His white shirt and boyish smile were brilliant. Flashbulbs went off. All the attention in the big room flowed to him. He seemed bigger than the event, stooping down to it from somewhere higher up the celebrity food chain.

The writers, sentimentalists who think they’re cynics, oozed gratitude. A significant minority of them believed that Cotto is the best welterweight and that the Filipino super featherweight Manny Pacquiao is pound for pound the best fighter in the world today, but they loved Mayweather for his outsize persona and the reminder it carries of the sport’s past glories.

When he got to the podium, Mayweather thanked everyone imaginable, even his dad, and noted that he had made $100 million in the ring, which he termed “a blessing.” It was the usual song and dance, but there was a gentleness to his manner that I hadn’t seen before. He was like a movie star at his high school reunion, muting his arrogance and trying to be a regular guy for old times’ sake. He seemed to genuinely appreciate the honor.

He and his entourage hung around for a while, then moved on. There was a big world out there, a fan base to expand and a brand to elevate, and the night was still young.

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