

Ray Leonard With A Dash Of Gangsta Style

Written by Ronan Keenan
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Three Mercedes and three SUVs, each heaving with burly, steely-eyed personnel make their way through the streets of London. This is not the cavalcade of a president, but a king.

Floyd Mayweather Jr., the returning pound-for-pound monarch of the fight game, adhered to the adage of safety in numbers as he travelled around London in a procession of luxury vehicles during his recent promotional trip to hype his ill-fated showdown with Juan Manuel Marquez.

A rib injury reportedly forced Mayweather to postpone the proposed July event at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, but some reports suggest demand for tickets was far below expectations, with Steve Kim of Maxboxing revealing that no more than 3,000 were sold.

Conversely, during his British sojourn Mayweather showed the ability to surround himself with a sizeable crowd that wasn't on his payroll. Approximately 3,000 fans crammed into London's Peacock Gym to witness a public workout and enthusiastically holler every move the unbeaten welterweight made during a sequence of routine exercises.

Such a turnout for Mayweather was unforeseen and despite boxing's flirtation with mainstream status in the UK, few fighters have ever drawn such attention on a promotional visit. The feat is all the more remarkable given that the American was hyping a fight to be contested against a Mexican in Nevada.

Mayweather's performances during his three-day visit matched his superstar billing. He mixed together a boyish charm with fleeting arrogance, producing a persona akin to Ray Leonard with a dash of gangsta style.

Mayweather's former promoter Bob Arum once predicted that if marketed as an all-American wholesome athlete, his charge would become the most famous black boxing celebrity since Mike Tyson. And while the 32-year-old prizefighter has achieved such a standing, he has done so by diverging from Arum's advice and embracing a flagrantly noxious attitude.

Such a persona has been on full display in recent weeks, most notably when Mayweather spitefully battled with ESPN's Brian Kenny when the interviewer dared question the fighter's credentials. But London presented Mayweather with a fresh set of potential admirers that were eager to anoint him as a prodigious entity. Mayweather held his end of the bargain and routinely churned out the sort of toothless lines that win affection from the mainstream press.

"There are no fans like the London fans and the British fans," he said before his public workout. "I used to talk a lot of trash and that made me as big as I am. But my mother said, 'Why do you have to do that? Just go out be respectful and just be Floyd Mayweather.'"

While he was respectful in his words, "Money May" was less deferential to an interview appointment with Sky Sports News. As his cortège arrived at the broadcaster's studios, a Sky

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camera crew was on hand to relay live pictures for the network. Yet as the flock of Mayweather acquaintances emerged from their vehicles, the fighter remained in his Mercedes, reportedly catching some shuteye despite the fact that he was delaying the Sky Sports show.

Mayweather surfaced some ten minutes later, decked out in a Union Jack sweater, and proceeded to engage in charming discourse with the Sky presenters.

“My advice to kids is this: If you have a goal that you want to accomplish, never let anyone tell you that you can’t do something. Once I got focused, said my prayers and really believed, I could do anything. I’d tell all the young kids out there to believe in themselves,” he said in a soft voice.

Mayweather also admitted that he had provided fans with some “duff fights”, vowed to make up for such occurrences, and spoke highly of British hero Ricky Hatton, a fighter he easily defeated in 2007.

The American has a habit of being more amiable with the British media.

“People misjudge me in lots of ways,” he once told Brian Doogan of the London Times. “‘Making it rain’ [throwing a quantity cash in the air] is something people see in the hip-hop world, and that’s why I pull out the money I have and flash it on TV. We don’t mean nothing bad. We don’t mean no harm and we don’t want to make it look like we’re better than anybody else. We feel we’re even.

“Everything I got, I got legally, so when I’m on TV and entertaining, I’m basically telling kids, ‘You come from the same background I come from, the urban community. You don’t have to sell drugs to become successful. Enjoy yourself and have fun’. When people come to talk to me, they can get a chance to know me, and what I’ve been through, what I fight for.”

But on occasions during the London tour Mayweather’s demeanour conveyed a contrasting persona. When his microphone unexpectedly cut out, Mayweather scowled at the nearby technician and sharply exclaimed “where’s my mic man? Come here and sort this mic out, dammit”.

Later, as he left the conference he obliged approaching fans by signing autographs and posing for photos, but did so by avoiding eye contact while listening to his iPod.

Such a combination of empathetic words and condescending mannerisms seemingly appeals to the youthful demographic, as judged by the multitudes that descended on his public workout.

Richard Schaefer of Golden Boy Promotions, which is staging July’s fight, described the atmosphere surrounding Mayweather’s British appearances as “Beatlemania”. And he was only slightly hyperbolic. “Floyd’s car could not get through the crowds. People were surrounding the car, taking pictures,” said Schaefer. Such were the masses that Mayweather was reportedly forced to make the final stage of his journey to the Peacock gym on foot.

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“He was very endearing to the British public,” remarked London’s former three-weight world titlist Duke McKenzie. “He wanted to come here and sell a product. He’s doing a real PR job. [The public workout] was like a Ricky Hatton weigh in.”

A higher compliment cannot be paid to a fighter in Britain, and Mayweather achieved such eminence through his own 21st century model of image management.