



TALES FROM
The Top Table

How boxing's superstars
took over a town

CRAIG BIRCH

Foreword by **Richie Woodhall**

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C R A I G B I R C H



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CHAPTER ONE

WHEN PRETTY BOY MET PRETTY WOMAN – FLOYD MAYWEATHER

FAST cars, a hefty entourage and a life-changing story for one girl who attended – Floyd Mayweather Jr’s visit had the hallmarks of a night of bling with the king of the ring.

‘Money Mayweather’ stayed true to type for the few short hours that his evening’s duty called to attend a part of the world you can bet your bottom dollar he’d never heard of before.

Undoubtedly the biggest coup to that date for Bar Sport in Cannock was to attract the man who, at the time, was still the highest-paid athlete on the planet.

Only golf icon Arnold Palmer, Vince McMahon (owner of WWE pro wrestling, arguably not a sport), Formula One driver Michael Schumacher and golfer Tiger Woods had earned more.

The fighter who proclaims himself to be ‘The Best Ever’ had first hung up his gloves after his previous bout, exactly

five months earlier, having banked a whopping \$650 million for his exploits.

An easy points win over Andre Berto equalled Rocky Marciano's record-breaking undefeated record of 49-0 and, without question, earned him a place among the finest of all time.

You can never say never again in boxing, though, and Mayweather would indeed get back in the ring to take on Conor McGregor, but only when the money was right.

He netted a whopping \$100 million to punch for pay one last time, with Irishman McGregor also earning his biggest purse of \$30 million.

Mayweather's tenth-round stoppage win earned him his first KO since beating Victor Ortiz in 2011, the latter by count-out in the fourth after what many fans saw as a cheap pot-shot.

Some will argue that halting McGregor was Mayweather's first legitimate stoppage in nearly ten years, when Ricky Hatton was decked for the finish in the same round.

It was the right way to go for Mayweather, who probably knew deep down that he was always going to lace on the gloves again.

He had filed a number of '50-0' trademarks long before he agreed to fight again, and it was hard to envisage him walking away for good until he'd beaten Marciano's tally.

Timing can be everything, in life as well as boxing, and the only thing Mayweather is better at than boxing is drawing cash into his coffers. All of this came in his twilight years.

The writing had been on the wall since May 2015, when he settled the years-long debate over who would prevail out of him and Manny Pacquiao with another clear points win.

He was as Vegas as his flashy persona, having boxed his last 11 bouts at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Paradise, Nevada, before taking on McGregor at the T-Mobile Arena.

He'd already been acknowledged as the best draw Las Vegas ever had when he toured the UK, as an after-dinner speaker, for the first time.

So what was he doing in Cannock again? Most people, initially, refused to believe that it would happen and that hurt ticket sales.

Others thought that it was some sort of con, believing the all-too-familiar adage that if something is too good to be true then it probably is. A sponsor pulled out on such grounds.

It left promoter Scott Murray with a dilemma ahead of staging the event, which he'd originally planned for the larger Vox Centre in Birmingham with his business partners.

The Vox, which was newly opened at the time, would have cost a bomb to hire and the sums, even with the venue packed to the rafters, didn't make for great reading.

The obvious solution was to move the show to the Premier Suite which, while cutting the capacity to 300, offered level footing on grounds the organisers knew.

Bar takings and the like went back into the pot and if Scott could trust anyone to pull off Mayweather's appearance without major problems, it was his own team.

They'd endured the carnage that can come with big names before and have since. When football legend Pele came the next year, Scott didn't even try to take him anywhere else.

Just like that, Mayweather was Cannock-bound. The biggest problem was to make sure he actually turned up.

This is not like booking any celebrity. His lordship has the resources to please himself in any situation. What were you going to do, sue him? He'd already left Scott panic-stricken once.

After arriving in England, Mayweather suddenly boarded his private jet and vanished to Turkey. Turned out he was just popping to a friend's restaurant for a meal before flying back.

That's the lifestyle you can afford if you happen to be 'the Floyd', and there are few people you have to answer to if you're him.

Scott had him under contract, true, but whatever he'd have asked him for back would have been chicken feed to the defendant. And there's no compensation for the loss of reputation.

It was literally in Mayweather's always-formidable hands. All anybody could do was just wait and see how it panned out.

The start of the night went like any other function there, but without the meet-and-greet with the feature attraction that usually occurs in a private room.

There was the usual meal, raffle, auction and so on in front of a top table that Mayweather was never going to sit on anyway. He would appear, speak, pose for photos and be gone.

Everyone was on tenterhooks until just after 9pm, when a fleet of luxury black vehicles – along with a lime green Lamborghini supercar – cruised through the neighbouring streets.

They were all on loan from a company that took the late-notice job through Scott's friend and ex-boxer Richard Carter, who made the arrangements. Most drivers worked for free.

Mayweather drove one of the Rolls-Royces, kerbing both of the front wheels as he wrestled with the twists and turns in the roads of a good old English town.

After damaging the alloys, he was heard shouting ‘he’s going to kill me’ when he reached his destination, referring to the co-owner of the Midlands-based Celebrity Super Car Hire firm.

They seemed to care about as much as anyone in Bar Sport did, after getting the star rub and a £1,200 tip to boot. With that, Mayweather proved true to his word – he was here.

Out, also, jumped his trademark entourage of 26 people, some of them the biggest of burly men, who were unlikely to have any problems keeping him safe.

He was ushered into the same room where the meet-and-greet normally takes place to ‘chill’ with his ‘Money Team’, providing a wish list of requirements that needed to be there.

With Mayweather fed, watered and feeling relaxed, the strains of ‘Versace’ by hip hop group Migos started to play around the stage and ended up on loop for a good 15 minutes.

In he came, just after 10.15pm, clad in a black jacket, red t-shirt and baseball cap, with a diamond-encrusted watch and star medallion ticking the ‘bling’ box.

Flanked by his security, he sat down to chat with fellow former world champion Richie Woodhall and appeared at ease, occasionally stopping to sip a cup of coffee.

We were in Richie’s hands now. They seemed to hit it off and Mayweather spoke openly and candidly about most things he was asked. Like with this book, there was no point telling Floyd how great he was in the hour, or just under, that ensued. It was about getting to know him on a personal level.

He wasn’t always rich; in fact at times he was thought to be dirt poor. The writing had always been on the wall, though, as he’d been born into a boxing brood.

He was originally Floyd Sinclair, of Grand Rapids in Michigan, before changing his name to match his father's and become Mayweather Jr, aged 11.

His upbringing seemed to be as much characterised by drugs as boxing. His mother, Deborah, was an addict. He also had an aunt who died of AIDS.

Floyd Mayweather Sr had once been shot by his brother-in-law after a feud while holding Floyd Jr as a baby.

The subsequent wound to the leg ruined dad Floyd's own boxing career and he would later turn to drug dealing to make ends meet.

Floyd Sr had been a former national amateur champion who turned pro while one of his two younger brothers, Roger, won two world titles. Both would later work as Floyd Jr's coach.

Their mum, Bernice, had another son, Jeff, who was also a world champion, albeit holding the lesser IBO belt to Roger's WBA and WBC honours. She encouraged them all to box.

Grandmother played as big a part as anyone in making Floyd Jr the success he is today, despite Floyd Sr and Roger's influence in the corner. The man himself tells you as much.

He said that night: 'My grandmother was one of life's fighters and she made me believe I was going to be a champion. We came from a fighting family, but she raised me.

'My mother was doing drugs and her brother shot my father. My dad used me as a human shield, once, because he knew he wasn't going to shoot me.

'But things happen and you learn as life throws obstacles at you, but I found something to dedicate myself to and work hard.

‘The first flashy people I knew were the kids in the neighbourhood; we used to call them the “go-getters”. When I was 16, I was the same.

‘I encourage every young male and female to stay in school, because it’s very important. I took a chance, but I always knew school would still be there.

‘From the first day I went to the boxing gym, I knew I was going to be a mega superstar. I rolled the dice and it paid off.

‘I kept focused, I had tunnel vision and continued to believe. I knew I could make money from the sport, but I wasn’t sure to what level.

‘I’ve put my family in a great position; my four children will have the best education money can buy and go to the best schools. By the time I was 20, I was a millionaire.

‘It wasn’t all about the money, it’s just a great comfort for me. The first thing I did was to buy my mother life insurance and make sure she was secure.

‘Eyes are the keys to your soul and I would rather be hated for being honest than loved for telling a pretty lie. As long as God knows what I’m doing, that’s all that matters.

‘All I want to do is work hard for the people who are inspired by me, because we all dream. If there’s something you believe in that you know you can do, go for it.’

The younger Floyd had the boxing beliefs of his fellow Mayweathers drilled into him from the crib, but it soon became apparent he would become better than they could ever wish to be.

There’s wasn’t much common ground between the three, as they became a warring faction. Roger and Floyd Sr don’t get on, and neither have little Floyd and big Floyd most of the time.

Roger claims to have made Floyd Jr the force he is, while Floyd Sr contests that it's down to him. The piggy in the middle had abilities neither could teach, though.

Speed and movement, cat-like reflexes, ring savvy and a slippery defensive style, even when cornered, that could make opponents move on to his punches made for boxing clinics.

Tales of him in the gym, aged just ten, standing on an apple box to reach the speed bag and then pelting the instrument, two handed without looking, became the stuff of legend.

He mastered the old 'shoulder roll' better than anyone before him and, as he rose to the top, comparisons with the Sugar Rays – Robinson and Leonard – and Muhammad Ali grew.

A high school dropout, it was boxing or nothing when Mayweather was an amateur. That saw three Golden Gloves national titles and a place at a home Olympic Games in 1996.

The year of his first Golden Gloves title, 1993, came with a bitter pill to swallow as his father was jailed for five and a half years for cocaine trafficking.

He was robbed blind at the Olympics after narrowly outpointing Lorenzo Aragon by a point to become the first US boxer to beat a Cuban in 20 years of the Games.

He would not get the gold medal bout that he deserved, later losing to Bulgaria's Serafim Todorov in a decision so controversial his country filed a protest.

It was a miscarriage of justice worse than fellow American Roy Jones Jr's defeat to Park Si-Hun at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. Even the referee raised Mayweather's hand by mistake.

He turned pro and took on Roger as coach, which changed to Floyd Sr in 1998 when he was released from prison. They

split in 2000 and reunited in 2013, with Roger back in between. It was Floyd Sr who led him to his first world title, in his 18th paid outing, later that year. It came against his son's boxing hero, Genaro Hernandez.

He picked up the WBC and lineal super featherweight crowns, after the champion's corner pulled him out in the eighth round. Mayweather paid for his funeral after he died in 2011.

He told the audience: 'From when I started to use the speed bag, people used to come to the gym and go "watch this kid".

'If you ask me who had the biggest influence of my career, I'd have to tell you it was my father. He taught me what the sweet science of boxing really is, to hit and not get hit.

'It's exciting to see two guys go toe to toe but, if you want any sort of longevity, you have to be a smart defensive fighter. Uncle Roger was more about offence. I was a mix of the two.

'The way I was performing, I would have won that gold medal. We all know I got ripped off, but it made me strive and work hard to ensure it didn't happen again.

'I turned pro and things started moving on along very quickly. The first time [debut against Roberto Apodaca, won by TKO in round two of four], I didn't know who I was fighting.

'He was making his pro debut, too. One of my heroes, Sugar Ray Leonard, was there and that made me want to showcase my skills even more.

'Genaro Hernandez was a legend, in my eyes, and is someone who I had so much respect for. Sadly, he's no longer with us.

'I remember, when I was a child, every boxing magazine I had I would take the centrefold out, because that was in colour.

‘I’d stick them on my wall and the one I had above my bed, the champion that I used to watch all of the time, was Genaro.

‘He was very tall and rangy, a good boxer and body puncher, and I used to think “no one can beat this guy”. I was 15 and, six years later, I was across the ring from him.

‘He was crafty, too, and you could see the difference between someone who was green and this great veteran. For me to win a world title at 21, against him, was a special experience.

‘He suffered a severe injury [blood clot and a torn cartilage muscle] while he was still at the top level, so he could no longer fight. He was then hit by the cancer [head and neck].

‘When he died, I got in touch with his family and we communicated back and forth. This guy gave me my chance to become a world champion, it was the least I could do in return.’

There was no stopping Mayweather from there. You could compose a boxing bible analysing his accomplishments and still not do it justice, so here’s a summary.

He would win another 25 world title fights, with 24 against reigning or former champions, including International Hall of Famers Arturo Gatti and Oscar De La Hoya.

He was a five-weight world champion, winning 15 world titles all the way up to super welterweight, where he finished his career.

Translated into money, he generated 19.5 million pay-per-view buys and \$1.3 billion in revenue – and that was before coming out of retirement to take on McGregor.

The reason he kept such a chunk of that revenue was that he cut out the middle man, buying out his contract with promoter Bob Arum in 2007 to go self-managed.

He only ever fought one Brit, Ricky Hatton, who he sent crashing down for a second time in the tenth round of their fight to retain his WBC welterweight strap later in 2007.

There could have been two, had Prince Naseem Hamed answered the call to meet him after Mayweather's 2001 coming-of-age victory over Diego Corrales by tenth-round TKO.

A young Mayweather was nearly 24 while a weight-drained 'Naz', then 26, would lose for the only time to Marco Antonio Barrera three months later.

Mayweather went on to become the fight game's biggest-ever star, while Hamed retired in 2002 and vanished from the spotlight for several years.

Mayweather said: 'I was on my way to the top when Naseem was there. He's a legend, I commend and take my hat off to him.

'He was a real showman and, since I was a kid, I was the same. Everything I talked about, I was able to execute. I was very interested in fighting him and I wanted to make it happen.

'I feel, a lot of the time, when you are flashy and flamboyant, people call it cocky. It's not cocky if you are backing it up.

'It was the way I'd fought my whole life, with razzle dazzle and a lot of flair. Earlier on in my career, I was very flashy and flamboyant.

'Over the second half of my career, I wasn't 100 per cent, but I carried on. To call yourself TBE (The Best Ever), you've got to take on the best and not every fighter is the same.

'Once you face me, it's all about the skills. I don't care how much heart you've got. A fight doesn't last for two or three rounds, there's 12 to play with.

‘I’m like a chameleon – I can adjust and adapt to many different fighting styles. Every move is calculated and I know I can dictate any fight and handle the situation.

‘If somebody gets the best of me for two rounds and I take the other ten, I’ll still feel like I didn’t do that good. I’ll never settle for less. You can watch me and think, “When I get in there with him, I’ll do this, this and this.” When you try and make it happen, it’s totally different.

‘I’ve beaten more world champions than anyone in the history of this sport. My life, the only thing I focused on was my craft. From morning to night, I dedicated myself to boxing.

‘I never worried about getting beat. Every time I went into a fight, I knew I couldn’t lose. I’m the best and I was born to be the best.’

With those themes touched upon, the speech came to a close and Mayweather headed backstage for photos with guests. That should have been the end of the story, but it wasn’t.

It was there that he met teenager Raemarni Ball, who was literally half his age at that time, and whisked her off to sample a life of luxury.

Raemarni, 19, got more than a memento and left her mark on the ‘Pretty Boy’, who took her and older sister Relissa Ricketts, 21, away from England on his private jet.

The rest of the audience were blissfully unaware that Raemarni had slipped away with Mayweather in one of the six white Rolls-Royce cars that were waiting outside for him.

The media had spotted her, though, as Mayweather stepped out of the building and made their own investigations into exactly who the mystery woman was.

She reportedly worked at the New Look shop on the high street in Dudley, where she lived in a two-storey semi-detached house with her five siblings and mother Mandy.

An aspiring singer and dedicated follower of fashion, the former performing arts student at Dudley College strived for stardom and this was her chance to get a share of the limelight.

All with a passing interest kept an eye on her social media accounts and she was most active on Instagram, where she had over 81,000 followers.

The first image posted of her and Mayweather pretty much confirmed when and where they had met, as she was clad in the same evening gown she was wearing before the event.

Subsequent updates revealed she had boarded Mayweather's private jet, which went back to the United States for stops in New York and Las Vegas.

They took holiday snaps in Miami, too, and were spotted at a basketball match between the Los Angeles Clippers and Golden State Warriors.

Raemarni shared an image of her less than a foot away from married superstar musicians Jay-Z and Beyoncé at the game. Others saw her wearing 'TMT' (The Money Team) clothing.

The last time they were seen together was at the end of that May – some three months after they met in Cannock – when she was still living the dream.

Mayweather was 38 at the time and, although he had never married, he has four children by two different women. His eldest son, Koraun, is a teenager himself.

It was never determined if they became intimate. All the claims that Mayweather had a 'girlfriend' weren't substantiated. Raemarni's mother flat out denied they were.

They could have just been friends who had fun in each other's company and, at the end of the road, went their separate ways.

Raemarni has come home to the Black Country since then, while Mayweather remains at his Vegas mansion or hot-foots it around the globe.

She had a boyfriend, AA rescue van driver Andre Brown, who apparently had no objection to her spending time with Mayweather. It's unclear whether they remain together.

She appeared to have struck up a friendship with Mayweather's personal assistant Marikit 'Kitchie' Laurico, who she has wished a happy birthday to since on Instagram.

Subsequent posts showed her back with her family, who are pictured in some images. One selfie showed her wearing a top that had 'no hard feelings' emblazoned across it.

Cryptic captions such as 'it's up to me to take a risk even if I lose it all' suggest she's reflected on her bizarre experience. Either way, it looks as if her 'Mayweather Mania' is over.

But that wasn't the last time they ever met, as she was on hand again when Mayweather returned to the West Midlands for a second UK tour the following year.

They embraced as old buddies, but there was never any suggestion that she'd be caught up in the whirlwind again.

They parted ways once again, on good terms, but this is how Mayweather lives his life. He's like a rap star with all the perks, except with boxing gloves. His wealth affords him that.

There was never any suggestion he'd be back at Bar Sport, but it wouldn't turn out to be too long before the West Midlands would indeed become Mayweather's stomping ground again.

Mayweather's return to the region had the big-arena feel, over at the ICC in Birmingham, which wouldn't have come cheap to anybody.

One noteworthy moment occurred, before he and Mayweather later locked horns, when the organisers brought out a Conor McGregor impersonator, who raised the necessary laughs.

But it was no longer a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet Mayweather; you couldn't sell that as a bill of goods like the first time.

Those bragging rights remain in Cannock. After the first run, such an event would always lose its lustre.

As rubbing shoulders with the greats go, that was as intimate an experience as a customer was likely to get.

The common denominator in all of this is Mayweather, who will never lose his drive to earn big bucks. A move into promoting and managing was his next project.

At the end of it all, he considers himself The Best Ever and he'll only be too happy to tell you why if you ever see him. Few would argue he's the best defensively of all time.

His flashy behaviour aside, there's clearly a humble human being inside of Mayweather, on the evidence of what's presented here. But, for him, talk will never come cheap.