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Profiling “Money” ✓

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Floyd Mayweather Jr.’s problem was how to force his way against the grain of history into big-time celebrity in an era when being the best boxer in the world no longer automatically qualified him for the A-list. My problem was how to write a magazine profile about a subject who was not inclined to give me anything worth writing about. The two problems and their potential solutions were intimately connected, and together they open up a useful perspective on the larger histories of celebrity and journalism.

Issue Section: [Forum](#)

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I prefer to write about people who aren’t celebrities, but because the celebrity profiles

are a staple form of magazine journalism, I’ve written enough of them to have learned that they pose a special craft challenge. That’s because when I write a profile I have to find some way to sympathize with my subject. I certainly don’t have to like the people I

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write about or approve of what they do, but I can't write the story until I've found a way to see things from their perspective. I have to at least experiment with feeling how they feel before I ask the reader to do it. If that sounds touchy-feely, all I mean is that the genre of the profile—which sets out to frame a character within some kind of big picture and, among other things, wants to show what it's like to *be* such a character framed in such a big picture—requires the writer to lead the reader into the subject's worldview, not just the subject's world. That can be hard to do when dealing with celebrities, who have usually mastered the skill of offering reporters preinterpreted versions of themselves that are strategically flat and processed to such a degree that the sympathetic impulse can find no purchase on their slippery surface.

No profile subject better exemplifies this tendency than Floyd Mayweather Jr., whom I wrote about in 2008 for the *New York Times Magazine*. Among the musicians, writers, artists, politicians, athletes, educators, and others I've profiled to date, he remains the toughest assignment. In the ring, he's a defensive specialist adept at frustrating the other guy's attempts to get at him, and he treats reporters the same way. When he's not repeating his usual claims about being the greatest of all time or other boilerplate phrases echoed by his handlers, he's ducking or ignoring or blandly misunderstanding questions, refusing to be drawn into any sort of meaningful exchange. And he does this all with an air of contempt, treating attention from the press, especially the print press, as a tiresome chore. May-weather can turn on the charm when a camera is pointed at him or at least produce a stack of bills to count or throw in the air, and he'll offer up a reality-show version of candor or a sentimental reveal when he feels the imperative to produce good content in support of his brand, but he's ostentatiously bored by having to put up with human beings carrying notebooks and asking questions more challenging than "How awesome is it to be so awesome?" He treats attention as his due, and grows testy when he doesn't get it, but makes a point of treating as a burden any journalistic efforts that go beyond providing free publicity.

Mayweather insisted to me that boxing came so easily to him that he didn't even have to think about it, freeing him to make the pursuit of celebrity his main life project. Supremacy in boxing, he wanted me to understand, was just the convenient platform from which to launch himself into the culture. This claim was an unconvincing attempt

to obscure the admirable diligence with which he has worked at the fighter's craft since he was a child, honing his body and developing his defensive skills and ring generalship to a high level of sophistication that was once fairly common among competent fighters but has become exceedingly rare in our time. His insistence that celebrity was his true calling struck me as either a lie or a catastrophic misrecognition of his own talents. Subtract his mastery of ring technique, and he's just another rich jerk who thinks he deserves to be famous.

But he was also to some extent speaking the truth when he identified celebrity as an endeavor to which he has had to commit considerable passion and energy. To understand the difficulty Mayweather has faced—and the magnitude of his accomplishment—in getting and staying on the A-list, it helps to understand that boxing carries a permanent air of horse-and-buggy antiquity. It's always 1926 in the fight world. For all its pathbreaking eagerness to exploit new technologies for profit (an attribute it has long shared with pornography), boxing is profoundly backward-looking in its reverence for its own history, in its belief in the virtues of time-tested technique and its suspicion of change, and in its nostalgia for the good old days when boxing occupied the cultural mainstream.

Back in 1926 or 1936, and as late as 1946 or even 1956, to be a boxing champion was to automatically qualify as a major celebrity, known and regarded as important not only by the millions of people who cared about boxing but also by many more who didn't. Between the wars, boxing and baseball were the sports that mattered, with horse racing a distant third. Football and especially basketball were still niche enthusiasms that would rise to dominance after the Second World War, supported by an institutional connection to school during a period when secondary education became truly universal and college expanded greatly—a connection that boxing, with its ties to manual labor and its whiff of the lowlife, was never going to enjoy. In the golden age of boxing, which dawned after the First World War as the fights shed their previous aura of marginal criminality and entered the emerging mainstream defined by newspapers, magazines, radio, and film, the most prominent fighters were on a par with or even bigger than the most popular stars produced by the movie and music industries. There was no distinction more prominent than being heavyweight champion. Some

heavyweight champions, like Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis, caught the popular imagination with special force and became totemic figures that the whole culture seemed to conjure with, but any champion would have made the A-list, had the A-list been invented yet. During the first half of the twentieth century, the high-industrial period when the apparatus of mass culture matured into a celebrity-producing machine, boxing helped lead the way.

That golden age began to decline at midcentury, decades before Mayweather was born. As football, basketball, and other school-based team games rose to dominate sports culture, the structural underpinnings of boxing in the industrial city's neighborhood order withered away, eroded by deindustrialization, suburbanization, and other long-wave forces that transformed urban life. The fights were a mainstay of early television in the 1950s, which kept a handful of elite boxers in the public eye, but TV also hastened the uprooting of the fight-world network from the social landscape by putting its local venues out of business. The rise in the 1960s of Muhammad Ali, a supreme virtuoso of celebrity who was also a superb fighter, masked the decline of boxing, but by the time he retired the fights were well out of the mainstream and fading. Boxing was also hurried along to niche-market status by its own elite—promoters, media executives, and other big shots who realized that they could make more money by moving the fights from local venues to broadcast TV to pay-TV, inventing more weight classes and championships, and otherwise diluting and pigeonholing the former mass appeal of the fights.

Mayweather's problem was how to force his way against the grain of history into big-time celebrity; my problem was how to profile a subject who was not inclined to give me anything worth writing about. The two problems—and their potential solutions—were, of course, intimately connected.

A Defensive Specialist

When I was following Mayweather around in 2008, a quiet struggle was going on between us that's emblematic of our media age. It was already becoming true then, and is much more true now, that social media and other online resources have made it possible for a celebrity to directly address the public without having to subject himself

to the filtering authority of reporters and other gatekeepers. (I sympathize with that impulse, by the way. I wouldn't want to put myself in the hands of another writer; I'd rather speak directly to whomever I am trying to reach, as I'm doing now.) It's still true that gatekeepers—such as, in this case, the *New York Times*—can confer prestige on Mayweather, but he no longer has to rely on them to get himself in front of millions of people.

One reason for him to put up with me at that particular moment was that, while he was still considered in some quarters the best fighter on earth, pound for pound, he was being eclipsed by Manny Pacquiao, who fought better competition and had a relentless offensive style that pleased crowds unequipped to appreciate the nuances of Mayweather's defensive skill. Mayweather kept reminding everyone that he was unbeaten and Pacquiao wasn't, but he couldn't reverse the perception that he was careful to a fault about the opponents he judiciously outpointed, while Pacquiao was taking on all comers and beating the stuffing out of them. Ratification of Mayweather's status by traditional authorities like the *Times* might help his cause, at least a little.

Still, though Mayweather had agreed to let me hang around, he was keeping me at bay. Having spent some time with him in Orlando, where he had appeared in a *WrestleMania* show, and then in Las Vegas, where he lives, I was wondering if there would be a story to write at all. So far I had the beginnings of a big picture in the dilemma he faced of wanting to be a major celebrity in a time when being the best boxer in the world could make him at best a minor one. But I didn't have a thick enough character to put in the foreground of that big picture. What I had so far, mostly, was a two-dimensional aspiring Donald Trump who seemed to have lost sight of the fact that his real skill was avoiding punches and not, as he kept saying, being "an entertainer." What made him so hard for me to engage as a profile subject was that he thought his great value lay in his mastery of celebrity itself, his ability to connect to the public by way of a passively servile media, while I saw his genius in being supremely good at using the shoulder roll and other nearly forgotten techniques to make the other guy *fail* to connect. It had so far been nearly impossible for me to sympathize with him or to see things even temporarily from his point of view, which would entail impossibilities like considering him on a par with genuine all-timers like Sugar Ray

Robinson or seeing the dignity in fondling money on camera.

Just as I was beginning to consider the possibilities for salvaging the assignment by turning in some sort of *Esquire*-meets – *Critical Inquiry* metathings about the unprofilability of Mayweather, I caught a break in an unlikely place: a Las Vegas nail salon. He was sitting there, a picture of pampered indolence, attended by a dozen or so members of his retinue, with his bare feet immersed in a tub of blue water and one hand splayed on a table so that a manicurist could work on his fingernails. Maybe the sweet relaxing soreness of the lower-extremity massage he had just received loosened him up, or maybe he had finally done the celebrity math, which probably went something like this: “Okay, the *New York Times Magazine* is print, which is clearly inferior to TV, the Internet, and just about every other kind of media outlet, but for some reason print still does reach a lot of people, and the article in its online version will be viewable on a screen, which is what really matters, and the *New York Times* was around in 1926, and as a fight person I’m supposed to have a certain respect for that, and it is supposed to be pretty much the best, and I’m definitely the best, so all right, while putting myself in the hands of a writer is less desirable than dispensing my content directly to consumers, there’s prestige to be gained by it, so it’s kind of like Cadillac teaming up with Tiffany, so I can dispense 3.7 units of personal feeling to further the cause of the brand.”

Whatever the reason, Mayweather turned to me and said, apropos of nothing, “You punish your kids?” I said that I did, sometimes. He said, “Do you raise your hand to them?” I said that I tried not to. He said, “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 precooked intimacy, family melodrama of the kind he was already used to serving up on 24/7, the HBO reality show, but it was also about as honest as he gets in an interview. He really didn’t want to turn into his father, Floyd Senior, a whip-fast, weather-beaten former boxer and ex-con who with his braids and eerie vulpine demeanor called to mind the hard-to-kill alien in the *Predator* movies after it’s been blown up and shot a few times. Right then, though, after Floyd Junior looked at me for a long beat without saying anything and then turned back to watch the manicurist

work, I could see his father in him. I made a moment of it in the story ([Rotella 2008](#)):

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.

Seeing that look—caught up close from off to the side, in literal profile—gave me a way into writing the profile. I now had a serviceably modeled character to put against a big-picture backdrop. Here was Floyd Junior, defying the decline of boxing from big mainstream deal into an esoteric niche sport by turning himself into the best-paid athlete on earth and even an A-list celebrity, to whom other male A-listers, from 50 Cent to Justin Bieber to a variety of big-shot pro ballplayers, have tended to flock and cling like baby lemurs attaching themselves to their mothers' underfur. Formerly known as Pretty Boy and now answering to Money, Floyd Junior had labored, Trump-style, to make his name semisynonymous with money and fame itself and worked hard to promulgate an image of himself as insulated by his millions from social order and destiny and even the strictures of space and time—which is the underlying logic of much of his program of self-presentation, from impromptu jet excursions to his habit of deciding on the spur of the moment to make his entourage trail him in a caravan of SUVs while he goes for a run at 3:00 a.m. And *still* he was worried, with cause, about turning into his father, an old-school hard case from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who did serious jail time for drug trafficking and was once shot in the leg by his wife's brother while holding the year-old Floyd Junior in his arms. Because down deep, below the layers of celebrity, Floyd Junior is a fighter, and all that hitting changes you. Finally, I had a story worth telling about a character worth writing about.

Writing the Profile

To write a magazine profile is to feel the force of familiar routines and usages that shape a well-established genre, as one would if writing a western or a backstage musical. The interwar era of boxing's sporting dominance was also the period in which the profile, of which the celebrity profile is a subgenre, matured and took its place in the constellation of nonfiction literary forms. You can trace the origins of the profile as far back as you like: in the first chapter of William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Bartley Hubbard is writing a magazine piece recognizable as a profile of the Gilded Age paint entrepreneur Silas Lapham; there are protoprofiles of actors and other celebrities at home in the English and French press of the nineteenth century; Pierce Egan's mock-epic portraits of fighters in Regency London display elements of the profile; Giorgio Vasari's sixteenth-century *Lives of the Artists* feels a bit profile-y at times, as do passages in Plutarch; and so do the lives of the saints and, in bizarre flashes, Genesis and Exodus and the Gospels. But it was in the 1930s that the magazine press, especially the *New Yorker*, stabilized the profile as pretty much the genre we've got today. As such, the profile became part of the institutional machinery of public life to which both professional journalists and would-be celebrities had to submit before You-Tube and Twitter provided the convenient means for DIY celebrity. Although the world of media and celebrity has changed since then, the mechanics and human dynamics of a profile still conform to long-standing tradition.

When I'm working on a profile I do a couple of formal sit-down interviews with my subject, but mostly I tag along as he or she goes about his or her business. With my subjects' consent, I lurk next to them and eat with them and ride along in their cars and otherwise insinuate myself into their works and days. I tend to get more good stuff from being up close and off to the side than I do face-to-face, because from the side you can see a person operating an array of masks and armor in encountering the world, whereas face-to-face you see mostly the masks and armor. That goes double, triple, for celebrities, which is part of what makes them so hard to engage and write about.

In lieu of a more precise definition of celebrity, I'll just say that I think of it as a quality, measured on a continuum, that refers to the extent to which a public figure is known and available as meaning-making material to people beyond his or her specific field or

scene of acquaintance. What sets apart a celebrity profile from a regular one is that the former is not just a portrait of a person but also at least implicitly an account of that person's celebrity: an inquiry into the nature, import, and cultural utility of that person's renown and signifying potential. Whatever else it's up to, a celebrity profile is also always asking, "Why do we know about this person, and is he or she a satisfying figure for us to conjure with?"—which means that since the quality of celebrity waxes and wanes and even in the semi-democratized age of the selfie is still more zero-sum than infinitely abundant, a celebrity profile is also always asking, "And should we trade him or her in for a better one?"

Especially when I'm profiling a celebrity (which, by the definition I just offered, means a person who falls somewhere toward the "greater" pole on the continuum sketched above), a lot of the time I'm just there, off to the side, not bothering anybody but not quite invisible. Often this process can be pleasant and relatively smooth, but there can also be awkwardness. Take, for example, the moment in 2007 when another boxer, Shannon Briggs, turned and extended his fist to me from the front passenger seat of the SUV we were tooling around in with his boys and bellowed, over the booming sound system, "You're riding with the brothers now." It was his right fist, the one he had recently used to knock Siarhei Lyakhovich entirely out of the ring in the closing seconds of the final round, thereby laying claim to one of the four "major" heavyweight belts and therefore a share of the fractured world title. I was paralyzed by a potent urge to leave Briggs hanging, if for no other reason than it might cause him to consider the possibility that there exist white guys with glasses who don't regard riding with the brothers as some sort of apex of authentic experience after which they can happily die and go to heaven—who, in fact, don't regard it as any more or less special than riding with the Catalan fish-market ladies or with admirers of the works of Cheng Pei Pei. It bothered me that riding around with him was something he thought that I might appreciate being congratulated for. But Briggs is a likable guy, and he meant well by the gesture, and I needed his goodwill in order to finish the job of writing about him, so, after a suspended little moment of indecision in which his face and probably mine started to fall as we each began to figure the no-win calculus determining what he might feel obliged to do if I left him hanging in front of his entourage, I snapped out of my reverie and bumped his cannonball-like fist with my delicate one.

Things got even more awkward later on, at the barbershop, where the barbers and other patrons, as well as Briggs and his entourage, all tried too hard to provide me with memorably snappy banter, as if each of them was drafting in his head a paragraph for my story that contained the phrase “certain distinctively African American folkloric practices of homosocial orality traditionally associated with the barbershop, one of the dopest of OG neighborhood institutions.” I decided that it would be best for all concerned to leave that scene on the cutting-room floor.

Part of the process of profiling is finding a way through the debris field of rote dialogue and scenes that the celebrity and his associates think that a reporter can use and working in toward the stuff they don't really expect you might care about (as opposed to the stuff they explicitly want to keep out of the story, which is usually not very interesting). Briggs and I arrived at our moment of truth a few days later. We were sitting side by side on his living room couch late at night, looking together at his laptop, his many different asthma meds dumped all around on the coffee table after he had brought them out earlier and dramatically flung them down to support his assertion that he used steroids to control his debilitating condition and not, as many claimed, to help him bulk up into a 270-pound upside-down ziggurat of defined muscle. On the screen, in boxing-related chat rooms, zealots with well-developed tribal imaginations predicted that Sultan Ibragimov, a fair-haired Muslim from Dagestan, was going to wipe the floor with Briggs in their upcoming fight. They shared the widely held view that, as I put it in the story ([Rotella 2007](#)), “Eastern Europeans are tougher than Americans, who, spoiled by money and comfort, have gone soft in their gated community of a nation. The former Soviet bloc, by contrast, is like a vast gray housing project, stretching from the Balkans to the Bering Strait, from which issue streams of do-or-die strivers: fighters, basketball players, musicians, dancers, writers, hustlers, beauties, entrepreneurs and gangsters, all flowing toward the big money in the decadent West.”

One post, asserting that Ibragimov would be “way, way too tough for Briggs” despite being the much smaller of the two men, went on to explain that “the kids from the Caucasus mountains grow up playing with guns, seeing their friends and family members murdered over minor insults. These kids are tough, mean, natural fighters....

So called ‘tough guys’ from underprivileged American backgrounds—the so-called ‘inner city ghettos’—are like helpless babies compared to the people of the Caucasus.... You can see it in the glint of the eye in these Caucasians. It’s scary, and it’s the reason why boxing dominance is leaving the U.S.A. for the East” (quoted in *ibid.*). This is one of many things that people do with celebrities: they use them mythographically, to personify and enact the forces of history.

Briggs, still looking at the screen, shrugged, as if to say, “Caucasians—what are you gonna do?”—and there it was, the logic of the profile in its essence: the character (caught again, like Mayweather in the nail salon, up close in literal profile) limned against the backdrop of his moment, living the consequences of the big picture. For much of the twentieth century the heavyweight championship was a Black Thing, but we had reached a point in history when the talent pool of athletic African American men over two hundred pounds with an appetite for hitting had been almost entirely diverted into playing linebacker and power forward, leaving Briggs as the last remaining plausible black American heavyweight. He had exploited that situation to raise his visibility, self-identifying as “the American Hope, the Black Hope” in an open challenge he had issued to the leading Eastern European heavyweights, which was a large part of the reason I had been able to interest my editors at the magazine in profiling a boxer not named Tyson or Mayweather. Fearsome to behold but asthmatic (which had helped keep him from being snapped up by football), and only intermittently committed to serious training, Briggs was standing all alone in the path of the great post – Cold War outpouring of Slavic talent. That was my story in a nutshell.

The business of profiling and being profiled is complicated, but with a little effort from both sides we usually get there. I can supply context with no assistance from my subject, but I can’t deliver a satisfying character study without some kind of cooperation or at least engagement, even if it’s antagonistic. So I press gently but insistently for entry, and almost everyone I write about, even the most forbiddingly brand-managed celebrity, feels obliged, at some point along the way, to respond by extending an invitation to enter at least an antechamber of his or her selfhood. Maybe a guest room is the better metaphor, especially when I’m dealing with someone who

has had practice in being written about. It's a many-faceted and essentially impure transaction—profler and profiled are always working each other, using each other, each with his or her own objectives and expertise and rules for just how selfish one can be in pursuing profit in this transaction—but that doesn't entirely rule out honesty, curiosity, insight, and the occasional acknowledgment of one another's humanity.

Against the Grain of History

Boxing, a broken-beaked canary in the coal mine of changing social and cultural orders, offers a cartoonish parody of some important features of postindustrial society. A tiny elite, most of them promoters or TV executives, now make almost all the money, but the winner-take-all effect holds true even among boxers. A case in point, as reported by [Joe Eskenazi \(2011\)](#) in *SF Weekly*, is that in 2010 May-weather earned \$22 million of the \$38 million that the nearly four hundred pro boxers in Nevada earned, and the twenty highest-paid took home 93 percent of the total. Once widely and deeply embedded in the urban landscape at the neighborhood level, boxing is now mostly a rootless electronic spectacle put on by a few people with esoteric skills. And the decline of boxing to niche status prefigures the fate of just about everything else that used to be considered mainstream, as the very idea of a mainstream gives way to a culture of niche markets targeting not a collective public but one or more individual data profiles.

That's the frame within which to appreciate Mayweather's achievement in clawing his way onto the A-list in the twenty-first century on the basis of his status as the most technically proficient 147-pound boxer in the world. If it were 1926, he wouldn't have to do anything besides win fights—and he wouldn't even have to win all of those, since back then there were many more good fighters and it was nearly impossible for a guy who fought the best to remain undefeated for long. When I profiled him in 2008, Mayweather was already trying to shift to devoting most of his time and effort not to boxing but to waging his many-fronted campaign for greater celebrity. As Leonard Ellerbe, his manager, said: "Boxing is Floyd's platform, but it's not a mainstream sport anymore. To get into the mainstream, you have to do mainstream things" (quoted in [Rotella 2008](#)). So, as I explained in the story, "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" (ibid.).

Since then, Mayweather has added more items to the list, including going to jail for domestic violence, disparaging Asians, posting Instagram shots of his six-digit sports-book betting slips, making \$85 million in 2012 and as much as \$128 million in 2013, and recently musing in an interview that he might replace Bieber with Miley Cyrus in his prefight ring-walk retinue because, as he observed when he first added Bieber to his Money Team, "when you're the best, you only want to surround yourself with the best" (Litman 2013). The "ultimate goal" is to turn himself into "a Fortune 500 company" and become "the biggest entertainer in entertainment" (quoted in Rotella 2008). He wants what everyone committed to the pursuit of celebrity wants: the kind of cultural ubiquity that *Batman's* Joker has in mind when he says that he wants his face on the dollar bill.

Bear in mind that Mayweather's notoriety and income still rest on one increasingly obscure talent: not being hit. Compared to all-time greats in his weight class his offensive potency is no better than pretty good, and if magically transported back to the era between the wars, he would probably stack up as no more than a very good welterweight.¹ But his old-school defensive skills, handed down to him through family connections to the golden-age body of boxing lore, have in the present era made him unbeatable to date. Most people who root for him now can't even understand what he's doing in the ring. They just know that he wins and throws money at the camera. While he doesn't fight often enough or against strong enough competition to build up a true all-timer's record, Mayweather clearly occupies the pinnacle of his declining profession, and he is without question the undisputed greatest of all time (trailed by his fellow one-percenter contemporaries Oscar De La Hoya and Bernard Hopkins) when it comes to making money by mastering the business model of boxing in his era. In his case, that means picking high-value, low-risk opponents; working HBO,

Showtime, and pay-per-view to extract maximum value from minimal risk; and freeing himself from promoters to own himself and his own promotions. He deserves to be studied by anyone interested in how to squeeze the remaining value, cultural and economic, out of a compelling atavism.

When I profiled him we were both living the consequences of big changes, not just in the machinery and calculus of celebrity but also in our respective professions. For me, profiling him was a way to do both journalism and American studies without relying entirely on the institutions of either journalism or academia—both of which have lately lost some of their capacity to provide the full range of professional opportunity and reward they once did. For him, submitting to the archaic torment of being profiled by some guy with glasses from a magazine was just one small step on the way to realizing his goal of being on every screen all the time everywhere, a final triumph over the limitations of his association with the quaint practice of boxing. I have to hand it to him: he has overcome a lot. He's a boxer, not even a heavyweight, and a technician rather than a crowd-pleasing bomber; he's about as likable as Trump; and, like Trump, he makes a point of rubbing his wealth in the faces of a public that shows signs of coming around to the idea that income inequality may be the thing that is most wrong with this country. In spite of all that, he has succeeded in making and keeping a place for himself on the A-list, in large part by encouraging us to follow his doings in the hope that we will witness his long-overdue comeuppance. And I have begun to think it possible that he was right and I was wrong about why he's worth writing about. Maybe the level of celebrity he has attained against all odds and the grain of history is, in fact, his greatest victory.

1 Take, for example, the *Ring's* list of the top-ranked welterweights of 1936: Barney Ross, Jack Carroll, Jimmy McLarnin, Ceferino Garcia, Fritzie Zivic, Izzy Jannazzo, Cleto Locatelli, Cocoa Kid, Jack Portney, Glen Lee, and Milt Aron (boxrec.com/media/index.php/The_Ring_Magazine%27s_Annual_Ratings:_1936). They fought their way up through a much deeper talent pool and faced a much higher level of competition at every level than Mayweather has had to contend with. I'm not saying that Mayweather, magically transported in his prime to that era, would necessarily be out of his league among them, but he would be no more than one excellent fighter among many, and his old-fashioned technical virtuosity would no longer give him the enormous advantage it does in the present day. And the 1936 guys, having refined their craft and resilience against each other, would be well ahead of him in class. It would be unreasonable to expect Mayweather to do better than hold his own among them. Beating anyone on that list would be a considerable achievement for him; beating half of them would be too much to ask. Matching him against the *Ring's* list of top welterweights for 1946—Sugar Ray Robinson, Tommy Bell, Tippy Larkin, Beau Jack, Tony Janiro, Johnny Greco, Tony Pellone, Jimmy Doyle, California Jackie Wilson, Willie Joyce, and Charlie Fusari—would, I think, produce similar results (boxrec.com/media/index.php/The_Ring_Magazine%27s_Annual_Ratings:_1946).

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