

Mayweather ready for top echelon of boxing

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) - Floyd Mayweather Jr. wants to be a star.

He's got a chance now because he seems to understand, finally, that stars aren't supposed to beat up women or get in fights in bars.

In boxing, stars save their violence for the ring. They become stars by giving out beatings, like the one Mayweather gave Saturday night to human punching bag Arturo Gatti, but not by giving them to the mother of their children.

Mayweather didn't always understand that, which is why he's spent a lot of his time between fights in court. He didn't understand that people see enough thugs and gangbangers every day that they don't want to buy tickets to see one in the ring.

Mayweather says he's a family man now, changed and finally mature at the age of 28. The other day, he even apologized for being late to an appointment because he was getting his sons some breakfast.

Never mind that it was 1:30 in the afternoon, the kids still had to eat. "I just want a second chance," Mayweather said. "Don't judge me for my past. Judge me for how I treat you all."

Mayweather was talking to the press when he said that, the same press that drew his wrath when it dutifully reported his troubles with the law. So, OK, Floyd, here's your second chance.

Do it right, because your skills are so dazzling and your smile so engaging that boxing desperately needs someone like you right now.

You showed it at the Boardwalk Hall, enemy turf filled with more than 12,000 rabid Gatti fans, where you gave their hero such a whipping that his corner wouldn't let him go on after the sixth round.

You played the villain, even inviting the crowd's boos by entering the arena held aloft like a Roman emperor by men dressed like Roman gladiators. You fought in front of Gatti's people because you weren't afraid to take a chance and, besides, \$3.5 million paydays don't come along that often.

And then you won both the grudging respect of Gatti's fans and the admiration of the boxing world by finally showing all the skills that make you the most talented pound-for-pound fighter in the world.

It seemed so easy because it was. That's the kind of rare ability you have.

"I felt I was under pressure. I wanted to perform well," Mayweather said. "We wanted to put on a big fight, a big show, a star-studded event."

Mayweather did just that, though there weren't many stars around because, well, stars just don't find it cool to hang around in Atlantic City. Like Mayweather, they'd rather be in Las Vegas.

Mayweather had to come east because he's never sold tickets and never been a big television attraction despite his tremendous talent. That's partly because of his checkered life outside the ring, and partly because Mayweather is so good that he can — and often does — win without even trying to show off what he's got.

That changed Saturday night when Mayweather came out determined to put on a show. Beating Gatti to win the WBC 140-pound title wasn't enough. Mayweather wanted to make a statement that he had finally arrived.

It was the kind of performance that a legend can be made of, though the way boxing is marketed these days it was seen by far too few. Mayweather's first pay-per-view fight cost \$44.95 to watch, and only some 250,000 households likely bought it, mostly Gatti fans on the East Coast.

They saw Mayweather hit Gatti with right leads, left hooks, uppercuts — every kind of punch. He hit him in the face, in the belly, on the kidneys. At one point, he hit him with four straight right hands, something orthodox fighters just don't do.

He even hit him while Gatti's hands were down and he was complaining to the referee about a first-round foul.

"You're supposed to protect yourself at all times," Mayweather said, and this time he was right.

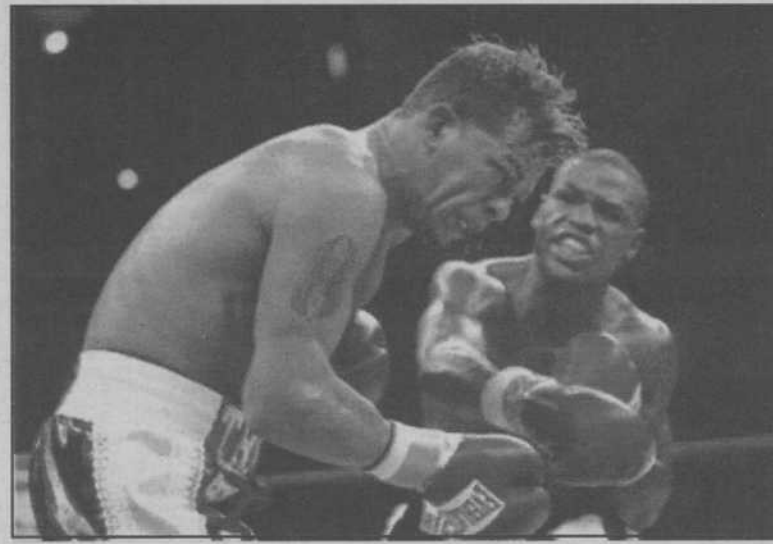
Mayweather has some excuses for taking time to find his way. He comes from a dysfunctional boxing family, and his father, who trains Oscar De la Hoya, was in prison on drug charges when Floyd won an Olympic bronze medal in 1996.

He also had both the fortune and misfortune of having money at a young age, money that went to a string of expensive cars and an ever-growing entourage.

Now, though,

Mayweather seems to understand how things work. He's still got the entourage, but he worked hard to promote this fight. Mayweather didn't complain about having to come to Gatti's backyard to get paid, wasn't arrested once, and flashed his wide smile whenever he was in public. He's got big fights and big paydays ahead. He's already a great champion, and maybe now, he won't be such a box office bust.

He's the kind of guy second chances are made for.



"Pretty Boy" Floyd Mayweather connects to the chin of Arturo Gatti on Saturday during their 140-pound welterweight title fight in Atlantic City, N.J. Mayweather pounded Gatti into submission, prompting the latter's corner to halt the bout.

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