

\$50, Under 11.5 Rounds, Floyd Mayweather, Jr. vs. Victor Ortiz

by David Hill

I don't succeed when I make a guy champion of the world. I succeed when I make a guy champion of the world and independent of me.

Cus D'Amato

It is weeks before the big fight. Floyd Mayweather, Jr. is undefeated and perhaps pound-for-pound the best boxer in the world. On this night he's training for an upcoming fight against WBC welterweight titleholder Victor Ortiz, when some verbal sparring between his father and former trainer, Floyd Mayweather, Sr., turns ugly.

"You were undefeated when you started with your daddy," Mayweather Sr. shouts at his son.

"You can't train nobody when you're locked up," Floyd retorts. His father, 61, was once a middling boxing prospect years ago. His professional record was 28-6-1. His greatest accomplishments have come not in the center of the ring but in the corner as a trainer to a host of big-time fighters like Oscar de la Hoya and Ricky Hatton. His greatest prospect, however, was his first prospect – Floyd, Jr. – who he trained from childhood to a Golden Gloves title and an Olympic silver medal.

Everything changed after Floyd, Sr. got locked up for drug trafficking. He did three years in the pen, and his brother Roger stepped in to take over Jr.'s tutelage while Sr. was away. To this day Roger remains Floyd Jr.'s trainer.

"Jealously don't get you nowhere." Floyd is growing incensed at his father's attempts to take any credit for his boxing accomplishments. He points at his uncle who sits off to the side head down, wisely staying out of it. "You're not even close to him! Don't nobody want to be with you! You're in our way! This is our gym!"

"F--- your gym."

Floyd Sr. shouts with very little volume. His age and illness reads in his voice. Years ago while he was on the outs with his family and training Floyd Jr.'s biggest rival, Oscar de la Hoya, Floyd, Sr. was diagnosed with sarcoidosis, a serious respiratory disease. The scare brought he and his son back together, and ever since he has been in his son's corner – but only figuratively. His role now is as a father, not as part of Floyd Jr.'s boxing team.

"Why are you here? Nobody wants you here! Get the f--- out of my gym!"

"Come put me out, mother-----! I'll beat your mother----- ass! 41 and 1!"

Floyd, Jr. has already started walking away from his father, shouting at him with his back turned. Whatever goodwill the sarcoidosis once brought on has escaped this room, along with all of the air.

"You can't fight s---. You ain't nothing but a mother----- cab driver. You weren't s--- as a fighter and you ain't s--- as a trainer."

Floyd storms out of the gym into the locker room, his bodyguards dragging his father out of the gym.

"And mother----- I ain't no Junior!"

I've got history with this guy. I've been losing money on Floyd Mayweather, Jr. for years. I am a phenomenal sucker who bets against Floyd every chance I get. I've never once believed that he will lose a fight, and on that score this upcoming bout with Victor Ortiz is no different. But I always hope he will lose. My reasons why are embarrassing and have nothing to do with boxing, this sport that I consider myself a fan of.

Floyd is a villain, a contemptible person. He changed his nickname from “Pretty Boy Floyd” to “Money Mayweather” and he takes great pride in flaunting his wealth. He burns hundred dollar bills. He belittles his opponents as homosexuals even long after he has beaten them. In the run-up to all of his fights he goes to great lengths to play the bad guy, and that’s truly what it is – playing. He is a promoter and an entertainer and admits as much. But I fall for it anyway. Despite the fact that Money Mayweather is as skilled a tactician in the ring as anyone fighting today I still root for his defeat. A sucker play, sure, but in betting with my heart and not my head, I am at least in good company.

James Baldwin covered the 1962 bout between the original “Pretty Boy,” Floyd Patterson, and Sonny Liston for the magazine *Nugget*. The fight took on a much larger social significance than just the heavyweight championship. Patterson was an affable and intelligent world champion. Liston was a known mafia associate, barely literate, considered a brute, and widely favored to win the championship from Patterson. The NAACP and even JFK had urged Patterson not to take the fight, fearing that a Liston championship would set back the cause of civil rights. Baldwin himself had bet “more money than I should have” on Patterson despite being positive that Liston would win. “I was afraid that Patterson might lose,” he said, “and I really didn’t want to see that. And it wasn’t that I didn’t like Liston, it’s just that I felt closer to Floyd.”

Sonny Liston knocked the beloved champ out in the first round.

The man that Floyd Mayweather, Jr. was fighting, Victor Ortiz, has his own sad story to tell. A second-generation Mexican American, Ortiz’s mother abandoned his family for another man when Victor was seven years old. Five years later his abusive father’s drinking got the best of him and he, too, walked out on Victor and his five brothers and sisters. They were placed in foster care and Victor soon took up boxing at the Salvation Army.

Eventually boxing would lead Victor to Robert Garcia, a boxer who was trained by his father, the legendary trainer Eduardo Garcia. Robert saw promise in young Ortiz and took him under his wing to train him himself. He turned Victor pro at the age of 17.

The Garcias offered young boxers like Victor Ortiz a way out of not only poverty but also the anxiety and turmoil of broken families. Eduardo Garcia’s brightest star, Fernando Vargas, was also abandoned by his father. To this day Vargas will only refer to his father as “that maggot.” This situation is not at all unusual in the fight game. In fact it seems to be more the rule than the exception. Floyd Patterson was a child of poverty and neglect, and ended up in a home for juvenile delinquent boys in upstate New York. It was there that he was discovered by Cus D’Amato, another legendary trainer with a knack for discovering talent among discarded youth. Decades later D’Amato would again pluck a future heavyweight champion from the ranks of New York’s criminal youth when he discovered a teenage Mike Tyson in another upstate detention center. Tyson’s father died when he was two. His mother was a prostitute and a drug addict who herself died when he was sixteen. He fared for himself on the streets of Brooklyn, robbing people for money and squatting abandoned buildings for shelter. Cus D’Amato would eventually adopt Tyson as his own son, and Tyson would refer to the octogenarian white man as his father.

My grandfather died when my father was seven years old. My grandmother tried to provide what she could for her three boys by dealing poker at night, helping carnies run scams at the fairgrounds during the day. She kept pace with a pretty shady crowd and coped with the stress of poverty and being a young widow with three kids by popping amphetamines and washing them down with booze. Eventually my uncles, who were much older than my dad, reached the age where they had to choose between jail and the military. So

they each enlisted and left, leaving my dad to look after his oft-unconscious mother, and himself, alone. It wasn't Bed Stuy, but it was a long way from Ozzie and Harriet.

My dad was, as we say in Arkansas, a tough sumofabitch. He wore a cowboy hat with a rattlesnake band. He was big. He played football and was good enough at it to get in to a state college on an athletic scholarship. He was a bit of a bully. One of my favorite stories about my mother and father's early courtship is how her boyfriend broke up with her one day and told her he "heard Jimmy Hill was interested in you. I don't want any trouble with him."

My dad never had any kind of family life. His first time sitting down at a dinner table and eating a meal was at my mother's family home at the age of 18. He never received presents for Christmas. Most nights he and his mother would share a bowl of bread, sugar, and water for dinner. This wasn't the Depression. This was the goddamn 1950s.

College didn't work out for him for whatever reason and he dropped out to get a job. Not long after dropping out his draft number came up and he was shipped to Vietnam. My dad told me once that when he went off to war he didn't care if he came back or not. At the time he didn't think he had much to come back for. He was aimless, angry, and immature. And the U.S. Government wanted to put his immature anger to use in Southeast Asia.

The fight game is a young man's game. There are plenty of physiological reasons why this is so. Despite the examples of George Foreman and Bernard Hopkins winning championships in their 40s, the human body just shouldn't take the kind of punishment boxing inflicts on it beyond the mid-30s. But there are psychological reasons, as well. Boxing requires anger. Joyce Carol Oates notes that

...boxers are angry, as even a superficial knowledge of their lives indicates. And boxing is fundamentally about anger. It is in fact the only sport in which anger is accommodated, enobled. It is the only human activity in which rage can be transposed without equivocation into art.

Not just any kind of anger, as surely the sport also requires the discipline to control emotion, to be calculating and tactical, rational. The kind of anger a boxer needs is one that is unique to the young. One that is raw, one that burns with intensity. Not the kind of smoldering anger that comes from a lifetime's worth of regret. A passionate, pissed-off fury that comes from the resentment of recent injustice. An idealistic anger that seeks to prove something, to silence critics, to punish ill-wishers, to defy doubters, to say "you are wrong about me."

The perfect complement to the product of youth, anger, poverty and neglect is the elder wizened tough-guy disciplinarian. The archetype of the boxing trainer as father-figure is common to virtually every novel or film about boxing, but it is at least somewhat grounded in reality. There is likely no better example than Cus D'Amato.

Cus taught fighters that what separated the tomato cans from the contenders was incredible discipline to train the body, but also the mental discipline to embrace and control fear. Nobody was immune to fear. Every man, no matter how tough, was afraid. "Heroes and cowards feel the exact same fear," he said. "The only difference is how they react to it."

Victor Ortiz once had his family name tattooed across his back. One day early into his professional career his father tracked him down and, during an argument, pointed out that it was still "his name" that Victor had on his back. Victor had the tattoo covered up. Robert Garcia, his trainer, adopted him and became his legal guardian.

After a particularly devastating loss to Marcos Maidana, Victor fell out with Robert and Eduardo Garcia for “verbally humiliating” him with “derogatory speech.” He hired Robert’s brother, Danny, a less experienced but hungry trainer who drove a truck for Coca Cola on the side to make ends meet. As a result, Eduardo and Robert quit speaking to Danny and Victor.

Victor Ortiz’s father had ringside seats for the Mayweather fight, along with Robert Garcia. Their seats had been provided by Floyd Mayweather, Jr. This is why I lose so much money betting against this [guy].

I was tired of losing money on Floyd Mayweather, but I couldn’t bring myself to bet on him. Fortunately in boxing you can bet on the outcome of a fight without picking a winner. For this fight the line was 11.5 rounds, meaning that you could bet on whether or not the fight would go the distance and end by judges’ decision or if it would end by one of the fighters knocking the other one out. I chose under 11.5, or the knockout option, and I got even money. I saw no point in trying to get myself back to even with Floyd in one fight. On this proposition I was willing to risk no more than \$50, which was just enough to cover the cost of watching the fight on pay-per-view if I managed to win.

As the fight with Floyd Mayweather approached, Victor Ortiz ignored Danny Garcia’s orders and bailed on training to take a day off to go fishing with his friends. Meanwhile Mayweather, the huge favorite to win the fight, continued to do three workouts a day, the final workout at 1:00am each night. *Heroes and cowards feel the exact same fear. The only difference is in how they react to it.*

The fight went pretty much according to plan for the first three rounds. Mayweather did a wonderful job of cutting off the ring, keeping Ortiz moving backwards while Mayweather stayed on his toes. Whenever Mayweather would back Ortiz so far that his back touched the ropes, Mayweather would let his left hand go, either in a straight jab or a left hook. He easily won the first three rounds just by punching and moving.

About two and a half minutes into the fourth round Ortiz finally catches a break. He crouches low and, right as Mayweather begins to throw a right uppercut – a very difficult punch to get off without a counterpunch – Ortiz catches Mayweather with a right hook, stunning him. Ortiz moves in for the kill and starts swinging, backing Mayweather into the corner of the ring. Ortiz senses he has the initiative and starts swinging wildly to the body. Suddenly he looks up and sees Floyd looking straight at him, hands straight down at his side, unprotected. Victor throws a big right hand lead, one of the more terrifying punches in a boxer’s arsenal.

Whiff – he misses.

Floyd does something called the shoulder-roll, a defensive tactic where a fighter turns his upper body so that his shoulder is facing his opponent and held high to protect his chin. In this posture Floyd can balance his body and tilt in either direction to avoid the coming blows. The move is old school, but over the years Floyd has made an art form out of it. He learned the shoulder roll from his father.

When I was eight years old my father decided to teach me how to shoot a gun. This may seem like a young age but where I grew up it was pretty normal to get your first gun well before high school. My father was an avid hunter. He hunted with rifles, shotguns, bows and arrows; he even enjoyed hunting with 19th-century muzzle-loaders. I can only imagine how excited he was to take his son out to share the experience with him.

Most children I knew who had fired guns at that age usually shot .22 caliber rifles at squirrels or rabbits, a gun that kicked as much as a pellet gun and popped as loud as a bottle rocket. My dad handed me a 12-gauge shotgun. A 12-gauge would turn a squirrel into confetti. I wasn’t even strong enough to rack the shell into the chamber. After struggling with it for a few moments, he impatiently took the gun from me, cocked it,

then handed it back. Then he stood back and lit a cigarette and pointed across the field at the beer cans he had placed on a bush.

I'm not sure what happened next. I know that when he picked me up off the ground I was several yards from where I started and the gun wasn't in my hands. I also remember the ringing in my ears lasted nearly as long as the bruise on my shoulder took to disappear. Much to my father's dismay, I never again fired a gun.

I am not a tough sumofabitch. Not only am I the first in a long line of men in my family to not go to war, I have marched against and protested every single one. I didn't play football. I never drank a beer with my dad or smoked with him. Hell, I never drank a beer or smoked, ever, with anyone. I didn't get in too many fights growing up, and the times I did were almost always against my will. I felt no anger growing up. I loved my parents and felt loved by them, especially my father, who despite my lack of any of his masculine interests or toughness still showered me with love, attention and praise.

Perhaps one had something to do with the other.

Once Ortiz misses with the lead he seems to explode with frustration. His feet leave the canvas as he leaps forward and smashes his head into Floyd's chin, a blatant and dramatic violation of the rules. The referee stops the clock and tells the judges to deduct a point from Ortiz. Victor walks over to Floyd and hugs him to apologize. Floyd touches gloves with him and they both walk to the center of the ring to restart the fight. Ortiz reaches out to touch gloves again, a sign of good sportsmanship, and again Floyd obliges him and touches gloves. The referee motions for them to fight. He then turns to tell the judges to restart the clock. As he turns away Ortiz once again goes to hug Floyd. Floyd meets him with a left hook followed by a straight right hand, catching Ortiz completely off guard. Victor Ortiz hits the mat with a thud. The referee missed the entire exchange, yet turns around and begins to count to ten. Fourth round knockout, Floyd Mayweather, Jr. Cash the ticket.

The fight game is a young man's game, it's true. But no young fighter gets to the top alone. Who is in your corner matters a great deal. It is one thing to be tough, to be angry. A professional needs more than toughness. Toughness alone won't turn that fear into courage. James Baldwin said of Sonny Liston, himself a young fighter whose fuse burned as fast as it burned bright, that he was "aching for respect and responsibility. Sometimes we grow in to our responsibilities, and sometimes we fail them." *The only difference is how we react to it.*

A few weeks before he died I asked my dad if he was scared. He laughed. "You know I was scared every day before you were born. The entire time your mother was pregnant I was terrified. I didn't have a pot to piss in. I had no job. I had no idea how I was going to support you and your mom." His voice was gravelly, scratchy; the tumors at this point were so large they were literally squeezing his trachea. "I was more afraid then than I am right now. But I was so young.

"Once you were born, everything changed. My whole life changed. *I* changed.

"I can't stop what's coming," my dad finally coming around to the question I asked. "I've done all I can do. I think I did good. I think it's enough. But my time is up. You need to worry less about me and worry more about yourself. You have your own family now. They need you. Your time is just starting."

We buried him a few weeks later. He was 63 years old. I was 32, recently married, and my first child on the way. I was not a tough sumofabitch. But I was not afraid.