

Memphian LaDarius Miller, under Mayweather's wing, could be poised for boxing glory

Michael Cohen

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LAS VEGAS — Ninety minutes before the champ is scheduled to arrive, LaDarius Miller enters the Mayweather Boxing Club. He chomps away on Hubba Bubba Hawaiian Punch gum on a Monday afternoon in late July, ready to begin another six-day work week.

Located just a few miles from the lights and lasciviousness of The Strip, the Mayweather Boxing Club is nondescript. It is not a massive stand-alone structure, nor is it a wonderfully elaborate complex reflective of the endless bank account(s) of its namesake, Floyd Mayweather Jr. Instead, it's part of a strip mall.

Four years ago, Miller was a 17-year-old kid from Orange Mound riding a bus from Memphis to Las Vegas. His ticket, purchased with money pooled by his mother, father and uncle, was as much an escape valve as it was an adventure. It afforded him the ability to chase his dream while outrunning the Memphis streets.

Miller arrived at 4020 Schiff Drive for the job interview of a lifetime. After a decorated amateur career in Memphis he had come to the famed Mayweather Boxing Club in hopes of earning a spot in the champion's stable of fighters. With a torrid first month of training, Miller, who goes by the nickname "Memphis," carved out a niche as a fearless fighter whose raw talent reinforced his trash-talking bravado. Intrigued and impressed, Mayweather signed him to Mayweather Promotions.

Flash forward to the present and Miller is a 21-year-old welterweight with a 3-0 professional record and lofty expectations. Over the course of two days in late July, Miller granted a reporter access to life inside the Mayweather Boxing Club. The experience illuminates the vast financial spectrum of professional boxing in which members of The Money Team are scattered between newly professional and obnoxiously wealthy. The shared goal is to win a world championship, but the disparity in fame and fortune between Mayweather and everyone else places his fighters simultaneously close to the legend yet also miles apart.

"It's pressure," Miller said, "but at the same time Floyd, he hand-picked us for a reason. He sees something in us."

Full-time job

One hour before the champ is scheduled to arrive, Miller is warming up inside a boxing ring emblazoned with The Money Team's neon yellow logo. He circles the canvas with a resistance band stretched around his neck and down either arm.

"Where's my hook?" calls out Eddie Mustafa Muhammad, Miller's trainer.

Under the guidance of Muhammad, a former light heavyweight world champion, Miller trains Monday through Friday for roughly three hours each day. The workouts alternate between sparring and technique-based sessions, with Miller actually boxing as many as four times per week. Strength and conditioning sessions are held twice a week at 6 a.m. with Chris Ben-Tchavtchavadze, head boxing coach at UNLV.

The cycle is completed Saturday morning with a five-mile run up Mount Charleston. Reaching the summit of more than 8,000 feet affords the fighters a ride back down in Muhammad's car and a trip to BabyStacks Café for red velvet pancakes.

In Muhammad, Miller believes he has found the perfect teacher. At 62 years old, Muhammad has spent the last five decades in boxing and has 50 career wins to his name. His resume commands respect, but it's his ability to dissect fighters and bond with them emotionally that wins over his pupils.

"You've got a lot of trainers that try to make you fight the way they used to fight," Miller said. "Eddie takes whatever your talent is, whatever your skill is and makes it better."

On Tuesday, Miller spars with a 31-year-old from France. He begins sluggishly, plodding around the ring as the Frenchman dances and scores. A half-slip-half-punch drops Miller to the canvas, causing the gym to erupt.

"Boy, get your butt up!" someone yells.

Miller is rattled. He stops fighting and removes his mouthpiece to hurl insults at the ringside hecklers. In steps Muhammad to soothe.

"Why are you worried about what's going on outside?" Muhammad says.

The next two rounds feature a flurry of body shots by Miller. With Muhammad's instruction, he negates his opponent's reach advantage by getting in close to attack the body. Ten minutes later, the Frenchman throws in the towel. He's exhausted.

"When he listens," Muhammad said, "he's a much better fighter."

The Money Team

Fifteen minutes before the champ is scheduled to arrive, word trickles through the gym that the open session must come to a close. All afternoon the place has buzzed, with men, women and children pouring sweat onto the black rubber floor.

It all winds down at 2:51 p.m. Floyd Mayweather Jr. is on his way, and the champ trains alone.

In a food court at the Palms Casino Resort later that evening, Miller and J'Leon Love, a rising star in Mayweather Promotions with an 18-0 record, open up about their relationship with Mayweather, a man they say treats them like family. Mayweather, they explain, is involved in their lives on a daily basis, whether it be organizing a barbecue or buying out a movie theater to take his protégés for the night. Miller said he feels “blessed” because Mayweather ensures “none of us want for anything.”

They consider Mayweather a teacher akin to “Michael Jordan or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar teaching you the game that they know,” Love says. With his career as a blueprint, Mayweather feeds them the do’s and don’ts of life both in and out of the ring. His fighters see the work ethic needed to become a champion and the lifestyle choices to make that work ethic possible. They see his successes and his failures, his lavish vacations and his run-ins with the law.

“That’s priceless right there,” Love said.

The importance of living simply and frugally is why Miller and Love are eating modestly in a casino food court. It’s why they spend their free time going to movies instead of nightclubs. Be smart now, Mayweather told them, so you can enjoy it even more later when the paychecks look like phone numbers. Where Miller might make a few thousand per fight, Love has begun to see six-figure purses. Mayweather, though, makes upwards of \$30 million every time he steps in the ring.

Still, his most important lesson is to be wary of outsiders. From Twitter followers requesting early releases of video games to oil drillers in San Antonio seeking investors, Miller and Love have lost track of the attempts to gain access to Mayweather. Their membership with The Money Team makes them potential points of entry, which is why every request is met with caution.

“What is the end outcome?” Love said. “What do you really want from me?”

A world champion

Eighty-six minutes after the champ is scheduled to arrive, the champ arrives. A series of impossibly fancy cars denote his presence.

Mayweather emerges from the locker room and into a tunnel of spectators. The sea of cellphone cameras and handshake seekers guide him to the ring, where Mayweather’s arms, shoulders and back are massaged.

Boxing gloves of every color stretch from one side of the ring to the other for Mayweather’s inspection. Facemasks only extend halfway across.

He steps into the ring wearing green gloves and a pink helmet; his sparring partner has been waiting for quite some time. Even here, on his first day of training for the upcoming fight with Marcos Maidana, Mayweather pummels his opponent, leaving him with a bloodied and swollen face.

“All you fighters are the same to me,” Mayweather barks between combinations.

As the icon of winning and wealth puts on a show, the next generation soaks it all in ringside. In front of Miller is the pinnacle of everything he wants to achieve, the ultimate dream as he crossed the country on a Greyhound bus. At a family cookout this spring, Mayweather stamped Miller a future champion. It left him humbled and with yet another reason to believe.

Said Miller: “That just means if I keep on the right track and stay focused, I have no choice but to be a world champion.”