WHO IS THIS MAN AND WHAT HAS HE DONE TO BOXING?

THE MANAGER WHO BUILT FLOYD MAYWEATHER INTO ONE OF THE HIGHEST-PAID ATHLETES IN HISTORY IS TAKING ON THE ENTIRE BOXING INDUSTRY. THE SPORT WON'T GO DOWN EASY

I have come to Tampa in search of a man. In newspapers and chat rooms, on blogs and video, this man has been referred to as the Phantom, the Wizard of Oz, the new Don King, Keyser Söze, the Rasputin of Boxing and the most powerful man in sports. There are theories about him: that he's turning boxing into the USFL, that he's killing boxing just as he killed Motown Records and, my favorite, that he doesn't actually exist but is a creation of the Illuminati to launder money through certain TV networks. I have never met or even seen the man in person, so I cannot confirm nor deny any of that. I am sure of only one fact: The man's name is Alan Haymon.

I'm told Haymon is not in Tampa. Physically, that is. Yet as I roam the 10,400-seat Sun Dome, home to the University of South Florida Bulls and tonight's ESPN show, it's obvious Haymon is everywhere. Most of the 20 fighters on the card, including headliners Keith "One Time" Thurman (25–0, 21 KOs) and Luis Collazo (36–6, 19 KOs), are managed by Haymon. The entire mobile set featuring the dazzling Wall of

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Thunder—a Times Square–size array of three-millimeter LEDs (costing in the neighborhood of $2 million) displaying the fighters' names and head shots—was funded by Haymon. His fingerprints are on ESPN too, this being the debut of an ESPN-Haymon monthly boxing series that replaces the weekly *Friday Night Fights*.

To those with a stake in the sweet science, Al Haymon has been known as the sport's preeminent boxing manager–advisor for the past decade. He has amassed 200-plus fighters including Thurman, heavyweight Deontay Wilder, Adonis Stevenson and Floyd Mayweather, all of whom espouse a fealty to Haymon usually reserved for a deity. He's a 60-year-old Ivy Leaguer and former music promoter who shuns publicity and attention like a vampire avoids sunlight. No photo shoots. No interviews.

Then, in January of this year, the boxing universe was rocked when NBC Sports Group announced the launch of the *Premier Boxing Champions* series, 20 live bouts airing on NBC and NBC Sports Network throughout 2015. This meant the sport was returning—regularly—to pedestrian TV, including five prime-time shows, something the networks hadn't aired in three decades. The architect and owner of the Premier Boxing Champions brand? Al Haymon. As if that news wasn't enough, over the coming months PBC announced what felt like a new TV deal every week, including ones with CBS, ESPN, Spike, Bounce and Fox Sports. As the story unfolded, it was revealed that Haymon had raised $425 million to fund his attempt to return boxing to "free" TV and, in doing so, to the national zeitgeist.

Some hailed it as a bold, long overdue move to revive a stagnating sport. Others flipped out, claiming Haymon is attempting to hijack the sport and put high-profile promoters (Top Rank, Golden Boy) and networks (HBO, Showtime) out of the boxing business. Instead of seeing Haymon as a savior, many see him as a shady, secretive Suge Knight of boxing who is way out of his league. "There are a lot of smart people with access to lots of money who make stupid decisions," said Kathy Duva, CEO of Main Events promotions. "They set themselves into a hole and it blows up. This is gonna blow up."

Back at the Sun Dome, however, the only thing blowing up is the 7,000-strong crowd. Spotlights swirl. The Alan Parsons Project's "Sirius" (the Chicago Bulls' intro song) blares over the sound system. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to go live on ESPN. Let's make some noise for the PBC!" With 11 cameras, glitzy staging and palpable excitement for Clearwater, Florida native Thurman, tonight's production

1. Al Haymon turned Floyd Mayweather into one of the highest-paid athletes. **2.** Léo Santa Cruz and Abner Mares during a Premier Boxing Champions event. **3.** A rare photo of Haymon.

"WHEN THIS IS ALL SAID AND DONE, IT'S GOING TO BE MUCH BIGGER THAN THE UFC."

is a serious upgrade from ESPN's now-defunct *Friday Night Fights*. "The PBC is bringing us fighters at their pinnacle," says Brian Kweder, senior director of programming and acquisitions. "That belongs on ESPN."

After a stunning ninth-round TKO on the undercard, the main event kicks off. The 26-year-old Thurman, stronger, faster and sharper, dominates the first four rounds. But in the fifth, the veteran Collazo hurts Thurman with a left hook to the body. The younger fighter recovers, however, and a bloodied Collazo doesn't come out for the eighth round.

As I join the sated masses heading for the doors, I run into Tim Smith, Haymon Boxing's vice president of communications, a.k.a. the company flack. Genial and quick with a smile, Smith, a former New York *Daily News* boxing scribe, chats with a white-haired acquaintance from the boxing business. They talk about the fight, the changes afoot and the future of PBC.

"That Al is going to be like Dana White and the UFC," notes the old-timer.

"Oh no," says Smith with a chuckle. "When this is all said and done, it's going to be much bigger than the UFC."

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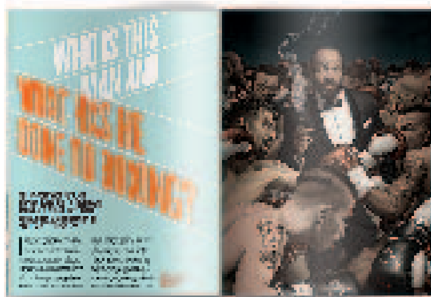
In September 1977, NBC's broadcast of Muhammad Ali's 15-round decision over Earnie Shavers drew a 37.3 rating with a 57 percent TV share—meaning more than half the households in America, or about 100 million people, tuned in. As recently as 1995, a Mike Tyson–Buster Mathis Jr. matchup on Fox attracted 26.5 million viewers. Times have changed. An average show on HBO—the undisputed champ of boxing programming—is seen in 1.3 million households. This past May, the long-awaited Floyd Mayweather–Manny Pacquiao bout, the most anticipated in recent *(continued on page 102)*



WHO IS THIS MAN AND WHAT HAS HE DONE TO BOXING?

Continued from page 66

memory and the biggest pay-per-view prizefight in history, did only 4.4 million PPV buys. "We used to be the number one sport," explains former HBO boxing czar Lou DiBella, now a New York City–based promoter. "Now on major sports websites boxing isn't even at the top of the ticker. It's listed under 'other' like billiards and sportfishing."

This is not to say boxing is dying. Clearly the $400 million Mayweather-Pacman haul proves that. Nor is it to say the industry is replete with dolts and crooks. Promoter Bob Arum of Top Rank is as smart and shrewd as any executive in professional sports. HBO and Showtime have long carried the sport on their backs, helping to build stars from Julio César Chávez and Evander Holyfield to Oscar De La Hoya and Floyd Mayweather. But boxing isn't healthy. "For decades the entire model has been driven toward a few promoters and one or two networks," says Luis "Lou" Ferrer, who spent nearly 10 years (2004 to 2013) at HBO boxing before landing at NBC Sports as director of programming acquisitions. "They've been siphoning off every bit of profit for themselves, even though it meant shrinking the fan base and driving down viewership."

Solutions are no secret: Ditch the dizzying alphabet soup of sanctioning bodies (WBO, WBC, IBF, WBA). Reduce the number of weight classes (currently 17). End the greed, petty infighting, personal grudges and cronyism that have churned out too many crappy fights and put the kibosh on countless others that fans wanted to see. Put on fewer PPV cards. The loudest rallying cry of all? Bring boxing back to network television. "You can't grow a sport or an industry through PPV or premium cable," says DiBella.

Understandably, HBO and Showtime have little interest in boxing's return to network television because it represents competition. The promoters and managers didn't put up a fight because cable and PPV meant better money with less hassle. No one with any clout in boxing has done anything to remedy the stagnation until now. "I wasn't surprised about PBC's deal with NBC," says Duva, hinting that Haymon absconded with her own NBC deal, a three-year contract that aired 20 shows, none of which were in prime time. "But I was surprised he was dealing with so many networks."

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It is the spring of 1973 and all is good in Al Haymon's world. He calls East Cleveland home, three square miles of integrated working-class folks where houses are kept up and kids play in the streets. On the radio, the O'Jays, the Spinners and the Ohio Players groove about girls, cars and neighborhood pride. The previous November Haymon sat in the Cleveland Arena and watched hundreds of fans cheering for his older brother Bobby, a professional prizefighter, as he won his 18th bout. And that fall Al would be heading to Harvard. From his John Adams High School senior yearbook photo you can tell he's ready. It isn't the afro or the stylish wide-collared shirt but his cool Mona Lisa grin, behind which he seems to be saying, "That's right, motherfuckers, bring it *on*."

Bring it he did. By the late 1980s he was promoting Top 100, R&B and jazz acts from Luther Vandross and Patti LaBelle to Stanley Clarke and Freddie Jackson. "Was he a nice guy? He was a businessman. I don't know many nice businessmen," says the O'Jays' Walter Williams with a laugh. "But he treated people good, made connections with promoters in different areas and took us all over the U.S. I have mad respect for him."

The big time didn't translate to life in the fast lane. "We worked out of his house in Newton, Massachusetts," explains Arlan Little, hired by Haymon in the mid-1980s. "He was like James Brown, the hardest-working man in show business." When not living out of a suitcase, Haymon led a low-key life. No lavish dinners. He didn't drink, smoke or hit the postconcert parties he threw when his acts played in Boston. Blowing off steam meant playing pickup hoops on the Harvard campus. "He was quiet, never rude," says Little. "He even let me practice for my road test with his BMW."

Haymon dove into boxing after watching a fighter who reminded him of his brother. Welterweight Vernon "the Viper" Forrest was just like Bobby: the same weight class, the same soft-spoken demeanor and the same sort of problems. Earlier in his career, Bobby Haymon had been mismanaged. In 2002, Forrest, looking to get out of an unfavorable contract, sought Haymon's help. Following back-to-back victories over "Sugar" Shane Mosley, Haymon got the Viper a six-fight deal at HBO.

Two men hitting each other onstage may seem a far cry from Motown, but Haymon saw similarities. "Al has told me about his love of the sport," says Stephen Espinoza, executive vice president and general manager of Showtime Sports. "But he also has the desire to protect these artists and fighters. He's seen how many participants get exploited."

There's not a person in the boxing business who has taken better financial care of fighters. Most managers take 33 percent; some take more. Haymon reportedly takes only 10 to 15 percent. Word is he doesn't take a cut for a boxer's first bout after signing nor for any fight under $100,000. He has never been accused of stealing or impropriety. If there has been a consistent complaint over the years, it's that Haymon's clients are overpaid—at the expense of network budgets and a fair market value. "People were upset when they read how much I was making for fights," says former welterweight champ Andre Berto, who signed with Haymon in 2006. "But promoters and managers aren't throwing any punches. Why be upset with a man risking his life?"

Those closest to Haymon will attest that it's not only about the benjamins. Berto knows this better than most. He first got a call from Haymon in 2005. The fighter was happy with promoter Lou DiBella and told Haymon he wasn't in the market for a manager. "But then we started talking almost every day for eight or nine months," explains Berto. "Not boxing. It wasn't a sales pitch. We spoke about life, the real world."

Over time the Haitian American fighter discovered that Haymon hadn't changed much from the mid-1980s. He still worked out of his house in Massachusetts. He never took vacations; he got his highs "making things happen." No bags of cash. No flash. Loyal to a fault, his core staff—Sam Watson, Sylvia Browne, Brad Owens—had been with him for decades. The most important person in Haymon's life? Not Mayweather but Emma Lou, his mother. He regularly took her to church and brought her grocery shopping with all her coupons—miles away in Cleveland, where she lived.

Is it an act? Maybe Haymon is secretly mimicking fellow John Adams High School alum (class of 1951) Don King. Just speak to Paul Williams, the former middleweight champ who was paralyzed in a 2012 motorcycle accident. "Al was there from day one, calling every day," says Williams. "I can't make money for him anymore, but he still pushes me, motivates me, wants to see me make something for myself." Or ask Léo Santa Cruz, the undefeated Mexican brawler who named his second son Al in homage to Haymon. Or look at his record. In a sport where fighters change managers and promoters as often as they do gyms, I've heard of only two boxers who have parted ways with Haymon: junior welterweight Lucas Matthysse, who opted to remain with Golden Boy, and Andre Dirrell, who thought the grass would be greener with 50 Cent, only to call it "the biggest mistake" of his life. What

did Haymon do? Exactly what Keyser Söze wouldn't have done: He took Dirrell back.

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"Throw some fucking punches! You look like amateurs!"

I'm at another July fight night courtesy of PBC, this time at Pearl Concert Theater, an intimate eggshell of a venue at the Palms casino in Las Vegas. In the co-feature of this NBCSN show, a pair of uninspired cruiserweights reluctantly paw at each other as if they have better places to be. There are maybe 1,000 people on hand suffering, and Tim Smith tells me once again that Al Haymon is not among them.

Yet perched ringside I spy Floyd Mayweather, tonight's promoter of record and a fighter without whom PBC may never have come to be. Haymon, Mayweather and Mayweather's longtime manager, Leonard Ellerbe, first crossed paths in Atlantic City in 2005. "In the early 1980s, my favorite DJ, Catfish Mayfield, used to always talk about Al," says Ellerbe, who was living in Northeast D.C. at the time. "He was one of the biggest concert promoters ever." Mayweather, who in those days was signed to a multiyear deal with Top Rank, felt he wasn't getting the fights—and paydays—worthy of his potential. Haymon, armed with a Harvard MBA, had promoted the likes of Whitney Houston, Eddie Murphy (his *Raw* tour) and Michael Jackson. He'd helped create the legendary Budweiser Superfest concert series. He was a razor-sharp, straight-talking, successful black man who was serving as a consigliere to young fighters including Jermain Taylor and Chris Arreola. "We hit it off out of the gate," says Ellerbe. "And it was the best move Floyd ever made in his career."

In 2006, with Haymon in his ear, Mayweather forked over $750,000 to buy out his Top Rank contract and become, essentially, a free agent. He'd be able to negotiate with networks and promoters (or promote himself) on a fight-to-fight basis. It was a gamble; if Mayweather stank, he would lose out on the guaranteed Top Rank money. But if he lived up to his talent, he could become a very rich man. A year after he left Top Rank, Mayweather pocketed $25 million for a fight against Oscar De La Hoya, and over the next eight years he generated a billion dollars in PPV revenue. The Money Mayweather industry was born.

Meanwhile, Haymon was using a cozy relationship with then HBO boxing exec Kery Davis to turn the network into a pipeline for his growing stable of fighters. And after two decades in the music business, Haymon knew his side of the bargaining table. "He was the toughest negotiator I've ever been around," says Ferrer. "He always delivered what he said he was going to, but he also used every bit of leverage he could to get his clients the best deals. He was the epitome of what we call in the legal world a zealous advocate." Another TV executive (who asked to remain anonymous) tells of Haymon dishing out the leverage. "Al wanted us to do a fight with Sakio Bika," says the exec. Bika was a mediocre, bland supermiddleweight, the boxing equivalent of a Marlins-Padres game. Naturally, the TV exec balked. "Al shook his head and said, 'Well, that's not going to make Floyd very happy....' "

At some point Haymon dreamed up PBC, a plan that relied on two key components: One, secrecy. If word leaked, there would be a line of people looking to derail the venture. Two, boatloads of cash. PBC couldn't use the standard model in which TV networks pay a licensing fee for sports programming à la the NFL, MLB, UFC, etc. That ship had long since sailed for boxing. Instead, Haymon would turn the traditional model on its head: He was going to pay the networks to air PBC.

By 2013 he was signing fighters the way Mayweather buys cars, and the money, nearly half a billion dollars, was provided by Waddell & Reed, a $40 billion fund that had already sunk $1.5 billion into Formula One. A huge gamble? Yes. A potentially massive upside? Without question. With DVRs and video-on-demand undermining advertising, live sports have become a precious commodity. In 2011, Fox coughed up a reported $100 million a year for the UFC. The next fall, NBC paid $250 million for a three-year deal to air England's Premier League. Haymon's goal wasn't to sell a few ads or attract a sponsor or two. He was thinking much bigger. "This is a long play, a multiyear endeavor," explains DiBella. "Al's attempting to brand something, to create a new audience with a consistent, reliable product."

On March 7, *Premier Boxing Champions* debuted on NBC prime time from the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The card featured Thurman and flashy Cincinnati native Adrien Broner. Although both fighters collected earned decisions, the biggest winner that night was PBC. Luring an average of 3.4 million viewers (according to Nielsen), it was the most-watched pro-boxing telecast since *Oscar De La Hoya's Fight Night* on Fox averaged 5.9 million viewers 17 years ago, on March 23, 1998. Over the next four months, 12 more PBC shows aired—and the series had yet to launch on Fox Sports or Bounce.

The haters came out in droves. Some targeted Haymon professionally: Al is undermining the industry by paying for airtime. He has historically put on shitty fights and is continuing to do so. He's not taking time or resources to build up young fighters. He's cannibalizing the sport. He's staging too many fights. The ratings suck. "He's turning this into a sports property?" says Duva. "I think the end game is simply to bilk investors." Other vitriol got personal. Why doesn't he ever speak to the media? Why is he so secretive? Why would he leave the music business if he hadn't been up to no good? What's he hiding?

The hating on the professional side is a mixed bag, some crazy, some legit, but for the majority, it's too soon to tell. The most valid gripe? The fights themselves. Throughout 2014, Haymon fighters

appeared in a plethora of duds. But when the news of PBC broke, it made sense: Haymon was saving the quality matchups for his own series. PBC bouts so far? Some fights that looked fantastic on paper (Adrien Broner vs. Shawn Porter, Danny "Swift" García vs. Lamont Peterson) underwhelmed, while others, such as the stunning knockout of champion Marco Huck that aired on Spike TV, have been surprises.

As for the personal attacks, Mayweather's manager doesn't think it's about business. "It's 100 percent about race," says Ellerbe. "There's all this criticism because he's a successful African American. That intimidates people. There's a lot of jealousy. If Al was a white male you wouldn't hear any of this." He has a point. There was once a white CEO, an extraordinarily private man who never spoke to the media and sought to both revolutionize and dominate his industry. But this man was seen as a visionary. His name was Steve Jobs.

This spring the smack talk turned to legalese. In May, De La Hoya and his Golden Boy Promotions filed a $300 million lawsuit against Haymon and PBC, alleging it violates the Muhammad Ali Boxing Reform Act, which prohibits managers from acting as promoters. In July, Top Rank's Arum jumped in, seeking $100 million in damages and citing both the Ali Act and the Sherman Antitrust Act. Perhaps their allegations have merit. Or maybe they just want to rattle Haymon's investors and force him to reveal himself in a deposition. The irony is unavoidable: The promoters' lawsuits are based on the Ali Act, legislation meant to protect fighters, but not a single fighter is suing Haymon.

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Al Haymon is here, right now, on this August Saturday night at Barclays Center in Brooklyn. Tonight is ESPN's second PBC card, featuring the unblemished García (30–0, 17 KOs) taking on local scrapper and Showtime color analyst Paulie "Magic Man" Malignaggi (33–6, 7 KOs). Haymon is hanging around the locker rooms in his standard dark suit, dark tie and white shirt, with his standard old-school flip phone, watching the fights on a closed-circuit TV. So I am told. I haven't yet seen Haymon myself. No one is eager to let me near him.

I've never been to the Nets' home arena before, but much feels familiar tonight. Same Wall of Thunder. Same high-tech lighting, same thumping sound system. As always, there are no ring card girls, no mention of sanctioning bodies and their belts, no entourages trailing a fighter into the ring. For boxing diehards watching on TV or sitting among the 7,200 spectators, there is no question this is a PBC show. And that is an essential part of Haymon's grand experiment: quality, consistency, reliability.

And an experiment it is. The PBC might not work. "It fails if the damage to boxing is already too deep," says Ferrer. If the bad decisions and mismatches and squandered fights and watered-down weight classes and never-heard-of titles have finally left a permanent bad taste in people's mouths, then the sweet science may never again catch on. Period. Haymon will have nothing to be ashamed of. "You can't be afraid to fail," says Ellerbe. "If you never try, it can't happen."

But it might succeed. To pull it off, for PBC to not just survive but thrive, requires more than a high-def video board and Marv Albert calling the action. "Boxing is all about stars," says NBC Sports president Jon Miller. PBC has its share of potential household names—Thurman, Porter, García—but none bigger than heavyweight Deontay Wilder (34–0, 33 KOs). The big men still attract the boldest numbers, and the six-foot-seven 2008 Olympic bronze medalist has the best odds to fill the void left by the soon-retiring Money Mayweather. "Deontay is as dynamic a personality as I've seen in a long time," says Miller.

PBC will also need a little luck. A few good matchups must turn into mind-blowing sagas, fights so electrifying they seep into mainstream headlines: trilogies like those of Arturo Gatti and Micky Ward, Erik Morales and Marco Antonio Barrera, or the still talked-about 2005 epic between Diego Corrales and José Luis Castillo. PBC may have found its gold in Léo Santa Cruz and Abner Mares, who delivered a 12-round brawl and brought in an average of 1.2 million viewers, the largest boxing audience ESPN has pulled since 1998.

Lastly, Haymon must make competitive fights. Fights that fans want to see. Dangerous fights. This may be, in the long run, the PBC founder's toughest task. Since starting out, Haymon has sought to do best by his boxers. Pay them. Protect them. Sometimes overprotect them. But the great—and sometimes tragic—paradox of boxing is that what's best for the athlete is often not best for the sport.

The sport does not suffer tonight at Barclays Center. Both undercard fighters score first-round knockdowns, but a leg injury ends the potential barn burner in the second. In the main event, Malignaggi, who has always compensated with heart for what he lacks in punching power, takes it to García for the first five rounds. But the 34-year-old has been hinting at retirement, and in the seventh and eighth rounds that looks more and more like a good idea. The fight is stopped in the ninth.

As García's arm is raised, I rush down to a hallway entrance. This is the main artery into and out of the dressing rooms and where I will catch, I hope, my first in-person glimpse of Al Haymon. I wait. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. People stream past, none of them my subject. Finally I get word that Haymon has left the premises. That doesn't surprise me. Before I make for the exit, I notice Malignaggi, face swollen but smiling, heading toward the locker rooms. He stops momentarily when he sees Ron Rizzo, a vice president at DiBella Entertainment and a longtime boxing acquaintance. The two men hug. "The ride's over, Riz," says Malignaggi.

Perhaps his ride. But for boxing, the real ride is just beginning.