COMMENTARY

“Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson” perpetuates the long history of profiting from race conflicts in the ring

The appeal preys on the desire to reclaim what is perceived to be taken - no matter what the cost

By RANN MILLER

PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 15, 2024 1:30PM (EST)



Mike Tyson and Jake Paul speak onstage at the press conference in promotion for the upcoming Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson boxing match at The Apollo Theater on May 13, 2024 in New York City. (Sarah Stier/Getty Images for Netflix)

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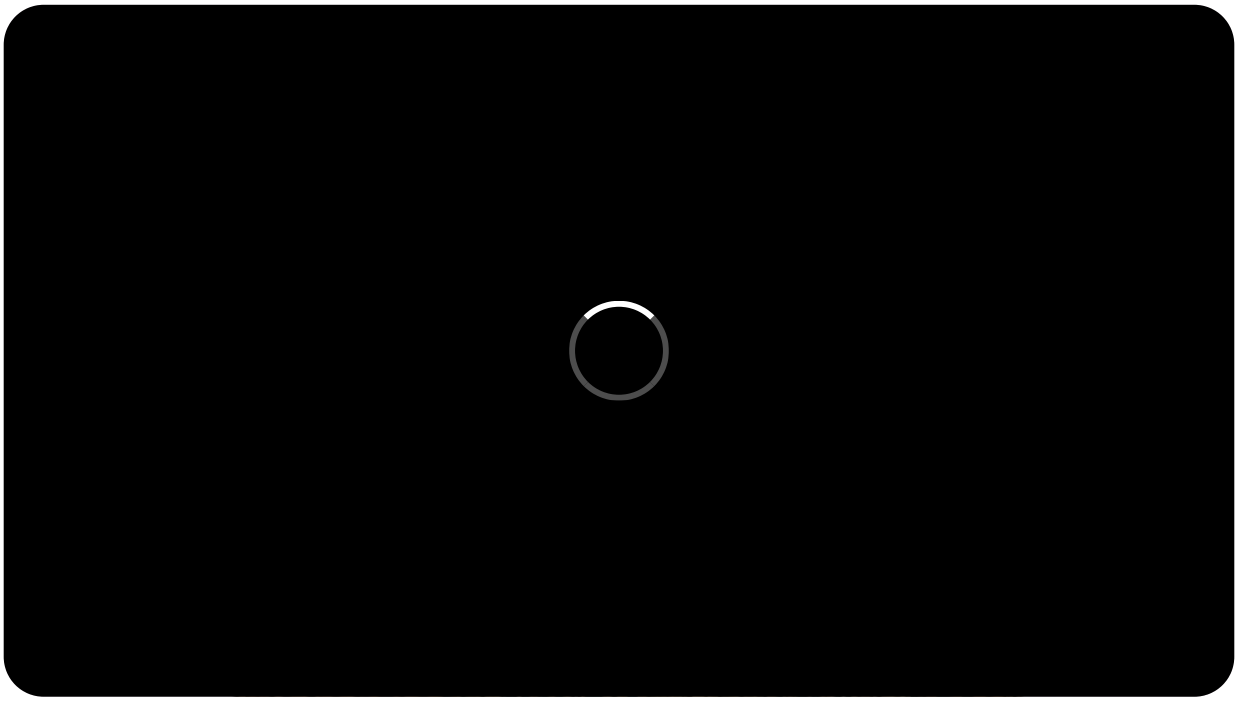
This week, Mike Tyson returns to the ring after a 19-year layoff. His opponent is Jake Paul, the YouTube sensation turned professional boxer who some claim is

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bad for boxing. But boxing isn't bad for Paul's wallet. He may make up to $40 million from this fight, although neither Paul nor Tyson confirmed their payday.



On the surface, the appeal is finding out if the 58-year-old Tyson can defeat Paul, who's less than half Tyson's age. There's also this: learning if Paul can continue to build his resume as a boxer, defeating real boxers. However, at the lowest common dominator, the intrigue surrounds whether Jake Paul is the next great white heavyweight.

There's a truism in advertising that sex sells. That's not the only thing that sells . . . race sells too, especially in boxing.

Race (or racism) is a featured tactic in fight promotion. One of the most apparent examples was the Mayweather-McGregor fight in 2017, with McGregor engaging in pre-fight antics where he called Mayweather "boy" – the anti-Black slur that serves as a proxy for the N-word – when instructing him to "dance" for him.

But there are other fights, like Wilder-Fury or even Mayweather-(Logan) Paul. Race in boxing is even sold in Hollywood. Examples include "The Great White Hope," "The

Professional boxing is where the concept of the great white hope — and the Black villain — gained traction.

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Great White Hype" and most notably in the "Rocky" franchise — the fictional story of a self-made white (Italian) boxer taking on the Black heavyweight champion in the first movie, defeating that champ in the second and defending the title against another Black heavyweight in the third.

For this, he earned a statue on the Philadelphia Art Museum steps. The irony of lauding a white fictional boxing hero in Philadelphia wasn't lost on comedian Bill Burr who in 2011 said:

"F**king Rocky is your hero. The whole pride of your city is built around a f**king guy who doesn't even exist. You got Joe Frazier from here but he's Black so you can't f**king deal with him, so you make a f**king statue of some 3-foot f**king Italian you stupid Philly cheese-eating f**king jacka**es."

The city erected a Joe Frazier statue in 2015.

Selling race works well in other sports. For example, one of this year's major sports stories was the ascent of the WNBA and women's basketball overall. The popularity of Caitlin Clark has a lot to do with that. Not only has Clark's talent on the court created a buzz, but it's her anointing as the next *great white hope* in an industry dominated by Black athletes; some of whom are cast as villains for their "treatment" of Clark, like Angel Reese and Chennedy Carter.

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Caitlin Clark #22 of the Indiana Fever controls the ball during the game against the New York Liberty on June 2, 2024 at the Barclayys Center in Brooklyn, New York. (Rich Graessle/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images)

But professional boxing is where the concept of the great white hope — and the Black villain — gained traction. It's not that African Americans dominating a sport was a foreign idea at that time. In horse racing, Black jockeys won more than half of the Kentucky Derby held from 1875 to 1903 — until Jim Crow eliminated the Black jockey. Still, horse racing wasn't a sport where a Black man could physically harm a white man. Boxing is such a sport.

In 1908, White people began searching for a white boxer to defeat Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight champion. White people couldn't fathom a Black man being superior to a white man in boxing. Additionally, Johnson wasn't a Black man who "knew his place." He didn't fear white people. He also flaunted his relations with white women in public.

James Jeffries was the first great white hope, announcing to America that he would "reclaim the heavyweight championship for the white race." He was soundly defeated. From 1908 to 1915, numerous great white hopes tried and failed to beat Johnson, until Jess Willard, nicknamed the "chocolate dropper," finally did, becoming the pride of white America.

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It would be seven years before a Black man was allowed to compete for any boxing title again and 15 more until a Black man could compete for the heavyweight title. The next Black heavyweight champion was Joe Louis, considered a “good Negro” by whites as opposed to Johnson.

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Muhammad Ali would turn the use of race to promote his fights on its head, using many of his Black opponents for white proxies. Per Jeffrey T. Sammons, a history professor at New York University and the author of "Beyond The Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society": “Those Blacks became stand-ins for the authority or the establishment or the so-called ‘man . . .’ When there weren’t real white hopes, Black people became white folks based on what was perceived to be their political positions.”

Famed boxing promoter Don King labeled Gerry Cooney the great white hope in promoting Cooney’s fight with then-champ Larry Holmes. Cooney even admitted, “It’s a selling point.” So much so that Holmes had to move his family from their home because white supremacists shot up his mailbox.

That is the genius of boxing promotion, the understanding that people will pay to watch the downfall of the other.

Floyd Mayweather, a promoter himself, took advantage of the race angle in selecting McGregor to fight and in selecting Logan Paul. “Money” Mayweather, always the capitalist, seized on the opportunity to make lucrative paydays by exploiting the racism that fueled the desire for his downfall.

Per Wayne State School of Law professor Khaled A. Beydoun, “Money drives the yearning for a white contender who can capture the imagination of new audiences and the maximum dollars only whiteness can bring.” It explains why Logan Paul, a boxing novice, was able to

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enter the ring with a boxer in the conversation as one of the greatest boxers ever. It is why Jake Paul can secure a deal with Netflix to fight the “baddest man on the planet.”

It’s good for business.



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Mike Tyson, Nakisa Bidarian and Jake Paul pose onstage during the Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson Boxing match Arlington press conference at Texas Live! on May 16, 2024 in Arlington, Texas. (Cooper Neill/Getty Images for Netflix)

But what's good business doesn't explain the vitriol away that's aimed at the Paul brothers — particularly Jake. Hundreds of boxers train for years for the opportunity to earn life-changing money and a shot at a world title. Jake Paul has already secured millions after eleven fights. Fighting Tyson legitimizes him even more, and if Paul's able to win, it's likely to propel him to a world title fight. This, by building his resume fighting non-boxers; only recently boxing those with boxing experience, after his first loss to a boxer.

It's the kind of pretentiousness and white privilege that mirrors Kim Kardashian's pursuit of practicing law simply by passing the bar exam. Whereas Black people have to work twice as hard, white people and persons white adjacent only have to be half as good.

However, Jake Paul may know something that we as a society are reluctant to admit: we thirst for a race conflict, even if the conflict comes in a boxing ring. That thirst is for a semblance of race vindication-ism. For African Americans, "rooting for everybody Black" comes from the reality that Black people must overcome sometimes insurmountable odds to obtain justice or success.

While a "win" feels like a blow against whiteness, ultimately justice or success doesn't come from an isolated incident of race conflict – whether in a boxing ring, a courtroom or the ballot box.

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For white people, the idea of reclaiming what was "taken" from them is a real thing: jobs taken by immigrants, college admissions by affirmative action, unfiltered opinions by cancel culture, Christian values by women and the LGBTQ+ community – and since the end of segregation – athletics by Black people. It's the ethos that is the foundation for the "making America great again" mindset. It's the sentiment, among others, that was behind the recent reelection of Donald Trump despite his loss in 2020.

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But this view of the world is to their detriment.

President Lyndon Johnson remarked, “If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you.” The MAGA mindset is picking the pockets of many white people. But like Floyd Mayweather, Jake Paul is ever the capitalist and doesn’t mind pickpocketing either.

Because nobody wins when humanity fails to see everyone as fully human. I suppose that is the genius of boxing promotion, the understanding that people will pay to watch the downfall of the other. They’ll pay with their vote or they’ll pay in cash. Jake Paul has mastered exploiting the expediency of securing the latter.

We’ll soon see if he’s great white hope or great white hype.

Jake Paul vs. Mike Tyson streams live on Friday, Nov. 15 at 8 p.m. ET/5 p.m. PT on Netflix.

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By **RANN MILLER**

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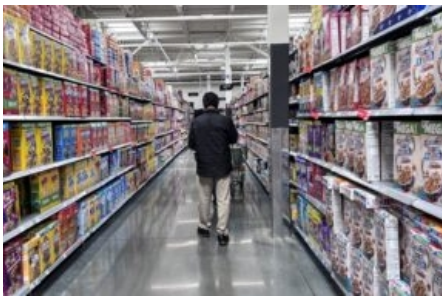
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