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Boxing Finds a New Dance Partner: Hip-Hop

By JOHN ELIGON

Damon Dash strutted into the Starrett City Boxing Gym in Brooklyn with a cellphone to his ear and a BlackBerry in his hand. Wearing a baseball cap cocked to the side, Dash, immersed in conversation, was taking care of business.

But once the phone clapped shut, Dash, the millionaire best known as a co-founder of Roc-A-Fella Records, joined dozens of ordinary people bubbling at the sight of two teenagers trying to knock each other out.

He was right at home.

Dash, 34, with enough swagger in his step to captivate hip-hop's broad audience, hopes he can help kick-start a sport flirting with irrelevance.

He teamed with the promoter Lou DiBella in January to form Dash-DiBella Promotions, a company focused mostly on promoting young boxing talent.

Other than the occasional circus following Mike Tyson, boxing has struggled since the late 1990's to connect with mainstream America, maintain its credibility and draw the ratings it had in the heydays of Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Leonard and Tyson.

Dash, who has sparred regularly since age 14, is looking to change this.

"I think boxing in general has lost a little bit of the glitz and the glamour that it used to have, and I think hip-hop brings back that glitz, that glamour and that intrigue," he said. "And it also brings in a built-in demographic.

"Over all, what I'm trying to do for boxing as a whole, I want to bring the sexiness and the charisma of the glitz and the glamour and the diamonds back to the sport. I want people to look at the fights more as an event as well as loving the sports aspect of it."

Hip-hop's greatest penetration has come in the N.B.A., from players making rap albums to rappers purchasing an interest in teams to the league's former contract with Fubu, a clothing line with an urban flavor. But the N.B.A. has had to walk a fine line between embracing hip-hop culture and not allowing it to alienate corporate America.

Boxing is willing, and almost obliged, to take this risk in an attempt to gain broader relevance, especially among a crowd that is younger and hipper than the older, more traditional fan base currently driving the sport. The best way to do this could be to create colorful, transcendent personalities, like

the ones abundant in hip-hop circles.

The light-welterweight Floyd Mayweather, who is a friend of Dash's, is excited about what hip-hop could do for the sport.

"I need to be promoted in the hip-hop area," said Mayweather, who defeated Arturo Gatti for the World Boxing Council super-lightweight title last month. "My fights need to be promoted like it's a rap album. I need commercials like, 'Coming soon: It's something you can't miss.' I think the hip-hop world and the boxing world coming together is great on both ends."

James Prince, founder of Rap-A-Lot Records, and Chris Gotti, the brother of Irv Gotti, the chief executive of The Inc. (formerly Murder Inc.), are other notables from the hip-hop world dipping into boxing as managers.

Dash began his involvement in boxing six years ago by using his clothing line, Rocawear, to make trunks for fighters. He said emblazoning the Rocawear logo on boxing trunks was one way to raise brand awareness.

To make promoting financially feasible, Dash teamed with DiBella, who has been a promoter since 2000 and has almost two dozen fighters signed to his company, DiBella Entertainment. DiBella previously spent 11 years at HBO, as a lawyer and as the station's head of boxing.

Dash-DiBella has four fighters under contract - Andre Berto, Jaidon Codrington, Curtis Stevens and Gary Starks Jr. Each is an up-and-comer who started his professional career within the past year.

How much boxing can benefit from hip-hop remains to be seen. Several past attempts to use hip-hop as a marketing tool have had little impact on the sport.

The rapper Hammer started his own management, entertainment and sports-marketing firm and represented the former heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield as a personal adviser in 1993. But that partnership lasted only two fights because the hype subsided, Holyfield said.

In 2000, HBO launched K.O. Nation, a boxing show featuring dancers, hip-hop music and the former MTV video jockey Ed Lover as the M.C. But the show, criticized for focusing too much on theatrics and not enough on quality boxing, was canceled after only eight episodes.

Dash and others in today's hip-hop world are about more than rap's bling-bling. They are businessmen.

Since creating Roc-A-Fella Records, which he recently sold, with the rapper Jay-Z in 1996, Dash has started Rocawear and several other apparel lines; two film companies, Dash Films and Roc-A-Fella Films; and the Damon Dash Music Group. He also owns Armadale Vodka.

Dash's venture into boxing is part of a larger movement among hip-hop magnates who are already sports fans to take advantage of their wealth by dipping into sports.

"What we're seeing now is just the evolution of something that's been there for a long time," said Todd Boyd, a professor of critical studies at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema and Television. "Hip-hop's a culture, and increasingly, people from that culture are coming into pro sports."

Winky Wright, who recently defeated Felix Trinidad, said working with versatile entrepreneurs like Dash could better prepare him for life after boxing.

"Someone like Dame Dash is someone who grew up like you," Wright, whose former manager was James Prince, said by phone. "They come from the streets; they come from where you come from; they know how you feel. They can visualize things you want to do because they've been there."

But the success of Dash and other hip-hop impresarios in boxing will ultimately be judged by one standard: business results.

"I think that they can be great for the sport if they do what they do best for the boxers," said the promoter Dino Duva, president of Duva Boxing. "That has to do with helping market and publicize fighters. They obviously have a huge vehicle to be able to market and get exposure for fighters through the hip-hop industry. I think that can be great for African-American fighters."

While boxing has a strong hold on the Latino community, some promoters have said black fighters have been undermarketed over the past 10 years, resulting in a decline the sport's overall popularity.

Because hip-hop and boxing are rooted in a rugged street mentality, those familiar with both worlds believe the convergence is natural.

"When you're working out in the gym, it ain't nothing separating a fighter from another fighter but air," Dash said. "You have to fight. You got to survive or else you're going to get hurt. You have to live by those same ideals."

Although boxing purists are open to giving hip-hop a chance, a disclaimer has been voiced: keep the thuggishness and histrionics to a minimum.

Bob Arum of Top Rank Inc., the company that promotes Mayweather, was taken aback in 2000 when he found out that his client was handing over his managing duties to Prince.

"This whole rap business seemed nutty to me," Arum said in a phone interview. "I'm in my 70's. I really couldn't relate to the music at all; I still can't relate to the music. And also, he would talk to fighters about being rap performers, and the truth is, they all sound the same to me."

When Arum realized, however, that Prince could communicate and relate to fighters in ways he could not, he opened his arms to him.

Sugar Ray Leonard, who for years dominated the middleweight division, seemed optimistic about hip-hop's impact on boxing.

"Hip-hop is major," Leonard said in a telephone interview. "It would help the kids and young boxers cross over to the newer generation."

The convergence of hip-hop and boxing benefited the former undisputed light-heavyweight champion Roy Jones Jr., who was famous for rapping as he entered the ring. He owns a record label, Body Head Entertainment, and one of his singles was the No. 1 rap song on Billboard in 2002. Mayweather and Wright are trying to follow Jones's lead with record labels of their own.

Hip-hop and boxing stand side by side on many other platforms.

Wright, a former undisputed light-middleweight champion, spars with the rapper 50 Cent in a recently released Reebok commercial. Many boxers are turning to urban apparel lines like Fubu, Rocawear, H.O.B.O. and State Property, rather than the traditional Everlast, to outfit them in the ring.

Last year, DiBella started a monthly event, Broadway Boxing, which he said drew many hip-hop magnates to the stands. In the next year or so, he said, he would like to start a more hip-hop-themed boxing show suitable for stations like MTV, VH1 or BET.

Stevens, a 20-year-old light heavyweight, one of the four boxers signed to Dash-DiBella Promotions, is already seeing the influence of hip-hop on his young career. He said that New York-area hip-hop and R&B radio stations - Hot 97, Power 105.1 and 107.5 WBLS - often promoted his fights, creating an added buzz when he steps into the ring.

With the rappers Jay-Z and Nelly recently becoming part owners of N.B.A. teams, basketball continues to lead the way in a convergence with hip-hop. But the N.B.A. must be careful because "to abandon the hip-hop culture would be almost as devastating as embracing it too much," said David Carter, founder of the Sports Business Group, which specializes in strategic marketing.

Boxing does not have to worry about hip-hop tarnishing its image because corporate sponsorship is scarce and the sport's reputation is already in question because of perceived corruption.

"We don't have many corporations that are running to boxing," said the promoter Todd duBoef, president of Top Rank Inc. By turning to hip-hop, he added, "We got nothing to lose."