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Boxing's Greatest Champions

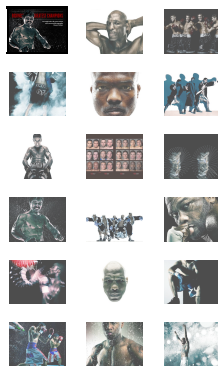


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Boxing's Greatest Champions

An inside look at the sweet science with renowned photographer, Howard Schatz. By **Coleman Molnar**

Six years in the making, renowned photographer Howard Schatz releases his new book featuring the biggest names in the world of boxing. From Pacquiao to Bradley, *At the Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* captures not only today's boxing champions, but also portraits of the industry's most respected trainers, judges, ringside commentators and more in 224 visually-stunning pages. We talk to Schatz about his experience shooting today's modern-day gladiators.



What got you interested in this project?

I was really interested in boxing. About 10 years ago I did a book called *Athlete*, and I had the privilege of studying, interviewing and photographing athletes from virtually every sport. There were Olympic athletes – swimmers, gymnasts and track & field people – and there were professional athletes – basketball, baseball, football, and hockey. I found that boxers were different than all of them because they were at risk every time they engaged in boxing, even in practice sparring in the ring. When they spar, they practice in their own gyms. They're at risk of dying, which doesn't happen very often, but it does occur; they're at risk of brain damage and of getting beaten

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up. The thing that drives them, the courage they have, is something that fascinates me. I'm nowhere near that kind of courageous person. The 6-year journey was a tremendous opportunity and privilege to learn something about them.

You interviewed quite a few physicians, and they talk about the risk.

Well, I interviewed everyone in the boxing world. I had the best promoters in the world here – managers, commissioners, sanctioning agents, judges, refs, inspectors, trainers, cut men. I did that initially because we, as observers of any kind of sport, know something about it, but we're only looking at a superficial layer of it. I wanted to dig down deep and learn as much as I could. They taught me a lot about the culture, the psychology, the business, the good parts and the bad parts in the world of professional boxing. When I was photographing the champions, it helped me to understand them and make pictures that were powerful and compelling.

What do you hope this book will do for the boxing world?

I didn't do the book for the boxing world. I did the book to surprise and delight myself, and to learn something. The joy was in the journey. If there were never a book, I still would have come away with the riches of the experiences.

Why boxing? Why not MMA or UFC, which are exploding, whereas boxing is declining in popularity?

When I started 6 years ago, MMA and UFC were in their early phases of popularity. And I knew more about boxing from *Athlete*, so I did it out of my own familiarity. I'm sure I would have learned some similarities with MMA and certainly a lot of differences. But I'm glad I studied boxing, and it doesn't bother or disturb me that boxing has had a declining interest over the last 20–30 years. The champions still fill stadiums, millions of people pay for pay-per-view, and there are interested people all over the world.

And they're different fans than the MMA?

Very different. It's like the difference between football and rugby, one being a gentleman's sport. Do you have any idea why that is? Why there's that competitive camaraderie?

MMA is filled with young men. Boxing is filled with some young men, but some middle-aged and older generations of men. Whether or not it's cultural, generations are different. People in their twenties are wired differently; they have different tastes, a different way of thinking, and different ambitions from people in their thirties, forties or fifties. So maybe this particular group of humans decided to take on MMA, rejecting the old as youth always does. But I've taken an interest in all sporting events, and I've never experienced anything like the crowd at a championship fight when two boxers go toe to toe. It's so emotionally, physically, and audibly charged like nothing else. I've had the opportunity to shoot ringside for *Sports Illustrated* and it's an amazing, visceral experience.

Are you usually working out of a studio?

Yes, even though the book has plenty of ringside images where I'm waiting for something to happen and catching it. But, I want to make something up, starting with a subject. I want to be surprised, I want the unexpected to occur in front of my camera. I try to make an image that didn't exist before.

So, when dealing in a studio setting with these boxers and professionals that aren't used to being in front of the camera, how do you make them feel comfortable with things?

I strongly believe in an interview. Before I take them in the studio, we go talk in a private room. I'm interested in them. I look at them, I ask them questions, I just listen intensely, and it's compelling for a human being to talk to someone who's truly interested in you. And then when it's time to make pictures, they trust me. They know I can make good pictures, but to make a great picture, it's like winning a championship.

It's something that you work for and can't always accomplish. You could be great, but your picture's only as good as its weakest part.

In the corner, they have gloves on. They can't drink water by themselves, they can't wipe their face, they can't do anything! They have to sit there and listen to the trainer and let the cut men stop any bleeding, close cuts, spread their face with Vaseline, and pour water on their face. They're used to having things physically done to them, and I knew that right away, so I was able to do anything I wanted to the boxer. I put water, paint, and glue on them; grease, salt, powder, anything I could to try and make something miraculous.

Amir Khan hits a block of salt in the book. I was 30 feet away. I said, "I want you to hit that so hard that it hits my camera." So I had an assistant throw the salt to his side and he threw a left hook. And I explained this to all my boxers, "what you do has movement, what I do does too. What you do has depth, what I do is flat. What you do has sound, what I do is silent. So how do I make a flat, still, silent image that's as fantastic as what you do? It's hard! Anything less than that spectacularly, phenomenally, powerful energy is going to be wussy, and you don't want to look like a wussy." They all understood that. I wanted to make masculine, surprising, fantastic images.

You spent time speaking with some of these older gentlemen. What was the sense of the future of boxing that you got from them?

Well, how many basketball players are there in the world, 50 million? 100 million? How many make \$10 million a year? 0.00001%. Well, just like the NBA, the rest of the world is like that. Everyone is striving to reach higher and higher goals. There are a number of people who work in boxing that don't do it for a living. Refs have other jobs, judges too. Harold Lederman, who announces for HBO, is a pharmacist.

Did you ask Alfredo Angulo to bring his dog?

No, it was a show for a big fight he had in New Haven, Connecticut. The promoters let me set up a studio backstage where the locker rooms were so I could shoot before-and-after pictures of everybody. He brought his dog to the match, and when he walked into the ring, he walked his dog out. It was part of the show. There's entertainment value. They dress up; it's part of performing and a lot of boxers love the crowd. They love being applauded, they love the attention. Yes, they need to win. Yes, they feel horrible when they lose. But one of the things that motivates them is the crowd.

So you were an ophthalmologist before you got into photography. What was the transition?

I've had a camera since medical school and shot all the time, it was a hobby. I have two daughters, and when my second daughter left for college, I had free time and devoted Saturdays to photography. It wouldn't detract from my medical career, my professorship or my patient care.

While in San Francisco 17 years ago, my wife said, "why don't we go to New York, take a sabbatical, just for a year. You can try out photography full time." It was so interesting and fun, dauntingly difficult and eye-opening, I met all sorts of people I wouldn't have met otherwise. So I re-upped the sabbatical. After 5 or 6 years, it was clear that I wasn't going to return to medicine. I was drawn away by this totally different, creative life. In medicine, it's very important to get it right, to listen, examine, do whatever lab you need. It was a mistake-free existence, living in a very careful, controlled manner. Photography was the opposite, it was about trying all kinds of things, being crazy. I liked being a doctor, I liked taking care of my patients, I enjoyed the challenges of rare problems and trying to figure them out. But this other life is extremely exciting and interesting. I'm very lucky.

Canon or Nikon?

Studio work is done on a medium format camera, a Hasselblad. Some work is done on Canon, the ringside work was done on

Canon, and all the spontaneous work I do outside the studio is done on Canon.

What was your first camera?

A Nikon. I was in medical school and I went to a party. There was somebody who had just returned from Korea. He was in the military, and he had this new Nikon F camera. You could do it all right there, dial sensitivity, dial the F-stop. We all looked at it, and it was so interesting. The next day, I wrote my cousin who was in the military in Korea, and said, "price out a Nikon camera over there with a 50 mm lens and I'll send you a cheque." And that's how I got my first camera.

Is there anything else you'd like our readers to hear about the book?

I did a book of photography, but I think it's a really interesting book. You can read interviews with everyone involved with boxing. It's not only a book to be looked at, it's a book to be read.

You can purchase your copy of *At the Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* [here](#).

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