

One day in 1950, little Howard Schatz joined his friends at sports camp. Camp counselors fitted the boys with boxing gloves, then watched as they flailed away for 90 seconds at a time. Eventually, young Howard was struck in the face. He stopped and removed his gloves. It was at that moment the 10-year-old came to a realization: Boxers are different, and he was no boxer.

"They're different individuals," Schatz says today. "They're special in many ways. They're determined, focused athletes, but they're also different because of that one thing: They're fearlessly courageous and getting hit doesn't seem to faze them, and because they can hit somebody else and feel just fine about it. Almost every fight, when it's over—whether it's a draw or a knock-out or a decision—they hold each other and they say good fight, good work, nice going. It's really remarkable."

#### Showing The Range Of Human Expression

It was while Schatz was creating a previous book, *Athlete*, for which he interviewed and photographed many different athletes in many different sports, that his childhood epiphany recurred. This time it led to a new project: a book devoted to boxing. The culmination of six years of

work, *At The Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing* (Sports Illustrated) contains more than 400 photographs, and like all of Schatz's books, it was a personal project powered by his intense work ethic and an almost manic desire to completely explore such an intriguing human subject.

"They all have machismo," Schatz says, "but they do as a group cover a wide range of human expression, from easygoing to extremely intense, from soft and sweet and gentle to tough customers. They're all very different, but they all work very hard to make great photos—very much like any great athlete, dancer or actor I've ever had. It was a great experience. But it wasn't particularly different from other experiences in portraiture with well-known and accomplished people."

#### No Holds Barred

The biggest difference, Schatz explains, is that the boxers were up for anything. They let the photographer do things to them, like dousing them with powder or sprinkling them with salt or drenching them in water, especially water. There was lots of water.

"You know," says Schatz, "between rounds a boxer sits there with his gloves on and he's helpless. He can't even handle a bottle of water. So they throw water on him, and down his pants and on his head, and

# At The Fights, In The Studio

Howard Schatz's 19th book is an in-depth exploration of the forms, shapes and textures of all things boxing, and the

images are exceptional By William Sawalich >> Photography By Howard Schatz





they put grease on him and they rub him, and they give him water to drink and a can to spit in. Knowing that—I shot for *Sports Illustrated* from ringside—and seeing that, I realized I could do anything I wanted.”

What he wanted, what Schatz *always* wants, is to make something amazing. He’s fond of saying that anyone can make a good photograph—it’s making something exceptional that’s the challenge. So all he ever sets out to do is amaze himself with an

tainly substantial enough; it’s literally and figuratively Schatz’s weightiest collection. Which is why once *Sports Illustrated* got wind of his project, they wanted in.

“I did it because of my interest,” he says, “and the fact that there’s a book is really great. *Sports Illustrated* came to me and said who’s publishing the book? I said I haven’t thought about it yet; I’m still working on it. They said nobody but us should publish this book! But my joy is in the journey. I do

**“The whole idea,” Schatz says, “was to make remarkable images that I could make up from zero, and you do that in the studio with strobes. But I shot from ringside so that I could get the entire, complete world of boxing.”**

exceptional photograph. In this case, his subjects were always game once he explained his philosophy of greatness. These athletes, in particular, responded to the idea of striving for excellence.

“We have to work really hard to do it,” Schatz would explain, “and we have to do it together. It’s like winning a championship. It’s not easy. You’re 32 and 2, and you’ve won the WBC and the IBO. It wasn’t easy, it took years, and it could be plucked away from you at anytime. It’s the same with these photographs; we’ve got to really work hard so that they’re fantastic.”

Fantastic, they are. Sublime, striking, surreal, simply stunning. This collection of boxing photographs—primarily studio portraits of boxers, although it includes ringside action shots and a bit of documentary as well—might very well be Schatz’s finest work to date. The book itself is cer-

it because it fascinates me, it’s my interest, it’s my passion, and it’s my enjoyment.”

#### The Studio As Laboratory

The boxers in the book are mostly champs, but Schatz photographed roughly twice as many boxers, many of whom didn’t make the cut. He photographed up-and-comers and also-rans, and promoters, writers and trainers. Unlike many of his projects that center on exploration of the human form, which is certainly included here, with the boxing book Schatz wanted to paint a complete picture of the sport, to make the ultimate examination of the sweet science. In fact, he likens it to a PhD study. His laboratory, of course, is the studio.

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For his latest book, Howard Schatz came back to a subject he has been passionate about since the 1950s: boxing. The photography is remarkable. Shooting in the studio and at fight venues, Schatz has created a multifaceted look at the sport and the extraordinary individuals who devote their lives to it. **OPENING SPREAD:** Kassim Ouma works with the speed bag. **TOP:** Chad Dawson triple exposure. **ABOVE:** Sechew Powell skipping rope.



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Go to [www.digitalphotopro.com](http://www.digitalphotopro.com) to see more articles on Howard Schatz and his visionary photography.



## Lighting The Boxer's Body

When it comes to lighting the human body, no photographer has more experience than Howard Schatz. It's clear that the peculiar challenge of illuminating the human form is really no particular challenge for him. Whether he's discussing the creation of soft beauty light—as he used in projects such as *With Child*, *Rare Creatures* and *Waterdance*—or explaining the edgier, more dramatic lighting seen so often in *At The Fights* and projects like *Athlete* and *Nude Body Nude*, Schatz speaks about lighting with an offhanded nonchalance, as if every photographer has the same second-nature lighting skills he possesses.

Schatz boils his lighting down to a simple decision: What do you want to show, and what do you want to hide? Put light where you want to see details, put shadow where you don't. Simple, right?

Because he uses different sources with different modifiers in different ways for almost every shot, there's simply no for-

mula for "Schatz Lighting." But what's consistent is an understanding that light need not be complex to create dramatic, refined effects.

With *At The Fights*, Schatz's particular challenge was to define the muscle tone of a boxer's body. To do this, he sometimes used harder light sources to create the shadows and highlights that define shape and texture. At other times, he relied on backlighting to simply rim-light a subject and define his shape dramatically. But just as often as anything, Schatz used the same soft source he might use for beauty, but positioned much, much differently.

To create soft beauty light, the photographer may use a large softbox from a frontal position very close to the camera. This minimizes shadows and texture—an ideal way to make skin appear smooth and supple. But with the same light positioned at least 90 degrees from the camera, not only does the raking light create shadows

that emphasize muscle definition, but the more dramatic light position makes it easier for the photographer to illuminate only what he wants the viewer to see—perhaps that's a tensed muscle or maybe a bead of water tracing its path along skin.

Water is a very useful tool for photographing boxers. Sometimes Schatz used powder, other times paint, and occasionally, even salt. But mostly, he added water—splashed, poured, sprayed and doused—because it's the most straightforward way to communicate energy in a still photograph. And its glisten makes skin practically glow.

"The first thing that happens," Schatz explains, "when a boxer comes in from three minutes of fighting and sits down in the chair is they throw water on him. When you do ringside photography, you learn right away that the best pictures are the first 30 seconds of a round because they still have water on them. So when they get hit, it sprays the water everywhere—on

your camera, on the ref, everywhere. And the last two-and-a-half minutes of a round you don't see the water, so the best pictures are the first 30 seconds. Water is just an ingredient that's part of the sport.

"But water also allowed me to show explosion," he continues. "The idea in boxing is a vicious blow to the jaw—an explosive, clear, unobstructed, unexpected punch to the face. And by exploding water, I felt that it was a metaphor for a knockout."

To light up that water, Schatz frequently employed backlight to illuminate sprays of water against a dark background. Black flags help to create the edges that will set water droplets off against a light background, and sharpening, dodging and burning, and other postproduction effects are deliberately employed to highlight texture from water droplets—whether they're exploding in motion or creating the shiny skin that helps define the muscular human form. See? Simple.

that I could get the entire, complete world of boxing. I also interviewed and made portraits of over 150 people who are important to boxers—judges, refs, trainers, cut men, announcers, writers, commissioners, managers, promoters, presidents of sanctioning agencies—they all taught me about boxing, gave me insight to boxing. I tried to cover it in a complete fashion, looking at every possible thing. And, of course, the ringside images are very powerful, but the heart of this work is the original studio work with these boxers.

"For example," he says, "take that image of Sergio Martinez, where you see jump rope on each side of him and he's in the middle. That's one frame. Can you imagine technically how complicated that is to do? I timed how long it took the jump rope to go around 360 degrees. It's 0.3 seconds. So two jump

Schatz is a perfectionist, and working with these athletes and building *At The Fights* took thousands of images. His love of boxing and his admiration for the athletes are palpable. Says Schatz, "I made 100,000 images. I edited and edited and edited, and everything in the book, I love. You can pick any image and I remember the session, I remember everything about it." LEFT: Joshua Clotney composite. ABOVE: James Kirkland.

ropes is 0.6 seconds. So if you set off your strobes at a 0.01 seconds, 1/100th interval, that's 60 strobes in 0.6 seconds. So I made 60 strobes as rim lights in 0.6 seconds to document the jump rope, and I moved the camera side to side, and then at 0.3 seconds, right in the middle, fired one strobe in front. So there he is. Every exposure, every image in the book, is a complicated technological challenge and feat. I didn't want to



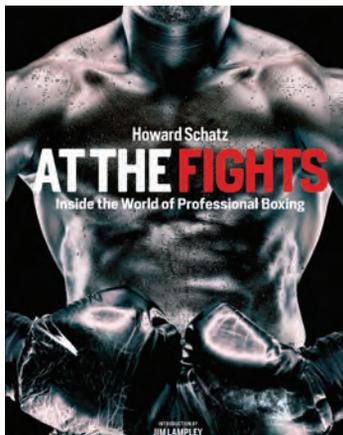
In addition to the studio sessions and photographs of promoters, commentators and other figures from the boxing world, Schatz photographed the fights themselves. ABOVE: A sequence from the Pacquiao vs. Clottey fight, March 2010.

make plain pictures. I told every boxer, if it's easy, it's been done before, and it becomes 'so what.' It's only when it's impossible are we close to God. And they all understood that."

### Creating A Deep Card

Even a casual sports fan will recognize many of the famous faces in the book: Manny Pacquiao, Joe Frazier, Mike Tyson. This makes it all the more impressive that Schatz was able to recruit them to the project. The farther he went, the easier it got.

"The more money an athlete makes," Schatz says, "the harder it is to get them to your studio. But this was a six-year project, and slowly but surely, more and more people came on. I got Jim Lampley, I got the great writers, I got the commissioners, the promoters, the managers. And slowly but surely, each of these very wealthy athletes felt the pressure of doing this, and I got almost every single champ who exists today.



*At The Fights*, published by Sports Illustrated, with an introduction by broadcaster Jim Lampley.

"Partly, also," he continues, "it's a small world. Boxing isn't like baseball or football. Eventually, they all got behind me. When the images started getting published in *The Ring* magazine, I became well known in boxing fairly soon as somebody who made images that looked different from anybody else's. The writers wrote about it, the television announcers announced it, the promoters wanted me to make their pictures."

### In Schatz's Arena

Once Schatz had an athlete in his studio, and he had explained his mission, he would set about making his special photographs. To do this, he started long before in the library, reading every book he could find about the sport and looking at almost every special photograph that has ever been made of a boxer. He'd develop a game plan, and then, of course, prepare to deviate from that plan as needed. That's how he surprises himself.

"Every time I shoot," he says, "I don't want to make stuff I've made before. It would bore me. I want to amaze myself. I told that to the boxers: Unless we're amazed, we've failed. So for every boxer who came in I had a list of 10 ideas, every one of which was different from anything I had done. I would start with one idea, and sometimes one idea led to something I never even thought of, and sometimes one idea wasn't so great and I went on to the second one. But I had a pile of ideas

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## AT THE FIGHTS, IN THE STUDIO

(Cont'd from page 44)

every single time. I tried to find my own way. I tried to not duplicate anything. That was the goal throughout, and the goal was informed by the fact that these are courageous, sometimes monstrous, powerful, passionate, sometimes vicious, sometimes dark, incredible characters. And I tried to make images that fit those adjectives.”

Although Schatz is a master of sculpting subjects with light, it was the athletes' bodies that most garnered his attention. He directed boxers to imagine that someone was building a museum of boxing, and they'd be making a gigantic statue of a boxer using this pose as a model. How would you pose? And the boxers helped the photographer find strong, graphic, iconic poses.

“I always see the body as sculpture,” Schatz explains, “biological sculpture. There are all sorts of study of the body here, every part of the upper torso especially. There's a picture in the book of a boxer's back. It's sideways in the book, a double-page spread, bent over, tattooed, muscular. I remember making that image. I've shot a thousand backs, but I saw differently that moment, and I lit it differently, and I worked in postproduction to multi-tone it differently, and I felt it really is iconic sculpture.”

Many images in *At The Fights* are sure to become iconic, but even if they didn't, even if the book had never seen the light of day, Schatz still would consider the endeavor a resounding success. After all, he succeeded at the one thing he sets out to do day after day: He delighted himself.

“It's not work,” he says. “I'm addicted to amazing myself. I'm addicted to the high that comes from making images that surprise me. I can't always do it, it's sometimes elusive and evanescent and difficult, but I keep yearning and working and striving for that high, for that feeling.” DPP

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You can see more of Howard Schatz's work and order *At The Fights* at [www.howardschatz.com](http://www.howardschatz.com).