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Vivid revelation, with a punch

Photographer illustrates the brutality – and honesty – of boxing

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By David Davis

2:07 p.m. CST, November 24, 2012

Howard Schatz's latest book, "At the Fights: Inside the World of Professional Boxing," resonates like a stinging jab. Over six years, Schatz interviewed and photographed 117 of the fight game's most prominent boxers, trainers, promoters and personalities, including retired champs Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson. He crafted many images as biological sculpture. The pictures reveal every striation of Manny Pacquiao's muscular chest and arms and every tattoo on Cristobal Arreola's chest and back.

Schatz tinkered with lighting effects to capture motion on paper (shades of Eadweard Muybridge). There's Sergio Martinez furiously jumping rope, Tim Bradley throwing leather.

Schatz also ventured from his New York City studio to photograph bouts from ringside. A series of before-and-after portraits of the fighters exposes boxing's savagery and the irrevocable damage these athletes suffer.

Born and raised in Chicago, Schatz attended the University of Illinois medical school and interned at Cook County Hospital. He worked as a retina specialist for 23 years at the University of San Francisco Medical Center. At the urging of his wife, Beverly Ornstein, he took a year off to concentrate on photography. A second career bloomed, complete with commercial clients (Nike, Ralph Lauren), editorial spreads (Sports Illustrated, Vanity Fair), gallery and museum shows, and 19 books.

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Weighing in at seven-and-a-half pounds, "At the Fights" is a heavyweight ode to the most brutally honest sport. As middleweight Kelly Pavlik told Schatz: "In boxing, you can't call timeout and have somebody come in and substitute for you. When you win, you win on your own. When you lose, you have nobody to blame."

David Davis is the author of "Showdown at Shepherd's Bush: The 1908 Olympic Marathon and the Three Runners Who Launched a Sporting Craze."

At the Fights

By Howard Schatz, Sports Illustrated Books, 240 pages, \$75

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