How Boxing Changed My Life

By Emily Harney

I did not grow up watching boxing. My first recollection of the sport was when I was young and saw what looked to be Superman versus a bald black man on my uncle's TV. I later found out that Superman was Peter McNeely and the other man was Mike Tyson. I wondered why my dad or grandfather did not watch boxing or even talk about it. They were both well versed in other sports and those who participated. I recently asked my parents why we never watched boxing as kids. They did not have an answer except that they were not big fans of the sport. I took them to their first fight; they have attended many to date. Today my understanding and knowledge of the business come from my direct observation and my experience working with those who participate: the fighters, managers, promoters, trainers, ringside physicians, gaming commissioners, and media colleagues.

Late in October of 2000, I read a feature in the sports section of the Boston Herald by the late George Kimball. His piece recounted the events of the October 20th boxing matches at the Roxy Night Club in Boston and the nationally televised fight card featuring the undefeated Bobby Tomisello in the opening bout. Tomisello, twenty-five, knew the risks he faced inside of the ring; he talked about it with his father, who was also his trainer, and once told his father he would rather die between the ropes than lose his first nationally televised fight. After a brutal ten rounds, the fight was a draw, and as Tomisello returned to the locker room he collapsed into a coma, never to regain consciousness. Some might be turned off from this brutality after reading about these events, but I was intrigued and curious about this young man. Are all fighters passionate about fighting, enough that they are willing to die? Who are these fighters out of the ring? Could these individuals live between two worlds — one that is civilized outside of the ring and one that is primal, sometimes dark, and unforgiving?

I found the first boxing gym I photographed in the phonebook. Farrell's Gym was located beneath storefronts on Hancock Street in Quincy Massachusetts. Unless you were

looking for it, you would have never known it was there, until the door opened to the dark stairwell and the most intense smell of stale sweat one could stomach hit you in the face like a bag of dirty gym socks. Down the dark stairwell came the sounds of a rattling chain, and what sounded like a grunt followed by the sounds of impact, followed by more grunting. As I entered a room that was no more than 30 square feet, the men in the ring halted their workout. "You must be Emily. I'm Jimmy Jr. We spoke on the phone. Welcome, make yourself at home." The short, dark-haired man with the punch mitts on stuck his arm between the ropes to give me a fist bump.

After that first visit to Farrell's, the phrase "make yourself at home" was one I heard frequently as I traveled to different gyms and fights. I would begin to see some of the same people at different venues. I was the only female in attendance who spent most of the event leaning against the ring, my elbows resting on the sometimes blood-dried canvas and my camera between the ropes. The men in attendance would stop and chat with me, asking me who I worked for? Frequently I was asked if my boyfriend or husband was fighting that night. I was not surprised by those questions. I had men tell me women do not belong ringside or the role of a sports photographer was for a male. These statements would only make me work harder to take photographs that captured imperceptible moments that not everyone could see or gain access to.

Late in February of 2001, I attended the boxing event *Silver Mittens* in Lowell, Massachusetts. Featured on the fight card were children between the ages of ten and sixteen, matched up to fight those in the same weight class. They came from all over New England that night, getting into the ring with gloves that seemed bigger than their heads and going toe-to-toe with each other. After a few hours of photographing, I headed for the exit door to leave where I came upon a thin blonde man in a white collared shirt. Embroidered on the chest were the words *USA Boxing Judge.*

"Hey honey, why are you leaving? You haven't taken my picture yet?" The man was so anxious and jumpy. I replied, "Actually, I did! A few fights back, you were the referee, right?" Without answering the question, he continued, "You know, I have a movie made about my life as a fighter, it's called *High On Crack Street.*" I found it strange how proud the man was to

share that kind of information with me. “Oh the HBO documentary? I believe I watched that in high school.” His demeanor seemed to change slightly when I told him that. “I’m Dickie Eklund, I fought Sugar Ray Leonard, almost beat him too. You know my brother’s a fighter too. A pretty good one; he’s going to be world champion someday.” Dickie *was a* confident man and moving around like he was ready to fight a few rounds himself.

I explained to Dickie I was looking to photograph the journey of a fighter as they prepare to fight and the fight itself. “Here, call me.” He wrote down his number on a scrap piece of paper. “We can meet at the gym here in Lowell and I will introduce you to my brother.” I am thankful for meeting and befriending Dickie that night; it is a night I think about often. Some women might have been a bit uncomfortable based on Dickie’s mannerisms or the fact he was in a film called *High On Crack Street* and chose to share that after starting with “Hey honey...” but I was curious about Dickie and his brother, as I had been about Tomisello.

I called Dickie the next week; he told me to meet him at the West End Gym in Lowell. His brother would be training for his upcoming fight there. West End Gym is located in an old mill building on the third floor. The stairs to get up there is a workout in itself. West End was nothing like Farrell’s, except maybe for the smell and the dedication of those who went there. The space was wide-open with beautiful, diffused window light on either side of the two rings, heavy bags, and an area to stretch and jump rope on the old wooden floor. The walls were wallpapered with old boxing photographs and news clippings of local fighters and world champions. It reminded me of something out of a movie. Hungover one of the rings was a large white and green banner, adorned with shamrocks reading, *Home of The World Champion, Irish Micky Ward*. Within minutes of noticing the banner, a blonde man, not much taller than I, was standing next to me. He introduced himself as Micky Ward. “Oh wow, that banner is yours!” I exclaimed. His humbling giggle matched his smile and his semi-high-pitched voice, “Ha sure is.” Before he could say anymore, the gym door flew open. “Hey, I see you met my brother, Micky Ward! You know he’s going to be the next great thing to come out of Lowell, a world champion.”

I watched Micky carefully that day — he seemed so sweet, and he was small in stature, nothing like boxers whom I had seen on TV. I watched Micky transform as he went from wrapping his hands to stepping into the ring. His attitude, body language, and facial expressions went from calm to combative in a matter of seconds. His footwork in the ring seemed like a dance and his punches made me wince as he hit the pads with his brother. I had a gut instinct that Micky was different than what people expected a fighter to be, not just inside of the ring as the relentless fighter but outside too, as a humble, working-class gentleman. After his workout, I asked Micky if I could follow him for my undergrad thesis. No questions were asked; he answered "yes."

For the next eighteen months, I photographed Micky in training camps, at fights, and meet - and - greets. I found it fascinating that a human being could transform into a different persona when the gloves went on, yet still hold the dignity and respect for his opposition, whom he fought like a warrior. Micky and Dickie provided me with the opportunity to see an athlete from a different perspective. What I knew of athletes from before was what the media had provided us. A selective, edited look at whom these individuals are but with an agenda attached. In boxing, the coverage of fighters by the media was slim and very selective. It still is. To now know these gentlemen for the everyday, hardworking individuals that they are, and as prizefighters living out their dreams, has allowed me to connect my own experiences with theirs. They are just like you or me, except they earn a living kicking ass and it's legal.

I soon recognized I was in a place that a fight fan or a boxing aficionado would trade for because they would be in the presence of someone that seemed inaccessible. It would be for me like meeting Larry Bird, as I am a big fan of basketball. I wasn't a fan of boxing though; I was a curious photographer who wanted to know more about the sport, the business of boxing, and the participants. I recognized there was a need to capture the photographs of the action to help tell the story from each particular fight, but there were also additional moments that would be impossible to describe in words that allow the viewer to fully understand the business of boxing.

The photographs by Neil Leifer, who photographed Muhammad Ali in and out the ring and shot for Sports Illustrated, moved me. He captured what might be considered the cliché

moments of a fight but he humanized the individuals he photographed, taking advantage of moments when the subject was joking around, or talking with children. These were moments that the viewer experience in their own lives, allowing for the connection between subject and viewer. Initially, it was hard to research photographers who photographed boxing, but there was one book I would go back to repeatedly for inspiration. *Time Square Gym*, by photographer John Goodman, contained photographs that were shot in a gym on 42nd Street in New York City. The black-and-white photographs depicted the worn-down environment of the gym and the individuals who occupied the space. How Goodman photographed encouraged me to experiment with different vantage points, films, and camera settings. In contrast to the photographs of Leifer, Goodman captured the blurred motion of the moving bodies, within this particular space, while Leifer's work was tack sharp. The work of both gentlemen allowed for me to understand that there was not just one way to photograph boxing.

On May 18th, 2002 I attended what I thought would be my last boxing match. My undergraduate thesis on the life of Micky Ward had been presented to the final jury, but I wanted to end my work with this one last fight against the late Arturo Gatti. On that night in May, for ten straight rounds, both gentlemen threw jab for jab, punch for punch as they moved around the ring, both of their faces bloodied from each other's jabs. The crowd was on their feet for most of the ten rounds, screaming at the top of their lungs in support of their fighter. It was similar to scenes in *Raging Bull,* except it was real and endless. I knew that night my days of photographing boxing were not over; I wanted to photograph more fights as action-packed as Ward versus Gatti.

The action I loved photographing was only part of what drove me to investigate boxing further. It was amazing to observe Micky Ward transform into his role as a relentless fighter whose punches were described by former World Boxing Champion, Zab Juddah as ones that "could make you piss blood for days." Micky was just as hardworking outside of the ring as an asphalt worker as he was as a fighter. His personality and good-hearted nature are nothing like Jake La Motta's hot-tempered, jealous character as played by Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull*. (As the real La Motta later admitted, he was worse.) Ward's own family stole his fight earnings on multiple occasions and yet he still allowed them in his corner as part of the team. Something

that would be a deal-breaker for others seemed to roll off his shoulders but ultimately was let out in the ring in his relentless fighting style. Micky helped me to understand that the money he earned fighting was not the driving force in his quest as a prizefighter. His love for the sport of boxing and what it had provided him was what seemed to satisfy him. He was living out his dream and making a living.

I did not want to go long without going to shoot in a gym or a fight, boxing became a part of my life. I would get anxious when I did not know when the next fight was or if I could not get to the gym to shoot due to my schedule. When I was preparing for a shoot I would get nervous — that I was going to be late and miss the fight or that I would have no media pass to gain the access I needed. I would listen to various songs to get me pumped up for the night; even though I was already excited, it helped put me in the mind frame to focus on taking photographs.

Every event was different — meeting new people; sitting with guys who fought Sugar Ray Leonard; or talking to ninety-year-old Skeets Skioli who wrapped the hands of Rocky Marciano. I would sit and listen to stories of "the good old days" of boxing when fans would fill the old Boston Garden to see Boston's Tony Demarco fight New York's, Carmine Basilio. I even found myself in conversation with the former mobster and confidant of Whitey Bulger and the Winter Hill Gang, Kevin Weeks. Weeks had asked for my help to locate photographs to prove he was an amateur boxer before his days as a contract killer. Needless to say, I found the information he was looking for and the opponent who had knocked him out.

I often think about how open and honest these guys were with me. They spoke with humbleness about times that were not only epic but also historical in the world of sports, and the moments when they were down and out and most vulnerable — when the fanfare and support they had now shifted to something that was not as elegant and grand as it once was.

The time I spent getting to know those who worked in the business of boxing provided me with knowledge a textbook or class never could as did the work I did in the offices of local boxing promoters. Working for the operations department and helping to put on boxing events

was didactic: reading fighter and bout contracts and sitting in on meetings with individuals who thought running a boxing company was easier than working for the NBA or the NHL.

I often think about my role in boxing and being an observer. When I was first shooting the sport, I asked very few questions - just observed, listened, and took in as much as I could. I believe this built trust between my subjects and myself.

It is important to me that my photographic work conveys the different areas I can observe from and the access I am allowed. I was influenced at a young age by the photographic work of Arthur Fellig, also known as Weegee. The brilliance of his photographs of a robbery, showing a suspect being led out of the store he attempted to rob, or of a murder suspect in custody in the police station, maybe credited to his privilege and the access he was given to be in that type of environment. I have strived to create work that allows the viewer access to moments of vulnerability for the fighter as they are transforming into a role they have mentally and physically been preparing for. For some viewers, these moments might feel uncomfortable as the fighter paces back and forth under a quiet underbelly of the area. For me, these moments feel familiar in my preparation as a photographer and teacher; going over game plans, what-if scenarios, and visualizing what I hope to photograph. My time spent working with fighters has taught me about preparation, planning, training, self-discipline, and how important it is to be confident about who you are, even when you get knocked down. Knowing how to get up, reflect on what happened, and keep moving has been equally important. I have witnessed some of the same fighters get beat, multiple times; and yet they rise, head held high, only to return to the ring again with confidence and hope that maybe tonight is their night.

Visually, boxing can artfully depict the beauty and fragility of the human body, showing us what the body is capable of withstanding. A single photograph of boxing can provide the viewer with a moment that, when watching on television or in the arena, one cannot fully process, as the speed and fluidity of the fight do not allow for this to happen. A photograph can also show moments of impact that in some cases cannot be conceived of without visual

proof. My vantage point and camera angle can capture a moment that the live cameras and fans in attendance would never have the opportunity to see unless they were in the same position and were anticipating the punch. In my job, I must anticipate the next move of each fighter. In some cases, the experience of working with a particular fighter more than once and knowing their habits allows me to be more accurate when capturing moments of impact.

In my photograph *The Titus Touch*, Titus Williams' right fist is making a large dent in the forehead of his opponent; the viewer bears witness to something that those who watched the fight live likely did not see. Through photographs, the viewer becomes a witness to what the body can withstand during forceful impact. These visual experiences create deeper connections between the viewer and the participants when the opportunity to access more information we rarely see or hear is given to us. When shown the joys, poignant moments, hardships, lessons, friendships, losses, and so much more, the viewer can begin to connect their own experiences to the subjects within the imagery.

I challenge myself to make photographs of moments that are unexpected, unpredictable and I have to be prepared and be paying attention to everything around me to capture them. It is important to me that my work represents truth: my passion for photographing the combatant poetic motion amongst participants who willfully choose to engage in this activity, and my privilege to take photographs in such an environment. The imagery I create must hold a kind of power over the viewer to accept what they are seeing as something real and informative, meaning this is not scripted.

It was ten years of covering boxing before I realized just how much I loved it, how much it influenced my choices in life, and these days it has influenced my teaching in the classroom. Missing birthdays, weddings, and trips with friends; it was not until I had my son in 2011 that I realized I had built my life around this business that taught me about friendship, hardship, death, life, and how important it is to be humble. I knew boxing was a business I wanted to continue to explore. My work has been published in countless media publications, it has been part of movie sets, used as advertisements, put on t-shirts, and recognized by numerous

organizations for excellence. But nothing means more to me than knowing that I helped a fighter by capturing a moment that meant something to them—a moment he or she may have forgotten—or by capturing them doing something technically wrong that they were able to see in my photograph but not on video. Knowing my photographs made a difference to these fighters made every hardship, lesson, and loss worth it.

I am sincerely grateful for the experiences I have had working in the business of boxing and photographing those who partake. It is a privilege to gain access and document one's journey as they prepare for their battles and as a result, these experiences have taught me how to prepare for the battles I face.