

# Feeling the Pain and Sweat of the Ring

Camera angles deliver the raw power of 'Southpaw.'

By JEREMY EGNER

"Southpaw," set for release on Friday, is in many ways a classic boxing film. It tracks the auspiciously named Billy Hope, a fierce, fading fighter played by a ripped and mumbly Jake Gyllenhaal, as he faces cocky upstarts in the ring and personal tragedy out of it. Titles, dignity and a young daughter's love hang in the balance.

But rather than looking to "Raging Bull," "Rocky" or the other usual suspects for examples of the genre, the director Antoine Fuqua turned instead to Ward vs. Gatti and Leonard vs. Duran. "I watched old fights more than I watched old movies," he said.

The real-world inspiration is clear in the gritty, visceral bouts, notable in their verisimilitude and intensity. To achieve them, Mr. Fuqua filmed most of the ring sequences as actual matches, with three-minute rounds broken up by breaks in the corners, to produce genuine sweat and fatigue. In some scenes, Mr. Gyllenhaal, who worked for months with the veteran trainer Terry Claybon to get in fighting shape (and who took over a part originally intended for Eminem), squared off against experienced boxers including Victor Ortiz, a former pro. They mostly pulled their punches. Mostly. "Every once in a while they'd stick him, so he knew what it felt like," said Mr. Fuqua, who has boxed recreationally for decades.

From a technical standpoint, Mr. Fuqua and his cinematographer, Mauro Fiore, sought to replicate the look and feel of a televised bout. Enter Rick Cypher and Todd Palladino, two veteran camera operators who shot all three Ward-Gatti blood baths in the 1990s, among many other title fights for HBO. The technicians, who pre-



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viously worked on "The Fighter" and "Grudge Match," helped the filmmakers nail the details — camera placement, lighting, "what the credentials should look like, you name it," Mr. Palladino said. Once shooting started, they captured many of the tight action shots from their usual spots just outside the ropes.

Other realistic touches included the veteran boxing announcing team of Jim Lampley and Roy Jones Jr., along with a well-known referee, Tony Weeks. An events center in Indiana, Pa., stood in for Caesars Palace and Madison Square Garden.

The idea was to use broadcast conventions to reinforce the sense of reality and draw in viewers with familiar camera angles, and then use more cinematic tricks to spike the intensity at crucial moments. "I was trying to capture the same energy and excitement of a fight, but also I wanted people to see the brutality of the sport," Mr. Fuqua said. "It's the pain game."

The director and cameramen recently discussed how they filmed the fights in "Southpaw." A longer version of this feature, including video clips, is available at [nytimes.com/movies](http://nytimes.com/movies).

## Wide Shot

▶ The classic establishing shot of a televised fight captures a majority of the ring and the fighters in full. "The long lens angle tells you everything and shows you all the advertising," Mr. Fuqua said. "It's just two men fighting." He used this perspective early in each fight as a way to ease viewers into the action with a

familiar angle, the all-encompassing view that anchors fight telecasts (above). Though tight shots offer an intimate look at the blood, sweat and adrenaline of the fighters trying to punch each other into oblivion, "if you're going back and forth between low cameras, you'll lose where they are," Mr. Cypher said. "We're always going back to that establishing point to make sure the viewer has that sense of place within the ring."





# Low Angle

► The filmmakers mixed more traditional broadcast angles, like the classic ring-level shot capturing the boxers from the waist up (above), with more oblique takes that amped intensity by mixing shutter speeds, frame rates and perspectives. One view that blended both qualities — convention and cinematic flair — was

the view upward from apron level, where still photographers position themselves. The perspective, above, is familiar to anyone who has ever read a fight article in *Sports Illustrated*, but these angles are also “a little more raw, a little more aggressive,” Mr. Fuqua said. “You see the sweat fly off of guys.” Mr. Fuqua kept cameras positioned there throughout the action, though he tried to use the shots sparingly to preserve their

impact. The angle also gives the audience the view normally reserved for fight judges and the swells at ringside. “It brings the viewer into a more intimate perspective,” Mr. Cypher said. “Most people can’t afford to buy front-row seats.”



# Point of View

► When the fights in “Southpaw” are at their most fevered, Mr. Fuqua incorporates disorienting shots from the fighters’ perspectives as they take and deliver blows (above). For these sequences, actors wore headgear outfitted with cameras to capture the ferocity of tight battle in the ring. At other times, Mr. Gyllen-

haal threw his punches at handheld cameras. “I said, ‘Jake, you’re fighting that camera,’” Mr. Fuqua said. He generally saved these shots for the closing rounds of the fights, when he wanted to intensify the palpable sense of brutality by transforming the viewer from voyeur into participant. “To keep the camera there and get hit and hit back, and see blood flow, it’s not something you normally see in boxing films,” Mr.

Fuqua said. Nor is it, obviously, something a fight fan would see on HBO. It’s impossible to strap a camera onto an active fighter, for one thing. But more broadly speaking, super-close shots aren’t used in live broadcasts “because it’s too risky — you could miss something,” Mr. Cypher said. “You miss the knockout — ” Mr. Palladino started to say before Mr. Cypher finished the point for him: “You’re fired.”