

Moments ago this man was smiling and joking with me. Now he's a monster. Larry Holmes snaps out his famous left jab – the same scarred, meaty fist that defeated Muhammad Ali in 1980. I grip the camera tighter, flinching when he grazes my hand.

It's embarrassing, but my first thought when approached to shoot the feature documentary *Facing Ali* was: "Really? Muhammad Ali? Again?" I had seen *Ali* (2001) the dramatic feature starring Will Smith and the stunning documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996). Wasn't Ali's story well told? Was it just going over old ground? I was lucky enough to be sitting in Derik Murray's office in Vancouver, so I kept quiet, nodded at what I hoped were the right times, and at the end of the meeting had the job as DOP.

★★★ Prep

The next meeting I had with Murray, and I walked into the middle of an intense discussion. A Very Excited Man was crouched in his chair, fists up, describing a fight. Suddenly, he hurled his hand into the air declaring the end of another Ali battle. He spat out dates, names, cities – statistics tumbling over each other. He was about 40, good looking and seemly a bit unhinged. I was nervous. Another producer? An über-researcher? Ali's man? "Meet Pete McCormack, our director," said Murray.

It was McCormack's intense passion for this film, his need to keep up the pressure, pushing it forward – I can still see him containing it in his hands like a ball of plasma – that inspired us. He corrected the boxers on their own stories. He knew the dates, times and stats better than they remembered their own lives. He really loved these guys and wanted the film to respect and honour what they had experienced.

Sitting in the desk across from McCormack was Murray, formerly a star stills photographer and commercial director and now a producer with a number of blue-chip sports documentaries behind him. *Facing Ali* was his new feature and, together with executive producer Paul Gertz, he had pulled together the team and financing and most impressively, the backing of Ali himself. Murray is also fluent in DOP-speak, and I love a producer who can articulate why he hates hair-lights. He knows what he likes and it could be boiled down to this: "Thin depth of field, a subject in a pool of soft light, moody backgrounds." With this directive, I launched out of that first production meeting in search of a lightweight camera and lighting package that would shoot 10 interviews over the eight months in three countries.

The first requirement was a cine-style camera. These men were warriors and survivors. By isolating the focus to thin slices of their faces, we could show the stories behind the scars that boxing and life had left on them. This look is difficult to achieve with standard 2/3-inch chip documentary cameras. It's a high-end "film-look" better suited to a larger film gate or chip size.

The interviews were expected to last at least two hours each, and ideally we would be shooting with multiple cameras. Film was

out due to the budget. We were looking for a big chip. The Red camera was waiting in the wings and Murray had already shown a strong interest in the camera. I had been tracking its development and managed to get my hands on a new camera body with the help of DOP/owner Vince Arvidson. It wasn't the camera of today – firmware build 17 hadn't even been released – and audio recording was a novelty when we started testing.

★★★ The Contender

The Red punched well against the lightweight 2/3-inch sensor cameras and held it's own against a Sony F23 but I wanted to compare against a heavyweight – the premium full-sensor cine camera of 2008. When I attempted to arrange a match against the champ, the rental house denied us the opportunity with a vague dismissal of the Red as not being worthy of a comparative test. This was a strange, unprecedented situation for me. Tests in prep are how cinematographers improve their craft and advise production. Was our camera a bum or a contender? Was Don King involved?

While disappointing and unusual, this situation essentially answered our questions about the comparison and we moved forward with our challenger the Red. Under a low ceiling and between bottled-lined walls in the basement of the Astoria Hotel is a gritty boxing club. Here we set up the Red and the first shots of *Facing Ali* as part of complete systems test. More than a camera test, this was a dry run for our shoot and a test of our lighting, sound, camera and on-set work flow in the same environment we would encounter during the rest of the film.

Following the shoot, post-supervisor Todd Giroux and Vancouver's Digital Film Central pushed the footage through a custom designed post pipeline. When we saw the results projected in 2K, we were sold. After some deep thought and somewhat of a gamble on Murray's part, the Red became our camera, or rather cameras. With the reduced cost of the rental we could take three camera bodies instead of the single heavyweight camera.

★★★ The Camera

I've described the Red in colourful terms on occasion, but my best analogy is that it is like working with a supermodel. She arrives on set and is gorgeous; everything looks beautiful in her presence. Producers, DOPs and directors are charmed. Sure, she needs some time to come out of the trailer (60 seconds to turn the camera on), but everything looks so good you work around her quirks. Then one day she goes on a bender. She doesn't show up. You find her huddled in a corner, kicking, screaming and foaming at the mouth. You're shocked. Once you've seen it a few times you calm down and work through things with her and everything is okay. It usually involves a cold restart and a call to Red support.

Admittedly, the analogy falls apart, but even with her quirks and growing pains, the Red gave us a beautiful look we could not have achieved on this documentary budget. It's also fun to feel

like you're on the edge a bit. Occasionally scary (three cameras collapsed simultaneously in Texas), but we never lost a shot.

Red and Vancouver's Inspired Cinema strongly supported us throughout the shoot, and the reassuring noises coming from James Tocher and Curtis Staples at Digital Film Central allowed me to sleep well on the road. One man who didn't sleep well was our lone assistant cameraman and digital intermediary technician, Aaron Haelser. Between managing the gear, downloading and verifying the drive and AC-ing, he had less shut-eye than anyone.

Haelser has been seduced by the dark side and often got sucked into the television-series world for months, but he was my first call after landing the job and I was lucky that he accepted. He's 20-something, as nice as they come, drives a cooler car than I, and also operated the A-camera during the interviews. He's also a fanatical drummer and McCormack wanted to adopt him.

During camera prep, a shipment of brand-spanking new S4 lenses arrived directly from the Cooke Factory via Fed Ex into the slightly nervous hands of Haelser. They even smelled new. We shot the interviews primarily with the 85 mm, 100 mm and 135 mm, and occasionally a 16 mm or 25 mm on the C-camera mounted on a sandbag or clamped into a lollipop. Almost everything in the show was eye-focused at T2.

Our "lightweight" package worked out to 21 cases of gear including a survival light and grip kit, portable jib arm, computers, backups, nine lenses and all the comforts of a studio shoot but without the studio crew. Haelser proved not only to be a great AC but also a solid freight manger and (other than the Line Producer Marcelle Pavan) the only one who could manage TomTom, the GPS.

Line Producers don't often get mentioned in DP reports but most don't travel the world charming grumpy boxers and tired crew while managing to stickhandle foreign customs and immigration, book bodies and locations from the drivers seat of a rental car and still maintain a beatific composure. Pavan was our big sister on the road, and I'm sure her master's degree in psychology came in handy.

★★★ The Shoot

Following our prep and a test shoot at a boxing club in Vancouver, our crew of five hopped a plane for the U.K. Landing in London with a thump and impressive carbon footprint, we set off to the London Country Club for our first interviewee – Sir Henry Cooper, British and Commonwealth heavyweight champion in 1970.

We began each interview setup by framing a frontal shot with the A-camera. The B-camera would be positioned to capture a profile shot and was mounted on a jib arm atop a wheeled spreader to allow for subtle movement and the ability to quietly reframe during questions. The B-camera's lens was either a 100 mm or 135 mm and the shot could be described as a "screamer" – very tight. Knowing that the A-camera always had the meat of the inter-

view freed B-camera to make gravy. I floated about looking for the little moments that I loved to catch – the sideways glance from Joe Frazier or the slow exhale from George Chuvalo. This is the real benefit of the second camera. Liberated from the fear of missing a crucial line, the B-camera can go looking for gold and it gave McCormack and Jesse Miller (the film's editor) another layer to work with in the cut.

To see this footage used in the film is a joy for me. Listening and feeling the speakers' cadence and rhythm is crucial or you screw up the shot. But when I nailed the timing, framing and focus (about two-inch thick), I wanted to break out into song in the middle of the interview. Another benefit to working with the long lenses and thin depth of field was that the inevitable dull, compromised background on B-camera could be dressed up with sliced cardboard, spare furniture or even light stands. Out of focus with a bit of sidelight, these items became a soft, impressionistic canvas behind the boxer.

★★★ The Lighting

The face lighting for the show was a Medium Chimera attached to a Barger Baglight with CTB (the Red has a native "daylight" sensor) and no fill. This was the same for almost every interview. The Chimera was set very close to the subject and gave a beautiful wrap and fall-off. Even moving the lamp two or three feet further away negated this effect and the lamp's position was very specific.

We took five minutes to light the face, but then we spent hours set decorating and lighting the backgrounds. McCormack would often glare in mock exasperation as Murray and I gazed into the monitor contemplating the position of a minute puff in the deep background. A fear of mine throughout the project was that the number of talking heads would be difficult to keep visually interesting. During the shoot, we created a gallery of frame grabs from each interview and referred to them as we selected and setup each new interview location. By alternating the eye line and creating a unique background for each boxer, we hoped to give each interview a "look" that would help the audience keep the stories and characters in order. I used a light warm, cool or magenta gel on the key light so that I could push the parts or all of the backgrounds cool, warm or green respectively in colour correction. This, along with Murray's art direction, helped to set a unique visual signature for each boxer.

Suddenly, in walks Sir Henry Cooper and we're on. And he's great. We reset to shoot a quick B-roll sequence after the interview. In classic documentary fashion, Cooper drops some of his best lines on us while we shoot the bits. Thank God for quick-witted sound guys. We got the line about his grandmother brawling in the streets of London. And then we're off.

★★★ Travel

Guided by the TomTom across the U.K. to Liverpool, we meet Ernie Shavers. I had no idea who this massive, shy man was but





Facing Ali: Ron Lyle punching Ian Kerr csc. Images courtesy of the filmmakers.

when I later watched the tapes of his fights I couldn't believe the punishment he inflicted during his career. (Ali credited Shavers as the hardest puncher he had ever faced.) "I wasn't a boxer, but I was a good puncher," he said with a huge grin. Shavers was generous with his time, and we filmed several sequences with him around Liverpool before ending in the community gym where he helped coach. We were soon on the plane back home, but not for long, as we had a date with Ron Lyle in Denver.

Lyle was a killer. Literally. He learned to fight in prison while serving seven-and-a-half years for second-degree murder. Meeting him was a bit like meeting Lou Gossett Jr. He was a guy who still made a mustache look dangerous and downright murderous in the 1970s. I hope he never reads the line about his mustache. He was polite and happy to see us until the interview started. Fittingly, he was positioned in the middle of a boxing ring. Suddenly belligerent and arrogant, the years dropped away. He would often answer a question with a question or just a glare – probing McCormack for weak spots. There were a few tense moments when we all thought he might throw a punch. It was magic on camera, and Lyle later became one of the keystones of the documentary.

The pattern became familiar. Fly into a city the day before the interview, rapidly scout for a location with the assistance of an online locations library or Google Earth, lock down the location, and send a list of additional lighting and grip that evening to the local crew. On shoot day we'd arrive at the location several hours early, pre-light and art direct until the last minute, and then roll hours of interview with our boxer. Following the interview we'd jump in the ring with the boxer, and they'd shadow box into the lens while McCormack would tease out old memories from famous fights. It was a great mix of rough, hand-held, run-and-gun and carefully setup interviews. We had a lot of fun.

Larry Holmes's interview was hilarious and although many of his raunchier stories never made it into the film, his honesty and hospitality was impressive. We did find a limit however. Following the interview, Holmes hopped into his luxury sedan with a couple friends and invited us to join him for a drink at a nearby Holiday Inn. Struggling to keep up with him, we screamed into the parking lot, jumped out, camera rolling, only to be stopped at the door by his burly companions. "No cameras. Have a drink..." Behind his bodyguard the huge former world heavyweight champion was on a tiny dance floor surrounded by 40-year-old white women. All of them line dancing to country music. And we weren't allowed to film it.

We went on to interview Joe Frazier, who choked up with emotion talking about Ali, Ernie Terrell, who sang for us, and George Chuvalo, who broke our hearts with the story of losing three members of his family. Our last interview was with George Foreman at his church's gym in Austin Texas where we hung a massive Texan flag behind him. Forman was the shortest interview but every word was gold. He was a master, performing in front of the camera. I went out and bought one of his grills afterwards.

It's tough to walk away from a project after shooting it. So often the results are disappointing when one sees the final cut. McCormack disappeared for months into editing with Miller and came out with magic. Colorist Andrea Chelebak put on a final finish after the Digital Film Group added the archive footage and then conformed and output the film to a print. The film has been well received – it was named Best Documentary at the 2009 Vancouver Film Festival and was short listed for an Academy Award for best documentary. It seems there was room for at least one more film about the great Muhammed Ali, and I'm very happy to be part of the team that brought it to the screen. 🍷