

TSS TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT: Showtime's Fight Camp 360

Written by Raymond Markarian
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Jody Heaps and Jason Bowers are the executive producers of The Fight Camp 360, a reality series that airs on Showtime. This show focuses on the lives of the six fighters involved in the Super Six Tournament as they compete to be proclaimed the best super middleweight fighter in boxing. Heaps and Bowers say their ultimate goal with Fight Camp is to help the sport of boxing. They lead a small production team that works behind the scenes. When the tournament was introduced, they knew that they had plenty of work ahead of them.

Bowers told TSS that, "Ken Hirschman told us about the Super Six Tournament and one of the first thoughts we had about how to make the tournament feel special, is to do this show. You know boxing is so much about prologue, build up, prologue, anticipation, and a very short climax. We wanted to get to know the fighters. So we thought about things that we could capture and convey to the audience. We try to build up the world around the fighter as best we can.

When Ken Hirschman, the EVP and GM of sports and entertainment programming at Showtime, was putting the final touches on the organization of the Super Six Tournament, he simply asked the Fight Camp production team to follow him to a promoter meeting.

Bowers said, "Ken was like, 'The Super Six is my baby. We are going to have a meeting with all of the promoters. Let's get the cameras in there.

Heaps continued. "Bringing in the promoters and shooting their meetings was a huge idea. We didn't know it was going to work. But the minute we started shooting the first meeting, we just looked at each other and said 'uh oh this is going to be great.

Jody Heaps, who is based out of New York, believes that the success of the show is based on establishment of the fighters as characters.

Heaps said, "We wanted to portray the fights differently than you saw them on television. (During the fights) we concentrate on the family members. If you don't know who the fighters are, it looks like two guys just hitting each other. But the real drama and the real theater happen when you start to know what is at stake: who's fighting, and who are his support group.

The production team usually splits into two crews, and travels to the camp of each member in the Super Six boxing tournament in order to get the footage that is necessary to create a successful show

During the Ward vs. Green fight, Heaps covered the Ward camp and Bowers worked with Green. But since these fighters train all over the world, exceptions have to be made in order to develop the story of each fighter.

Heaps said, "We put in a lot of miles. We have a pretty small team. Jason and I are involved in

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it. We have the same two editors, Josh Glaser and Cass O'Meara. We have a small staff here at Showtime. We also use the same camera man. That way everyone is familiar with each other.

Bowers, who lives in San Jose, CA. says that the tournament style format has made the stories of each fighter easier to tell.

"With the tournament, the story builds over time. It is more like a traditional sport. Each fighter is like a team. You get the highs and the lows. When you are at ringside and you see the faces of the wives, the mothers, the promoters, you see the people that are invested in these fighters. It is a bigger community than just the man in the ring. The show naturally adds that element to it.

Fight Camp 360 has received nothing but positive reviews thus far. However, the production team cannot run away from the consistent comparisons of their show to HBO's similar 24/7.

Both Heaps and Bowers acknowledge the similarities between 360 and 24/7 but they found ways to successfully distinct their show from what HBO has to offer.

Heaps said "From my understanding, we are breaking new ground. I don't think there has been any show like this. In many ways 24/7 broke new ground when it came out years ago. But the way we recap the fight from an emotional standpoint and getting access to the winners and losers locker rooms, I think all of that is brand new.

"I think that Fight Camp 360 is more of what boxing really is, Bowers said. "It is more like the real sport. 24/7 is more indicative of the general perception of boxing. They work with the most well known boxers, this sort of megastar, huge personality type of boxer. I think that it hurts the sport to perpetuate that. The feeling that fighters are larger than life, I think that hurts the sport.

Another glaring difference between the two shows is that Fight Camp 360 does not use a narrator. Both Heaps and Bowers stated that the voiceover on 24/7 has a very strong presence, almost as if it is another character in the show. However, Fight Camp uses a simpler approach.

"We want that intimate, 'you're there' feeling, Heaps said. "We try to be in the moment, the small mundane moments, for example, Froch paying his hotel bill. Heaps said, "We try to learn where you are going, what you are doing, and why you are doing it. This show is a sort of window into who he (the fighter) is. There are not many people in a training camp. And there are not many people in the locker room after a loss. So we decided not to use a narrator for that reason.

The fighters and promoters have been very accessible to the Fight Camp production team. Bowers and Heaps have been pleasantly surprised by the interest they have received from everyone that is involved in the tournament.

"Much to my amazement, the promoters have never, ever, told us to turn off the camera. I don't know if they perform for the cameras or not. But they have been absolutely accessible, Heaps

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said. "The fighters themselves are the same way. They will ask us questions about the show. One camp wanted to know if Abraham really drove the Ferrari. (RM: Virgil Hunter thought the Ferrari stunt was staged.) They watch the show avidly. I think they are just interested in seeing how the other fighters live. I don't think a fighter could get any particular psychology or physical advantage. I think they watch the show because they are just genuinely interested in the other guys.

Although the Super Six Tournament is a progressive concept in boxing, sometimes momentum is lost with The Fight Camp 360 series because the boxers have an inconsistent fight schedule.

Bowers and Heaps acknowledge the difficulties of producing the show under these circumstances. (When speaking with both Jody and Jason, it was interesting to hear them describe the fighters and their teams as characters, as if they are actors in a show.)

Bowers said, "Sometimes, these characters (boxers) fight so infrequently that it is very hard to sustain a story. But the more we get to know them, the more the fans are invested. Like Carl Froch, he is coming off a loss. People want to know what happens. And when we broadcast that, it makes it all feel bigger. We are just trying to let these people come through to the audience with as true a lens that we could provide into their lives. Just like a T.V. show. We will ask them, 'What do you do for fun?' and just go from there.

Heaps says "We use really small cameras. So we are a lot less intrusive. We don't use a big lighting system. The cameras we use are very light sensitive. We hope that it gets to a point where they do not even know we are there. At some point they get used to us. And they trust us. So they open up. We have been into their training camps, into their homes, and their locker rooms. They are pretty used to us. They understand us. Do they ever want to get rid of us? All of the time.

When a show is completed, Showtime sends a copy to the promoters in Europe and it is aired there. Fight Camp is also aired in Canada.

To begin filming a show, a crew usually goes to the fighter's camp before they start training, and revisit it during fight week.

Heaps said, "Let me just be pretentious for a second. I think people will come up with a better way to doing this kind of sports show. But this is the way to do it now. This seems revolutionary. It is eye opening. And we are also blessed with having six incredibly articulate and very distinct personalities. That is one thing that makes the show great. These guys are all different from each other. But they share a common ground.

The next episode of the Fight Camp 360 will be aired on September 1st.