

MARK WATSON | FACEBOOK.COM/PHOTOGRAPHYBYMARKWATSON

# Cage fighters

With the guarantee of knockout images for his graduate show, student Mark Watson stepped into the ring armed only with his Nikon kit



**INSPIRATION**

The ballet of violence that is mixed martial arts.

**AIM**

Create a body of work that would accumulate in my graduate exhibition.

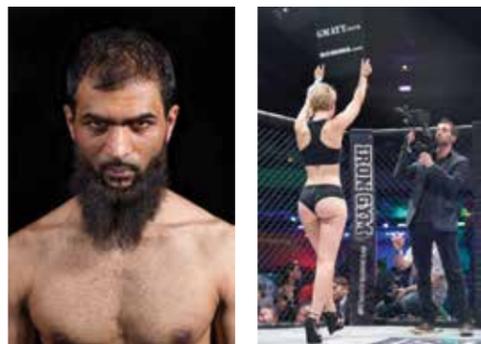
**DURATION**

20 shoots over the course of seven months

Having been an avid fan and practitioner of mixed martial arts (MMA) for a number of years, this project was one I was very excited to undertake. I always want my work to be interesting and have an impact on the people who choose to view it. The nature of what these extraordinary men do undeniably generates fascinating and attention-grabbing photographs. People will make up their own mind whether they agree or disagree with the controversial premise of violence in mixed martial arts; my images simply showcase what these competitors knowingly do.

A typical event holds between 12 and 20 fights on a given night. Gaining access merely required a friendly phone call to the promoter, and in some cases the offer of free usage of my images to promote future events. To ensure the fights are as evenly matched as possible there are weight classes, and the day before the event all fighters must weigh in to ensure they aren't over the limit. It was during the weigh-in that I would bring along my black backdrop and studio lights to shoot portraits of the fighters. Many fighters have to cut their weight through elongated sessions in the sauna, meaning many of them were dehydrated and not in the most accommodating mood. However, a friendly introduction as well as simple directions went a long way to help make my portraits as successful as possible.

Staffordshire University has a great store that allows you to borrow almost any equipment imaginable. I shot the majority of my images on the Nikon D4. It's very versatile and produces excellent results with portraits and is ideal for shooting sports.



**IMAGES** Few people get to witness the action as intimately as a photographer. Stood on a ladder, capturing two professional fighters giving all they have in the cage is a unique experience.

The lighting is extremely dim at these events, not to mention the fighters move extremely fast; this means getting sharp focus can be tricky. My method is to focus on one fighter and manually move the position of the AF point as the fight unfolds. A laborious process – but it produces great results. My advice to anybody who wants to simply practise making images and become a sharper, more efficient photographer is to call up your local MMA promoter and ask if you can come along and photograph their next show.

When I'm not focused on adjusting my AF point to a particular fighter during the combat, I'm always looking for something significant to shoot. I always want my work to have an impact and be engaging to my audience. Whilst it is usually during the fights that the dramatic moments of fierce brutality present themselves, there are equally dramatic images to be made before and after the fights. For example the thrill that comes with victory, as well as the crushing disappointment and sometimes physical pain that comes with defeat. At a typical event I'll shoot well over 2000 images. When sorting through these, I focus on the images that capture the highest moments of intense drama, as I believe that's the bit people are most interested in.

Once I have my images whittled down and edited, I upload them to my Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/photographybymarkwatson](http://www.facebook.com/photographybymarkwatson)). This gives anyone who is following me the chance to see the work I have been doing and lets the fighters see their images – of which they are usually extremely pleased. All this work was put towards the Staffordshire University Graduate Exhibition, where I displayed five framed A2 portraits, as well as a 50-page book, further showcasing the sport of mixed martial arts. ✕

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