

Marty Sammon's Million Dollar Screen Debut

Written by Robert Mladinich
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Longtime boxing official Marty Sammon has squeezed a whole lot of living into his storied life. A San Jose, California stockbroker by day, he has officiated 51 world championship bouts as either a judge or a referee. His boxing work has taken him around the world, to Australia, Korea, Thailand, Mexico, Ireland and England. Although he is often described as "loquacious," while on those trips he doesn't just sit around the hotel pool or catch a few rounds of golf. He immerses himself in the area, trying to find out the most esoteric information possible.

A native of Steubenville, Ohio who now lives in Santa Clara, California, Sammon has an uncanny ability to make positive things happen in his life. Last year he added to his already impressive resume of life experiences by landing his very first film role and getting his SAG card in the process. He is listed in the credits as Referee No. 5 in "Million Dollar Baby," which just garnered the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2004. It also won awards for Best Director (Clint Eastwood), Best Actress (Hilary Swank) and Best Supporting Actor (Morgan Freeman).

"Working with such a great cast was a tremendous introduction to the film business," said the eternally optimistic Sammon. "There wasn't an ounce of pretentiousness on the set. You hear so much negative stuff about Hollywood types. Well, everyone I met was the antithesis of everything I ever heard. It was an absolute joy to be involved in such a great film."

As things turned out, he and Eastwood had a lot in common. Both went to high school in California's East Bay, and Sammon says Eastwood was so low-key and down to earth, he felt like he was working with an old friend from the neighborhood. "We realized we had some common ground and really hit it off," Sammon said.

What surprised Sammon more than anything was the fact of just how regular a guy Eastwood is. He waited on the food line like everyone else, and no one in the crew, Sammon included, seemed the least bit intimidated by his superstar status. "Clint sees himself as a regular guy," said Sammon. "It's not often that I'm nervous talking to anyone, but walking onto the set, I admit I was a tad bit nervous. But within minutes I felt as comfortable as I do in a boxing ring."

Sammon can also not say enough good things about Swank, who he predicts will be a top-flight actress, in the Katharine Hepburn tradition, for decades to come. "The dedication of that woman is amazing," he said. "She's always looking to learn, and even did all of her own stunts. I told her if you get hit in the head you get dizzy and mad, and if you get hit in the body you wince. In her next scene she got hit with a body shot and winced beautifully. She shot me a wink and asked the crew, 'Did you see how I winced?' The director [of that scene] said jokingly, 'It's called acting, Hilary.'"

Throughout his eventful life, Sammon has always had a way of finding himself in the midst of controversial or historical events. While still a small boy, his family left Steubenville for California when many of the local steel mills closed down. They envisioned California as a promised land, but were in for a rude awakening. The family moved all of the time to look for work, and by the

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age of 15 Sammon had gone to 11 schools. Because Sammon had done some boxing back in Steubenville, he was able to fend off adolescent extortionists and developed a reputation as someone not to be messed with.

College boxing was extremely popular in the mid-fifties, so Sammon joined the team at Santa Clara University where he began studying pre-med but earned his degree in finance. In the 1955 Pacific Coast Inter-Collegiate tournament at Sacramento's storied Memorial Auditorium, his bout with Roger Rouse was described by one local newspaper as the bloodiest bout in that venue's history.

"The problem was, it was all of my blood," Sammon joked. Years later, longtime light heavyweight champion Bob Foster, who fought Rouse twice, said Rouse hit him harder than any of his other opponents, Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier included.

As a member of the ROTC in college, Sammon was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army upon graduation. As a member of the 101st Airborne in September 1957, he was dispatched to Little Rock, Arkansas to enforce integration into that city's Central High School. Sammon, who had grown up with people of all creeds and colors, was aghast that so many of his colleagues were not supportive of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. He says he almost came to blows with several of his redneck colleagues, and to this day is touched "by the courage of those children."

He still keeps in touch with several of those children, including Melba Pattillo Beals, who is now the director of communications at Dominican University in San Rafael, California. She says she calls him every September to "say thank you for saving my life." At a prayer breakfast last November to benefit the San Jose YMCA, she told the assembled audience that her grandmother had always instilled in her that in tough situations God will send you a guardian angel. "And my guardian angel," she continued, "was a young paratrooper named Marty Sammon."

Sammon's path into professional boxing was also unconventional. He stayed in shape by playing handball at San Quentin State Prison, and eventually agreed to referee matches between the inmates. The inmates had a lot more at stake in the outcome of some of those fights than Sammon realized, and he often had chicken bones (or worse) thrown at him if he inadvertently messed with the over/under by stopping a fight too soon or letting it go too long. "If you could referee a fight in San Quentin, you could referee a fight anywhere," laughs Sammon.

As a professional judge, Sammon's biggest fight was probably the first Oscar De La Hoya-Shane Mosley bout, which he scored 115-113 for the Golden Boy. Although criticized for that decision by many people, he cites De La Hoya's undercounted body punches and stands by his decision 100 percent. From a strictly personal perspective, his most memorable refereeing assignment was the infamous first matchup between former football star Mark Gastineau and Tim "Doc" Anderson in 1992 in San Francisco.

Rumors abounded that Anderson was going in the tank, so prior to the bout Sammon personally warned both parties that there better not be any monkey business. Anderson wound up beating

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Gastineau from pillar to post. His victory so enraged his promoter, Rick "Elvis" Parker, it is alleged by Anderson that Parker poisoned him just prior to a rematch. Anderson lost that fight, and was left lying in his own vomit on the dressing room floor. When discovered by a janitor hours later, he was taken to a local hospital where it was suggested that he was poisoned. When Anderson threatened to go to the authorities, Parker promised to kill Anderson's quadriplegic sister and her two daughters. Things culminated with Anderson shooting Parker dead in 1995. He is now serving a life sentence in a Florida prison.

"I write to Tim regularly, and he writes back," said Sammon. "I'm pretty much of a law and order guy, but good cell space is being wasted by keeping him in prison. If someone threatened my family the way his was threatened on a regular basis, all bets are off. There were so many mitigating factors that should have been taken into consideration. Even several of the jurors wrote to the judge, expressing exasperation over the drastic sentence. They were going to request leniency, but that decision was taken out of their hands by mandatory sentencing guidelines. It's a travesty of justice."

In the days and months ahead, Sammon says the success of his first film will have him on cloud nine. What he doesn't say, but what is clearly evident from his demeanor, is that every day is a good day for him. He has had no shortage of good fortune in his life, and there's no reason to think his run of good luck will end any time soon.

"I can honestly say I'm one of the luckiest people I know," Sammon said. "As long as you never give up on your dreams, good can come out of anything. Hilary Swank said it best. When she accepted her second Academy Award, she recalled the days she was living in a trailer park with nothing more than a dream. Hell, I once lived in a trailer park in Fontana [California], so I could relate to that. The greatest accomplishment in life is to dream big, then set out to make those dreams come true. It's true in boxing. It's true in acting. It's true in anything."