

Making Great Boxing Films

Written by Aaron Tallent

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Boxing films are like any other movie genre. There is a little bit of everything. We have inspirational sports movies (“Rocky”), satires (“The Great White Hype”), artistic films (“Raging Bull”), historical pieces (“Gentleman Jim,” “Ali,” and “Cinderella Man”), and character studies that just happen to take place in the world of boxing (“Million Dollar Baby”).

The process of making good boxing films is no different than creating other type of quality movie. First, there must be a great script to build from, and then solid actors are needed to bring life to the characters. The director’s vision of the film must also be effectively communicated to the cast and crew, who must then share that concept as well. The production must stay on track and the producer and director must work to overcome obstacles along the way. And like other films, quality technical advisors must be on hand to make sure the subject matter, i.e. the boxing, is accurately portrayed.

If boxing fans ever have gripes about Hollywood’s representation of the sport, it is in the details. Inaccuracies, be it historical or technical, are frustrating to anyone whose knowledge of the sport is even the smallest fraction below superficial depths.

Most boxing films have elements that border on ridiculous. The rounds and rounds of clean bombs to the head in the “Rocky” films make for great cinema, but in reality, such a brawl would leave most fighters dead or permanently disabled. Let us also not forget the fact that a referee would have stepped in and stopped all of Rocky’s onscreen bouts at some point or another.

In “Million Dollar Baby” (MAJOR SPOILER AHEAD), when Maggie (Hillary Swank) has her neck broken in the title bout with Billie “The Blue Bear” (Lucia Rijker) it is said that she lost the bout. Obviously, that element adds even more pain to an already heart-wrenching film. However, Maggie would have won by a disqualification and Billie would have likely been charged with, at the very minimum, assault.

The dilemma that filmmakers face is understandable. They have 90 to 150 minutes to tell a story. Sometimes it is difficult to explain or show the complexity of boxing in that time and still come away with a captivating film. In fictional modern-day stories, forgoing accuracy for the sake of drama is a little more acceptable. But with historical pieces, rearranging facts for great storytelling can be downright irresponsible. The most recent example is “Cinderella Man’s” representation of Max Baer as a despicable braggart who reveled in the fact that he once killed two men in the ring. The film is correct in saying that Frankie Campbell died from injuries suffered during his fight with Baer in 1930. What it does not say is that Campbell’s death haunted Baer throughout his career.

The film also states that Baer was responsible for the death of Ernie Schaaf in 1933. In one scene, Jimmy Johnston (Bruce McGill) tells Jim Braddock (Russell Crowe) that Schaaf suffered such a beating by Baer that the first big punch in his next fight killed him. In actuality, Schaaf died as a result of an inter-cranial hemorrhage suffered in his bout with Primo Carnera. He

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fought three times in between his bouts with Baer and Carnera. It is speculated that Shaaf's fight with Baer helped lead to his death, but the film's portrayal is completely false. The filmmakers could have portrayed Baer fairly without diminishing Braddock's accomplishments. Because they did not, the movie suffers and generations of filmgoers will be left with an unfair impression of Baer.

It is pleasing to see that Hollywood is making more biopics on fighters. There are many great untold stories still waiting to be reintroduced to a new generation of people. But in telling them, the filmmakers have a responsibility to make a realistic and accurate film. That means studios must be willing to spend the necessary funds to recreate the period that they are showcasing. It also means that filmmakers must be willing to tell the true story and not go for the "good versus evil" ending if it is not there. The stories of fighters like Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, and Rocky Marciano are compelling enough to avoid a film that screens well with test audiences but grossly misrepresent the facts. Scrimping on cost and realism can leave a filmmaker with a glorified TV-movie.

In choosing which fighters deserve to have their stories told on the big screen, studios would also do well to avoid any fighter who appeared on HBO, Showtime, or ABC's Wide World of Sports. Michael Mann's "Ali" had many problems, but the most significant was summed up by a colleague of mine who upon the film's release, said, "I saw all of that play out in real life. Why would I want to go see a movie about it?" The same principle can be applied to Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, and any other fighter of the past 40 years. Why see a reenactment of the "Rumble in the Jungle" when you can watch it on ESPN Classic any time you choose?

But there are plenty of classic fights where there is either no film documentation or the representation that is available is of poor quality. A well-produced recreation of Jack Johnson's knockout of James Jeffries or Dempsey's barnburner with Luis Angel Firpo would be very marketable. Filmgoers would also be better served by films showcasing an era where boxing had a much more influential grip on society.

However, filmmakers could apply all of these principles and still miss the mark. Boxing films are in many ways like the fights we watch. Some are good. Some are downright awful. Only a handful of them are classics. That is why we truly appreciate the great ones when they come along.