

Chuck Wepner: Real-Life Rocky Speaks Out

Written by Robert Mladinich
Sunday, 31 December 2006 19:00

Like just about everyone else who heard that Sylvester Stallone was going to reprise his role as Rocky in the just released film "Rocky Balboa," former heavyweight title challenger Chuck Wepner of Bayonne, New Jersey, was more than a bit skeptical.

Because the character was based on Wepner, who as a prohibitive underdog gave a good account of himself while unsuccessfully challenging Muhammad Ali for the title in 1975 in Cleveland, he had more reasons than most for his lack of enthusiasm about Rocky's sixth incarnation.

In the latest film, the Rocky character, who is now 58, returns to the ring for one last stab at boxing glory. His nemesis this time around, Mason Dixon, is played by former light heavyweight champion Antonio Tarver.

"Of course I thought it was implausible in the beginning," said the 67-year-old Wepner, who a few months back reached an undisclosed financial settlement with Stallone for never compensating him for being the inspiration for the Rocky character.

"But Stallone kept it real by not training like he would train to fight, but training to just give a good account of himself. He still has the ability to take a punch and keep coming forward. To his credit, Stallone didn't try to make himself into a real fighter at his age. He knew what his limitations were and just wanted to prove something to himself."

Two months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Wepner, who was then 62, engaged in an exhibition boxing match with an old ring foe Randy Neumann. The charity bout was one of many organized by ShoBox analyst Steve Farhood to benefit the families of emergency workers who were killed at the World Trade Center.

Wepner whipped himself into the best shape he could on short notice and was intent on not looking foolish. Although always known as a consummate brawler, Wepner defied his age and quite possibly boxed better than he ever did in his heyday.

During a career that lasted from 1964-78, he compiled a record of 35-14-2 (17 KOS) against the likes of Ali, George Foreman, Sonny Liston and Ernie Terrell. Besides his repertoire of dirty tactics, he was nicknamed the "Bayonne Bleeder" because of his propensity to bleed as if stabbed with a shank.

"That helped me understand Stallone's motivation to recreate the character, even though he (Stallone) is pushing 60," continued Wepner. "Life doesn't stop at 60. Stallone felt that he had some unfinished business. He took care of that business with this movie, which is very, very good."

Stallone has stated that he loved the Rocky character, but felt that he cheapened it with several

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of the sequels which transformed the fabled fighter into a cartoon character. He also frankly admitted that because his career went into a tailspin in recent years, he wanted to atone for his fall from grace with a very personal tribute to a wonderful cinematic hero while also reviving his own career with such a heartfelt movie.

Stallone couldn't bear the thought of the Rocky legacy being devalued by the caricature it had become in the much-maligned sequels to the first film. To that end, he has succeeded.

There has been nothing but praise for the latest film, from hard-to-please critics as well as the real-life Rocky himself.

"The movie started off a little slow, but it got pretty exciting by the end," said Wepner, who, accompanied by media crews in his hometown, viewed it on opening night at the Frank Theater on the East End of Bayonne. A photo of him at the theater was splashed across the front page of the next day's Jersey Journal newspaper.

"I wasn't disappointed at all," he continued. "The first movie was a masterpiece. This one was pretty close."

Until it was settled in September, Stallone and Wepner were engaged in litigation that had the potential to get ugly. The real-life Wepner had sued the reel-life Rocky for using his name to promote the franchise, which has generated \$1 billion in revenue, without his permission for 30 years.

Wepner's name and likeness are still used in DVD pre-logs, a fact that Stallone never denied. On a recent television broadcast, business show host Neil Cavuto jokingly told Wepner that Stallone still continues to make him famous, even more than three decades after the first "Rocky" film walked off with the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year.

Wepner said that he is glad that he and Stallone were able to settle amicably. At one deposition hearing in San Diego, he told the actor, "No offense, it's just business." He said that Stallone didn't appear to take the matter personally. For that he was grateful.

"The case was a no-brainer," said Wepner. "I'm just glad that it's over and that we can move on."

There is always the possibility that Wepner will soon become a movie icon in his own right.

He has led a very colorful life with enough twists, turns and excursions for several lifetimes. Talk is that both Tim Robbins, an Academy Award winner for "Mystic River," and John C. Reilly have expressed interest in playing the lead in a feature film.

Moreover, renowned documentary filmmaker Jeff Feuerzeig, who brought us the acclaimed "The Devil and Daniel Johnston," which was a portrait of the manic-depressive singer/songwriter genius, has been filming a documentary about boxing's quintessential underdog.

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Life is good for the immensely likeable Wepner, who in December was honored by the Veteran Boxers Association, Ring 8, in New York. As a guy who always sees the glass as half full versus half empty, he is eagerly looking forward to, as he always has, what the future holds for him.

“I’m like the way the Rocky character was in 1976, and the way he is now,” said Wepner, who has been employed as a liquor salesman for many years. “Both films have paralleled my life in a lot of ways. The first one was about a hungry fighter who had a dream.

“The last one was about a guy approaching 60 who still had something to prove to himself. I refuse to give in to my age. Age is just a number to me. You are as young as you feel, and right now I feel pretty good. I’ve always lived life to the fullest, but this is a really exciting part of a great life.”

One reason for his youthful exuberance is his relationship with his third wife, Linda. She jokes that he still has the heart, as well as the libido, of a teenager. They complement each other greatly and are always at each other’s side. Their marriage appears to be a match made in heaven.

When her husband was presented with a “Champion Forever” belt at Ring 8’s fiftieth anniversary Christmas bash earlier this month, Linda was gushing.

“My heart is fluttering,” she said. “It always flutters when I’m around him. Maybe it’s fluttering a little more this time because the movie just came out and he’s the real-life Rocky. I know it and now everyone in the world knows it.”