

Rocky Balboa and the fight crowd

Written by Robert Cassidy Jr.
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There are few comebacks in boxing as glorious as that of Rocky Balboa. In the sixth installment of the "Rocky" series, titled "Rocky Balboa," Sylvester Stallone returns the film to the character's humble Philly roots. The movie – Balboa – is both likeable and meaningful.

It's been 30 years since the fight game was introduced to Balboa. We asked a variety of people some questions about the series:

Your favorite 'Rocky' movie?

Steve Farhood, boxing analyst, Showtime: "As far as I'm concerned, there IS only one Rocky movie, and that's the original. The original was different from the others in one significant way: It wasn't directed by Stallone. John Avildsen did a brilliant job. Also, Rocky was fresh and brand new back then, and as such, was a totally believable character."

Mark LaMonica, sports and celebrity blogger, Newsday: "Rocky III is probably my favorite, which could be considered heresy in Philadelphia and Rome. But everyone always says I and II. But, in Rocky III, Balboa has a few gutcheck moments where he needs to find his heart and soul after getting embarrassed by Clubber Lang. To me, that's the essence of the character that we know as Rocky Balboa. He was all heart, and when he lost in III, we all felt a little uneasy . . . until he beat Apollo Creed in the beach race scene."

Bobby Cassidy, former No. 1 light heavyweight contender and cast member, Rocky I and II: "The first one. It had everything, even a love story. The anticipation of the fight was fantastic. And what made the movie great was the he didn't win. It wasn't your typical Hollywood ending. Burt Young's character, Paulie, was great. He had emotion, envy and a love-hate relationship with his sister."

Michael Bentt, former WBO heavyweight champ who played Sonny Liston in "Ali": "Looking back and appreciating it now, the first one was awfully compelling and raw. But there is something in the current one, 'Rocky Balboa' that strikes a chord in me on many different levels. Maybe I'm old enough to appreciate the 'process of other men.' The thing that resonated mostly is Rocky's yearning not to be defined by anyone but himself, and even then not being comfortable or complacent with what he has. The courtroom scene was poignant and transformative. Stallone's best work since Rocky I and Copland. But everyone's a critic."

Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini, former WBA lightweight champion and actor-director: "The first one, it's a classic."

Tommy Rainone, welterweight: "The original because it was done so well, the music, the dark grainy look that it had. The movie was written perfectly and the casting was even better."

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John Cirillo, president, Cirillo World PR: "The original Rocky was a true movie classic, I remember standing and cheering in the movie theater as if it was yesterday."

Ron Ross, boxing author and columnist: "The original Rocky, because all the others are just like branches on a tree. Gotta go back to the root."

Ed Brophy, Executive Director, International Boxing Hall of Fame: "The first Rocky was my favorite. It is one of the most inspirational films I have ever seen."

Which was the worst "Rocky" movie?

Farhood: "The worst of the worst was Rocky V. Even though I wasn't big on Rocky II, III, or IV, at least Apollo Creed, Mr. T, and Ivan Drago were good characters. That was missing in V. And the we-can-save-the-world speech after the Rocky-Drago fight in IV was fairly pathetic. Talk about taking yourself way too seriously!"

LaMonica: "Sadly, it's gotta be Rocky V, although I contend that it wasn't as bad as everyone makes it out to be, kind of like Godfather III."

Cassidy: "Rocky V, who cares about a street fight?"

Mancini: "It's a toss up between 5 and 6. I understand what Sly was trying to do, he was trying to keep up with the times. But in 4 and 5, he got lost along the way. He became a caricature of what the modern fighter is."

Rainone: "I'd have to say 5 although the street fight was amazing and it wasn't a bad flick but in comparison it wasn't as good as the others."

Cirillo: "Rocky III, I was just never a big Mr. T fan."

Earliest memory of the "Rocky" series?

Farhood: "I saw the original Rocky with my buddy John when the film first came out. There wasn't much buzz yet, and we didn't know what to expect. I distinctly remember people standing and cheering during the fight scene, something that just doesn't happen in Manhattan movie theaters. And I remember running all the way home, even though we saw the movie on the West Side and I lived on the East Side. I think John and I could've run a full marathon."

LaMonica: "I was first introduced to Rocky Balboa in the den of the house I grew up in when I was about 5. I remember sitting on the floor watching Rocky on regular television with my parents."

Bentt: "I just turned eleven when the first Rocky premiered. I remember not really being all that excited about the film. I always maintained that fighters are compelled to fight out of the experiences in their lives. And those experiences include fighting as a response to the relationships in a boxer's immediate culture (family) and the greater culture (society). In Rocky, I

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didn't see anything remotely mirroring my experience. Or if I did I wasn't sensitive or secure enough to acknowledge it. But the parallels were there, even as an 11-year-old. A guy I nicknamed 'The Babe' made sure of that. Here's a bit of irony with The Babe. I'm in a dressing room waiting amongst a group of junior Olympians in the 1976 regionals. A heated discussion about Rocky erupts. I go into my best Muhammad Ali-esque Rocky is fake routine. The only kid not joining the debate was this kid in the corner. I'd soon find out this short Italian fireplug with thick arms and legs was my opponent. Think Babe Ruth meets Vern Troyer. We were eleven and he already had the beginnings of beard growth! During my harangue he never took his eyes off me. I was just a puppy selling wolf tickets and I wasn't bad enough to ask him 'What the f--- are you looking at, white boy?'. Anyway, we fought 45 minutes later and this cat proceeded to get in my face royally. Bang, bing, bang. I remember him swarming all over me and thinking 'I made a mistake by talking because this guy really isn't fighting like it was a sport'. I don't remember his name. All I know is that put a stop to my trash talking before a fight."

Mancini: "I was 15 when the first one came out, I was a freshman in high school. I don't think anyone who saw it wasn't inspired by it. America needed something to hold on to. Everything he did, I tried. I had my first amateur fight in April of that year. I did the one-arm pushups. I drank the raw eggs. I ran the steps. I did all of it."

Brophy: "My earliest memory of the Rocky series was seeing the first film when it debuted in 1976. It's a year I will always remember because it was the year of Rocky, the 1976 Olympic team and also the year I graduated from Canastota High School."

Which character was the best Rocky opponent?

LaMonica: "Drago! He had everything. The height, the deadly punch, the hot wife, the Cold War stare, the great access to performance-enhancing drugs. Plus, he killed the man who gave Rocky his title shot. He was the quintessential antagonist for our hero Balboa."

Cassidy: "The Russian. He was tall, he was strong. He looked like a fighter. Plus, he was in my acting class."

Bentt: "For sheer charisma and as someone who had the 'external' look of a fighter, it had to be Apollo Creed. His technique left a lot to be desired but to the masses back then it didn't matter how he threw his punches. He had the look of a champion, he talked the talk of a champion and he commanded attention when he entered a room."

Mancini: "Apollo Creed was fantastic. He was the quintessential opponent. But I did like the Clubber Lang character too."

Rainone: "By far, Clubber Lang, He is one of the greatest villains to ever be in a film and a lot of his lines were improv, at least that's what Stallone said. Amazing character from the opening scene when he's standing over a fallen opponent screaming, 'I want Balboa!'"

Cirillo: "Carl Weathers from the original Rocky, he looked like a fighter."

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Ross: "When a character stays in your mind the way Apollo Creed does, I guess it's the 'Creed' rises to the surface."

Brophy: "Apollo Creed, to me, was the best Rocky opponent. The actor who portrayed him (Carl Weathers) did such a great job in making him larger than life."

Rocky Balboa reminds you of which real-life fighter and why?

Farhood: "Rocky doesn't really remind me of any fighter. The easy answer is, of course, Chuck Wepner, but when Wepner got his shot at Ali, he was a legitimate top 10-top 15 heavyweight. Before fighting Apollo, Rocky was a total nonentity."

LaMonica: "Vinny Pazienza. Crazy Italian guy in the ring who could throw punches and take punches until either the bell rung or his face fell off."

Cassidy: "That's a tough one. But I'm going to say me. We were both southpaws and we both beat the odds. I turned pro without a single amateur fight. Teddy Brenner said the odds of me becoming a contender, without any kind of amateur background, were 1,000-to-1."

Rainone: "Arturo Gatti."

Mancini: "As far as career trajectory, we can talk about James J. Braddock, a knock around guy, finally getting a title shot. I know the movie is based on Chuck Wepner. And what about Carlos Baldomir, he's the modern-day Rocky."

Bentt: "For pure drama and an Italian-American tie-in, Rocky Balboa is the heavyweight rendition of Ray 'Boom Boom' Mancini. Boom Boom was never in an easy fight and neither was 'Rocko'. Both were bleeders. It was blood and guts when they fought. But how about a runner-up? Frank 'The Animal' Fletcher. Although the obvious difference is pigmentation, go back and take a look at Fletcher's fights. He probably most closely resembles Rocky in ring style and temperament."

Cirillo: "Paulie Malignaggi, Italian, tough, charming and never will give up. The Cotto-Malignaggi fight was like a real-life Rocky."

Ross: "I know he's supposed to be based on Chuck Wepner but whenever I see Arturo Gatti, I see a pocket Rocky."

Brophy: "Rocky doesn't remind me of one particular real life boxer, but Stallone's portrayal of a boxer who is trying to prove himself is exactly what most boxers are all about. They all have that Rocky spirit in them."

In real life, Rocky Balboa would be ... a champ, a contender, a club fighter, a tomato can.

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Farhood: "In real life, Rocky would be ignored. Nobody wants to fight a left-handed heavyweight."

LaMonica: "Despite the 24 losses on his record, the Rock is a champion."

Cassidy: "A contender, especially today. But they'd stop all his fights in the first round."

Rainone: "A contender probably similar to Micky Ward."

Mancini: "First of all, real fighters, can fight. But let's look at the heavyweight division during the late '70s and early '80s. He'd be a contender. He would have gotten a title shot, Larry Holmes would have needed an opponent like him, a tough, good-looking white guy to beat up."

Bentt: "If I were being honest, Rocky Balboa 'should not' have been licensed to fight after more than a couple of years in the gym if the character existed. Fighting is a dangerous game. No matter how tough and durable a Rocky Balboa is, those characteristics eventually give way to fighters being reduced to perennial sparring partners and/or punching bags. Not very healthy at all. A guy like Rocky Balboa would not have survived very long in the gyms of New York, Philly, Detroit, or Jersey. But sadly, boxing is such that no one is really there to protect the Rocky Balboas from the themselves."

Cirillo: "Since he is also a lot like Arturo Gatti and Micky Ward, he certainly could be a champion, maybe not the greatest in history but a champion."

Ross: "In today's world of multi-championships, he would definitely be a champ. Why not? Everyone else would, too. A generation back, a club fighter."

Most inspiring Rocky moment?

Farhood: "Anything that's accompanied by Bill Conti's music. Rocky accelerating during roadwork ... climbing the steps ... rallying against Apollo ... If you didn't find virtually everything in Rocky I inspiring, you watched with a blindfold and ear plugs."

LaMonica: "Just hearing those opening bells in the soundtrack during key moments in fights and other scenes. Instant Goosebumps."

Rainone: "It's probably when he says, 'One more round,' in Rocky 5 after getting knocked down and looking finished in the street fight. That whole scene is realistic and inspiring to me as the streets are somewhere Rocky seemed comfortable fighting. I relate to that."

Cassidy: "This might be a little offbeat, but to me it was when he took back Mickey as his trainer in the first movie. He came to Rocky's apartment, he was begging but not begging, and Rocky was ignoring him. Then Rocky ran downstairs and got Mickey. That was great. The love won out."

Mancini: "In the first one, when he was in the locker room saying his prayers before the fight, I

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could identify with that. I used to do that. You have that alone time before you head out to the ring. That was a great scene. One scene in the last one I really liked too was when he says, 'What's a matter with a guy standing in the middle of the ring, going to-toe-toe saying: I am.' Every fighter can identify with it."

Bentt: "I connected with the courtroom scene in Rocky Balboa. The subtext of the whole debate to me was 'I won't allow you to define me or pigeonhole me.' What he has to say in 'Rocky Balboa' transcends race, faith, education and political affiliation."

Cirillo: "Actually, in a way, the latest Rocky film provided the most inspiring Rocky moments, he got up off the canvas of life!"

Ross: "The same in every movie. The last ten minutes of the picture when he climbs off the canvas and finds TRUE REDEMPTION!"

Brophy: "The most inspiring Rocky moment was during his training when he hit the sides of meat in the cooler."

Best Rocky line?

Farhood: "My favorite is extremely underrated: 'These are my pet turtles, cuff and link.' I spoke to Bill Shakespeare the other day and he told me he wishes he wrote that line."

LaMonica: "'Take her to the zoo, Rock' – Gazzo's friend from inside the car in Rocky I after telling Rocky that he thinks Adrian is retarded and that 'I hear retards like the zoo.'"

Cassidy: "Yo, Adrian!"

Rainone: "'Cause ya cant win Rock! This guy will kill ya to death inside of 3 rounds."

Bentt: "Unsilent majority bigmouth, Paulie's line to the Russian diplomat. I thought I'd give props to 'Bed Bug Eddie Grant.'"

Mancini: "The best exchange came after the first fight. Apollo: 'There ain't gonna be no rematch.' Rocky: 'I don't want one.'"

Cirillo: "Yo, Adrian!"

Ross: "It's not so much what he says, but how Stallone puts it over. He speaks the mundane into the magnificent."

Brophy: "Yo, Adrian!"