Maybe I'm just being cynical, but I've always believed that posthumous honors, with few exceptions, are like an umpire's makeup call. "Yeah, I think I did ring up that batter on a called third strike that was a foot outside. No problem. I'll call one the other way in the next half-inning."

Former Yankees and Indians second baseman Joe Gordon, who was 73 when he died in 1978, played his last major league game in 1950, but he will enter the Hall of Fame Class on July 26, 2009, by the approval of the reconstituted veterans committee. Which begs a question (OK, two of them): Have Gordon's credentials for immortality somehow improved since he's passed on, or did the nine-time All-Star's long-delayed certification by Cooperstown owe to the fact that, as good as he was, his career really wasn't Hall of Fame-worthy?

You tend to ponder such hypotheticals when there is an announcement that a deceased athlete not only is going to be honored with a bronze plaque, but with an entire statue. Such was the case with former middleweight champion Joey Giardello, who was 78 when he died of congestive heart failure and complications from diabetes on Sept. 5 in his adopted hometown of Cherry Hill, N.J.

On Dec. 7, the 45th anniversary of his title-winning performance against Dick Tiger in Atlantic City, friends and family members of the late Carmine Tilelli (Giardello's real name) gathered at the triangle of East Passyunk Avenue, South 13th Street and Mifflin Street in South Philadelphia for the announcement that on that site would rise a statue of the man who perhaps is best known now for the harsh and slanted depiction of him in a 1999 movie.

Renowned sculptor Carl LeVotch has been commissioned to create the statue, which will be funded by the joint efforts of Ring One of the Veterans Boxers Association, the Harrowgate Boxing Club and the Web site Phillyboxinghistory.com. Philadelphia Councilman Frank DiCicco cleared the way for the group to use the location.

When it is completed, the statue of Giardello will be the first of a real, flesh-and-blood Philly fighter in a city that always has prided itself as being the foremost breeding ground of champion boxers. Oh, sure, there is a statue of Rocky Balboa at the foot of the Art Museum steps, but that tribute to the fictional heavyweight champion popularized by actor Sylvester Stallone was a movie prop for 1982's "Rocky III."

Should Giardello have gotten a statue before, say, former heavyweight champ Joe Frazier? Or the late, great light heavyweight titlist Tommy Loughran, who last month finally was inducted into the Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame? Hey, it's the sort of thing that sparks debate, and isn't that what halls of fame and statues are designed to do, anyway? In Philadelphia, there are statues of baseball's Mike Schmidt, Steve Carlton and Rich Ashburn, of basketball's Julius Erving and Wilt Chamberlain, of hockey's Gary Doernhoefer. There's even one of the late Kate Smith, who was regarded as something of a good-luck charm for hockey's Flyers when she

sang “God Bless America” before important games. But there isn’t a bronze monument commemorating Bobby Clarke, the greatest hockey player ever to play on home ice at the soon-to-be-demolished Spectrum, or of any Eagle. Go figure.

Longtime Philly promoter J Russell Peltz is firm in his belief that Giardello is as deserving of a statue as any local boxer, and he considers the Brooklyn-born Giardello to be a native son despite his birth city a hundred miles or so to the north.

“He was the greatest middleweight ever to come out of this city,” Peltz said of Giardello, and, yes, he includes Bernard Hopkins among the runners-up. “Joey didn’t duck anybody. He was one of the few white fighters who fought all the tough black fighters.”

For my part, I’ll miss hearing Giardello just talking about his past, which would be colorful enough to merit a statue even if he wasn’t enshrined in the International Boxing Hall of Fame, Class of 1993.

Joey – he was Mr. Tilelli to his neighbors in Cherry Hill – was an avid sports fan whose love of the old Brooklyn Dodgers was almost limitless. Some years ago, he was an invited guest for a reunion of some of the great Yankees teams from the 1950s when someone introduced him to Billy Martin.

“He knew who I was,” Giardello said of the encounter with the fiery (and frequently fired) manager of the Yankees during the George Steinbrenner era. “I was, you know, just making conversation. I said something like, `Billy, I didn’t like you much when you were beating my Dodger teams in the World Series. You really used to kill the Dodgers.’ I said it as a compliment.

“Billy had been drinking and, I don’t know, I guess he took it the wrong way or something. He said, `I’ll kick your ass.’ I didn’t take him serious, but I was watching for a sucker punch, just in case. You never know, he might have tried it. It wouldn’t have been the first time. Finally someone came over and got between us and that was that.”

Might Giardello have accommodated Martin had he stepped over the line?

“Nah, I would have hurt him bad,” Giardello said. “I mean, I’m not some marshmallow salesman.”

No one could ever confuse Giardello with marshmallows. He was rawhide-tough, a natural counterpuncher who compiled a 101-25-7 record, with 33 knockouts, against the finest competition of his era. And if that competition wasn’t as tough as it could have been, Giardello couldn’t be faulted. Sugar Ray Robinson and Bobo Olson were only two of the champions who, he claimed, ducked him at every opportunity.

“None of those guys wanted to fight me,” Giardello said. “Maybe it was my style. I waited almost 12 years to get my first title shot and, when I got screwed on the decision (Gene Fullmer retained the championship on a controversial 15-round draw on April 20, 1960, in Bozeman,

Montana), I never thought I'd get another chance. So I had to fight all the guys that nobody else wanted to fight."

So how did Carmine Tilelli become Joey Giardello, and wind up in Philadelphia?

It turns out that Carmine Tilelli was too young to enlist in the Army at age 16, so he borrowed the birth certificate of a friend's older cousin in order to serve his country. This was 1946, just after World War II.

Having served a two-year hitch under the name Joey Giardello, the erstwhile Carmine Tilelli was mustered out in 1948 and wound up in South Philadelphia to visit an Army pal.

"I was short on cash and I'd fallen in love with a South Philly girl, Rosalie Monzo," Giardello said. "She kept me here. She kidnapped me.

"Anyway, I had to do something, right? So I went to this gym and took up boxing. I had never fought before, at least in the ring, but I was in a lot of fights, if you know what I mean. I got me a manager and started fighting."

After the draw with Fullmer – "It was a disgrace; I won the fight, Fullmer knows I won the fight, everybody knows I won the fight," Giardello insisted – the next big chance evaded Giardello until Pearl Harbor Day, 1963, when he squared off against Tiger in Boardwalk Hall.

"I knew Tiger wouldn't run from me," Giardello recalled. "Tiger never ran from anybody."

And so it was that Giardello, then 33 and a 4-1 underdog, outboxed Tiger over 15 rounds to achieve his dream of becoming a world champion.

"That night, nobody could have beaten me," Giardello said.

He retained the title once, outpointing Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, and relinquished it in his next defense, on a unanimous decision to Tiger. But as fate and Hollywood screenwriters would have it, the fight that everyone remembers – which is to say, those who weren't around 40-plus years ago – is the one with Carter.

You'd think that someone as accomplished and decent as Giardello, a man who put his family and his ring legacy above all else, would have gotten a fairer shake from movie moguls who used the still-living Philly legend as a means to tell a story that wasn't entirely on the up-and-up.

My wife and I took Joey and Rosalie to a local theater when "The Hurricane" came out because I wanted to assess his reaction to the scenes depicting his fight with Carter, which I'd heard pretty much fudged the truth.

I'll never forget the outrage and amazement on Joey's face as the actor portraying him took a terrible pounding from Denzel Washington, who played Carter, but was awarded a racially motivated decision as the crowd booed.

Dramatic stuff, except that it didn't happen that way. The fight took place in Philly's Convention Hall, where Giardello was more popular than cheesesteaks and soft pretzels. And that TV announcer, who yelped into his microphone about the injustice that had been done to Carter? Doing the actual commentary that night was Les Keiter, retired and living in Hawaii, who I was able to track down in seven minutes of calling around. Keiter said the movie version of the fight was as far from reality as it possibly could be.

I wrote a series of stories about Giardello and the way he had been smeared by a director and screenwriter who figured their version was more dramatic and advanced the idea that Carter was a great fighter locked away in his prime because he was too radical and threatening to the white establishment. And it very well may be that Carter was unjustly imprisoned for a triple murder he might not have committed. In any case, he eventually was released when a judge ruled that procedural errors had been made by the prosecution.

Fact: Denzel Washington was terrific as Carter, so terrific that he was nominated for an Academy Award as best actor. Fact: Carter wasn't tossed into jail shortly after losing to Giardello; he went 7-7-1 after that fight before he was incarcerated. And wouldn't Carter's story have been nearly as gripping if the fight scenes had been played straight?

I won an award in the Associated Press Sports Editors writing competition for my series on Giardello, which was nice. Joey sued the moviemakers and got a fairly sizable financial settlement and an admission from director Norman Jewison in the "bonus material" DVD that, yes, he was a great fighter who beat Carter without the aid of biased officials. That was even nicer.

A pricey attorney with a Washington, D.C., firm retained by the movie company called my executive sports editor demanding that I be fired for, I don't know, detracting from their bottom line. His reply: We don't fire our reporters for writing the truth. Mr. Hotshot Lawyer backed off. Kevin Spacey won the Academy Award as Best Actor for his performance in "American Beauty," amid speculation that Denzel Washington's chances for the Oscar were hurt by the controversy over factual distortions in the script that were continually brought up by media snoops like yours truly.

To this day, I'm still waiting for a fruit basket, or something, from Kevin Spacey. Denzel won his Academy Award the following year for "Training Day," which was about a corrupt cop and had nothing to do with sparring, skipping rope and hitting the heavy bag.

Said Giardello when the settlement was announced: "For 19 years I fought the greatest fighters around and I beat Carter fair and square. I just wanted to set the record straight, and I think it has been."

I didn't have the heart to tell him that most of the people who saw "The Hurricane" probably were unaware of the misrepresentations or the settlement and quasi-apologies the Hollywood types were obliged to issue him.

Aside from the fact that I am now leery of any film "based on a true story" – remember, in "Ali,"

the confrontation between Belinda Ali and hubby Muhammad Ali over his mistress and future wife, Veronica Porsche, took place in Zaire, not the Philippines, the better to coincide with the movie's adjusted time frame – I'm just glad that Joey will be immortalized in bronze in his old neighborhood.

Even if it is somebody's idea of a makeup call, so what? Late or not, it's the right thing to do.