

## Chuck Wepner: Brother, can you spare a dime?

Written by Robert Mladinich  
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It has been more than 30 years since Chuck Wepner challenged Muhammad Ali for the heavyweight championship of the world and became the prototype for Sylvester Stallone's "Rocky" character, which is about to undergo its sixth incarnation.

Wepner, who hailed from Bayonne, New Jersey, was nicknamed the "Bayonne Bleeder" because of his propensity to bleed as if stabbed with a shank. During a career that spanned from 1964-78, he received more than 300 stitches while compiling a record of 35-14-2 (17 KOs).

But his biggest moment came in March 1975, when, as a prohibitive underdog, he lasted into the 15<sup>th</sup> round against Ali in Cleveland. He even knocked the mighty Ali down.

Stallone, then a struggling actor, watched the Ali-Wepner fight on closed-circuit television in a New York movie house. He was so impressed with Wepner's effort that he churned out the script for "Rocky" in just a few days.

The film would go on to win the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1976 and spawn four sequels. It is believed that the entire Rocky franchise has netted over \$1 billion, of which Wepner never saw a dime.

For years Wepner told people that he received \$70,000 for being the muse for the first film, but now admits to saying that to spare himself the embarrassment of not being compensated at all. He describes his dealings with Stallone as being "thirty years of frustrations, handshakes and broken promises."

Since his gallant stand against Ali, Wepner has had no shortage of travails. He was socially addicted to cocaine in the eighties and served two years of a 10-year prison sentence for drug trafficking, but was sprung early with the help of his many friends in the law enforcement community and the political arena. Although Wepner was a small fish in a much bigger drug conspiracy, he refused to rat on his colleagues, which only enhanced his reputation as a standup guy.

What is most refreshing about the former boxer's involvement in that crime is the fact that he accepts full responsibility for his actions. He is the first to admit that he screwed up and deserved every day of the sentence he received. When released, he spent several years in what is called the Intensive Supervision Program. He has never looked back.

"What I did was an aberration," said the 66-year-old Wepner, who looks a decade and a half younger.

Wepner continued to do charity work, much of it with local police departments, even as he logged many hours a week as a salesman for a liquor distribution company – a job he has held for more than three decades. Because he was so beloved in and around Bayonne, he shot a

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television ad several years ago for Dillon Tires, which is located in his hometown.

“I’ve been around a while,” he says in the ad. “I’ve fought Sonny Liston, George Foreman and Muhammad Ali. Sometimes I got beat, but you’ll never get beat at Dillon Tires.”

The former fighter has proved to be quite the pitchman. “I run the ad every year on local channels for about four months at a time,” said Bruce Dillon, the owner of Dillon Tires. “Whenever I do, business booms. I have to keep a stack of autographed pictures of Chuck on hand, because everyone wants one. He’s an icon around there.”

Wepner’s life never seems to slow down – even as he approaches the age of 70. He is currently immersed in a lawsuit with Stallone, whom he alleges used his name inappropriately to promote the “Rocky” franchise.

What inspired the lawsuit, which was filed two years ago, was the fact that Stallone announced plans to produce a Broadway play based on the Rocky character. Since then, a film to be called “Rocky VI” has gone into production.

Renowned documentary filmmaker Jeff Feuerzeig is also filming a documentary on Wepner’s life. Feuerzeig recently released “The Devil and Daniel Johnston,” a portrait of the manic-depressive, singer/songwriter genius.

For the past several months, a camera crew has been chronicling Wepner’s every move. Besides traveling with him as he makes his daily rounds of liquor stores and bars, many of whom he has serviced for decades, they have brought him to Gleason’s Gym, where they filmed him hitting the heavy bag; to New Jersey’s Hudson County Park, where they had him running up steps much the way Stallone did in “Rocky,” and even had him run over a mile behind a car equipped with a camera.

“In the park I ran up 46 steps five times before they got it right,” joked Wepner. “When they had me running behind the car, the producer was telling me to pick it up while I was saying slow it down. These guys forget that I’m a senior citizen.”

Once the documentary is completed, most likely by the spring of 2006, there are plans for a feature film on Wepner’s life to be made by Metro Goldwyn Mayer and tentatively titled “Redemption.” The first choice to play him was Academy Award winner Tim Robbins, who, like Wepner is 6’5” and already showed in “Bull Durham” that he is athletically inclined.

However, it seems that Robbins has priced himself out of the picture. That opened the door for John C. Reilly, who although a few inches shorter, could probably better capture Wepner’s blue-collar, workingman appeal.

Reilly has been nothing short of brilliant in such films as “The Aviator,” “Anger Management,” “Chicago,” “Gangs of New York,” “The Perfect Storm” and “Boogie Nights.”

“I feel like my life is being lived as a reality TV show,” said Wepner, who was accompanied to a

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November 30 boxing show in North Bergen, New Jersey, by his lovely third wife Linda, to whom he has been blissfully married for 12 years.

“I’ve always lived large and enjoyed the ride,” Wepner said. “But this, I have to admit, is one of the most exciting chapters of my life. The next few years are going to be very interesting. I can’t wait to see what’s in store for me.”