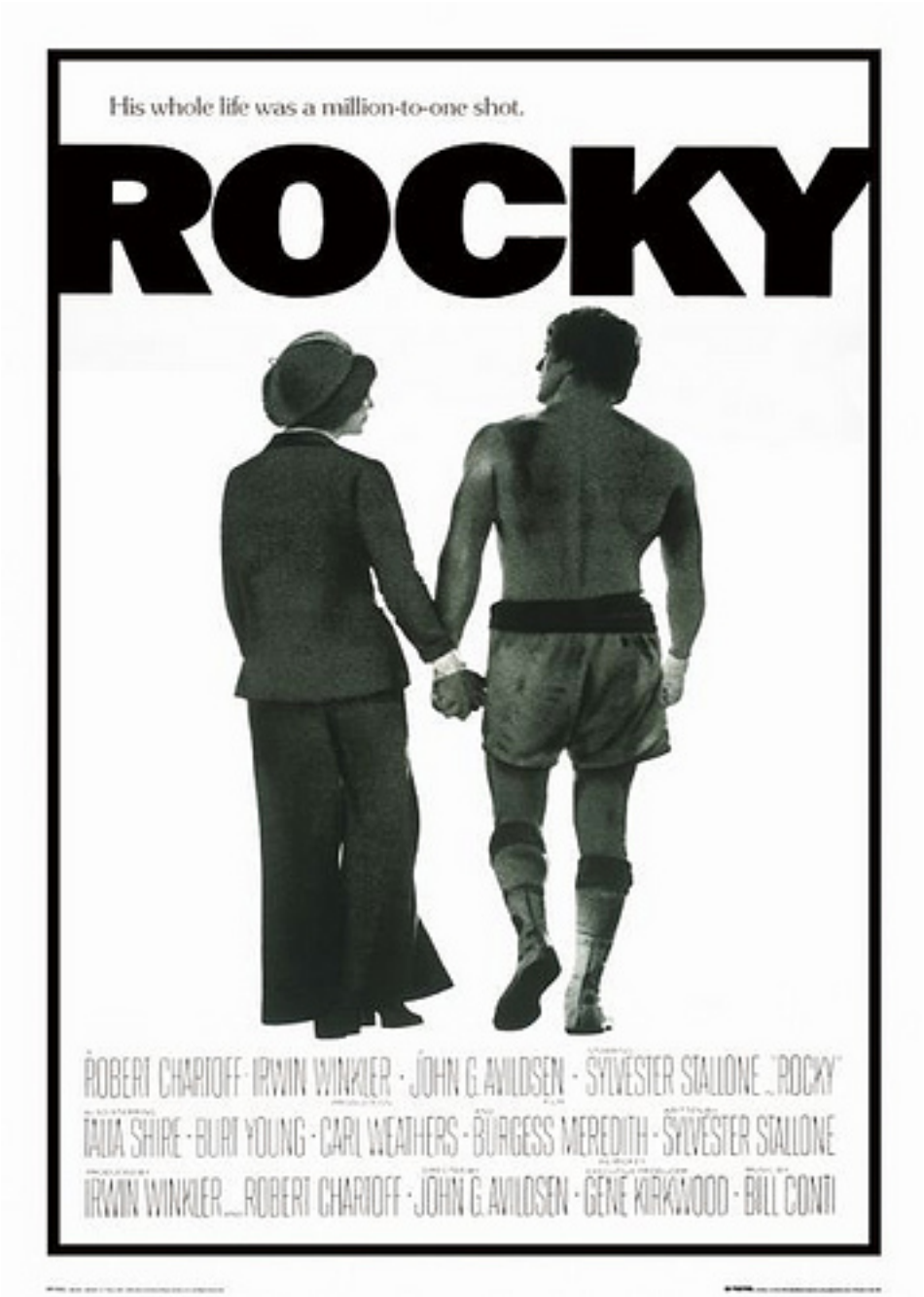

If the International Boxing Hall of Fame wanted to induct an actor Sunday shouldn't it have been Robert DeNiro? Or maybe Luis Santana?

It's bad enough that the sport's Hall of Fame (one of two, of course, this being boxing) has degenerated into the Hall of Very Good over the years with the election of far too many fighters with less than stellar credentials but with the induction of Sylvester Stallone the newly opened actor's wing isn't even that.

If the people who run the place in Canastota wanted to make a politically correct statement with Hollywood affiliations they could have opted for Hillary Swank, who won the Oscar for Best Actress a few years back for the job she did in “Million Dollar Baby’’ playing Maggie Fitzgerald, a struggling waitress turned female fighter trying to make it in the world’s toughest sport while coming from the same hard scrabble background of most of her male counterparts.

They could have honored Robert Ryan, who played a broken down has-been in the classic 1949 film “The Set Up’’ or John Huston, who directed the film version of “Fat City,’’ the great boxing novel written by Leonard Gardner. They could even have inducted Humphrey Bogart for the final role of his career, the shady down-on-his-luck sportswriter Eddie Willis in “The Harder They Fall.’’

Frankly, that wouldn’t have made much sense either, this being the Boxing Hall of Fame, not the Acting Hall of Fame but at least Swank, Ryan, Bogart and DeNiro could act. Stallone? Not so much.

To be fair about it, Stallone wrote and starred in “Rocky,’’ the Academy Award winning rags-to-bandages 1976 hit that was nominated for 10 Oscars and won three. An entire generation was inspired to become fighters or fight fans because of it and for that the he deserves the sport’s gratitude to be sure. But it’s highest honor? Why?

Stallone went on to turn “Rocky’’ into five sequels, each a bit lamer than its predecessor. Sort of like what happened in Godfather III or with Roberto Duran, who made more comebacks than Rocky Balboa.

Stallone also helped create “The Contender’’ reality TV series that sadly drew a larger audience during its brief television run a few years ago than most real boxing matches do these days. That is not Stallone’s fault. He was trying to help the sport and did again but it was not hall of Fame TV, to be frank. (EDITOR NOTE: Thought maybe RB would insert a little FRANK Stallone crack here…) Certainly it was no “Jersey Shore.’’

How that resume put Rambo into the Boxing Hall of Fame is beyond me, but then so was the election of Mike Tyson, who lost badly to three of the top four fighters he faced (Evander Holyfield, Lennox Lewis and Buster Douglas, while defeating former light heavyweight champion Michael Spinks in 91 seconds in the final fight of Spinks’ career) and never once got off the floor to win a fight.

Certainly Tyson was the youngest fighter to win the heavyweight title, which gives him historical significance but then again he was also the youngest fighter to lose the heavyweight title so there you have it. His was a story of promise never fulfilled, a story more of what might have been than what actually occurred. A story the opposite of Rocky, actually.
But at least he was once a unified heavyweight champion and a cultural icon big enough that, like Ali, one name was enough to identify him. Like Tyson, Stallone was a mythmaker and a phenomenon who made millions from boxing. What he was not was a Hall of Fame actor like DeNiro, whose portrayal of Jake LaMotta in “Raging Bull’’ is considered one of the cinema’s great performances.

“Raging Bull’’ is on every list of greatest films ever made. Rocky? Like Stallone, Hall of Very Good.

If the International Boxing Hall of Fame wants to one day reach the same level of respect as the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown or the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio it needs to re-think what its doing. The Hall needs to be a place difficult to attain, a place where you can argue long and loud about why this guy or that isn’t in instead of the other way around.

A long parade of convertibles filled with names that will attract a crowd on a Sunday afternoon in June is all well and good but the people in the cars need to be people who qualify for more than the Hall of Very Good. People like Robert DeNiro, if you must, not Sylvester Stallone.

Comment on this article

Brad says:

It's the Hall of Fame. Rocky is the quintessential underdog movie. Everyone knows Rocky. Raging Bull may have been a better film, but it had no lasting impact on our culture like Rocky did. Plus if you have guys like Dan Duva, Shelly Finkel, Leroy Nieman, and Jose Sulaiman in the Hall of Fame, there's a place for Stallone. If it was simply about "being the greatest" then Freddie Brown should be in, and Nacho Beristain would be out.

DeadRinger says:

Well, I guess with Raging Bull it's different because that painted a very different portrait of a boxer than Rocky did, even though it's a masterpiece. (De Niro rightfully won Best Actor at the Oscars, while Scorsese and the film itself lost in what is considered the second greatest Oscar robbery of all time, the worst being Citizen Kane losing in 1942). Even if Rocky didn't turn everyone into boxing fans, it got everyone's attention. I've talked to people who don't even know who Manny Pacquiao is who associate boxing solely with the Rocky franchise. While Raging Bull is a better scripted, acted, directed, and produced film, its impact was more on cinema that it was on wider popular culture. After all, Rocky is the big-hearted everyman with the same struggles and dreams as everyone else, while Jake LaMotta was a paranoid bully with low self-esteem. While I would love to see De Niro and Scorsese honored at the hall, the enduring impact of the Rocky movies is too much to ignore.

There are plenty of people who don't deserve to get into the hall who are in there anyway, most notable one being Jose Sulaiman. At this point, the hall of fame is just something that's fun to argue about, especially when it comes to credentials. I would argue that there are too many old-timers getting in and that we focus on them at the expense of contributors from other categories. Guys like Sam Langford and Benny Leonard are in there because their accomplishments rang throughout history, but does any living person really have a proper career perspective on Gorilla Jones?

Radam G says:

I ain't gettin' into this one. Holla!

astro says:

I couldn't agree more. Even the other Halls of Fame are really starting to be Halls of Very Good. Maybe they don't need to induct every year, they could spread it out to every other year or so.

ez da fez says:

Ignoring the main point of this article and diverting it back to Tyson, do Borges and Loiterzo make it a point to purposely disagree with each other on every issue? We've even reached the point where Loiterzo is borderline praising a Mayweather opponent as actually being worthy while Borges is calling him a borderline bum. I'd love to hear these guys talk politics.

dino da vinci says:

I'll handle this one, Radam. Ahem...The nice thing about this location on the web (@TheSweetScience) is the writers have 100% free reign to express their thoughts. Many times while reading his work I've caught myself thinking, "That's right Ron, rip into 'em!" This isn't one of those times. Stallone personifies everything that's right with America. If you have ambition, a great work ethic, creativity and a ton of moxie, you can become a Sylvester Stallone. In the beginning, he was throwing pebbles (small rocks?) at producer Irwin Winkler's (Or was it his partner Robert Chartoff?) window in an attempt to get his attention for the Rocky script. With a little over a hundred dollars in his bank account, told his first wife, even as the value of the script rose by hundreds of thousands, "If it's alright with you, I'd rather eat it than sell it if I can't act in it". At its highest offer, he asked, "Who do I play?" "You play nobody", came the reply. Final offer came, "Alright, $25,000 (actually, $24,000) and 10% of the gross, if it grosses anything". If it grosses anything! How cool is this guy, Ron? Yes, he's not Pacino or DeNiro, but then again, they can't do what he does either. Guy makes like $20,000,000 a movie. Trust me, at that number somebody is watching them! My cousin Marco read your article, turns to me and said, "I agree with Ron (about not having actors in a sports hall of fame)". Having read it already in the morning, I told him that I didn't. On cue, a guy walks into our office, I turn to my cousin and tell him not to say anything. I asked the guy to name the actor who played Rocky Balboa. He answered without batting an eye, "Sylvester Stallone". "OK, who played Jake La Motta?", Iasked. "I don't really watch movies", came the reply. This is one of those rare (rare, rare, really, really rare!) questions that might get answered 100% correct, 100% of the time. Maybe Joe Palooka should have been in already, but if we're going the celluloid route, Balboa's your man.

the Roast says:

Hey, If not for Rocky we never would have seen the career of Vinny Pazienza. As long as they dont put Antonio Banderas and Woody Harrelson in I'm ok with Stallone.