

ALSO INSIDE:

- Mammaries for Mammals pg. 5
- Faithful Jamgrass pg. 22
- Cari, Meet Rocky pg. 25

By Carl Corvis

Movies

# Rocky Who?

## My punch-drunk holiday introduction to the Italian Stallion

Nothing quite says Christmas peace and joy like a boxing flick. Blood, punches, fighting and the triumph of the will — what could be more representative of the birth of baby Jesus?

The new (and ostensibly final) sequel to Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky*, *Rocky Balboa*, opened three days before Christmas, following in the grand holiday tradition of movies like *Million Dollar Baby*, *Raging Bull*, *Rocky IV*, *Rocky V*, and, of course, *Rocky*, which probably started the whole thing.

Having never seen a single *Rocky* movie (seriously, this is how bad it was: I didn't know "Gonna Fly Now (Theme from Rocky)" was the theme from *Rocky* until a few weeks ago when I saw a commercial for *Rocky Balboa* and finally connected the two), I decided to fill the giant gap in my cultural literacy by watching each movie in order (within the space of 48 hours) before venturing to the Bijou to check out the new one.

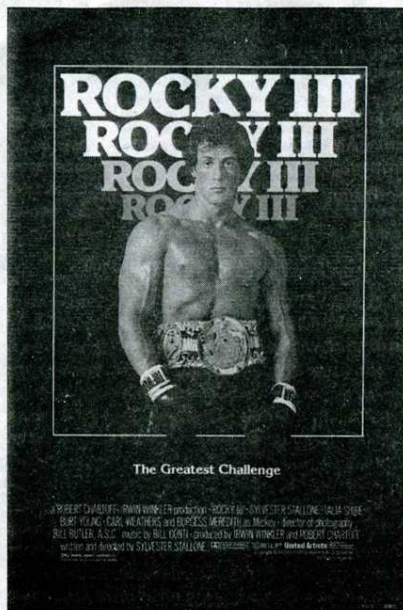
I now know more about boxing than I ever thought possible. I'm not a fan of the sport, preferring the violence of football to two men beating the hell out of each other. But now I know that a match without a knockout goes 15 rounds, that each round is three minutes and that one can literally "throw in the towel" to end the match.

I also now know that underneath the same plot in every movie (the scene is set, conflict arises, a match is set, the conflict hurts the training for the match, the conflict is resolved, training for match improves, the match happens, Rocky starts off losing the match, then comes back improbably and drags it out for a long time to either win or tie), the series of films reflect a society's changing cultural anxieties about race, gender, class and aging.

The first *Rocky* was released in time for the holidays in 1976. Although its most recognized scene is Rocky running up the stairs in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (a scene referenced in every subsequent film), the movie is actually a quiet character study that went on to win three Oscars.

*Rocky Balboa* is a small-time hood with a heart of gold that sees the beauty in the quiet, mousy Adrian (Talia Shire). When heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (Carl Weathers) decides to fight Rocky because of his nickname, "The Italian Stallion," Rocky is forced to prove to himself that his longtime dabbling in boxing will allow him to go the distance with the champ.

Sylvester Stallone wrote the script himself, as he did for every other *Rocky* movie. The film has a slow pace, and the



movie ends just after the climatic fight scene, as Adrian pushes her way through the crowd to hug the semi-victorious Balboa, as the 15-round fight is a split decision going to Creed.

*Rocky* and *Rocky II*, a rematch with Creed released in the summer of 1979, clearly reflect the unease of the 1970s. Both films take place in economically depressed sections of Philadelphia — other than the museum, the streets of the town are dingy and grim.

In the original film, Creed makes it clear he wants to fight a white boxer, highlighting a cultural anxiety about the rise of black athletes. In the sequel, Rocky is forced to fight the rematch after he fails to provide for his family with commercial endorsements after the first fight, to the dismay

of his wife.

"I didn't stop you from being a woman, don't stop me from being a man," Rocky shouts.

Adrian almost loses her baby and falls into a coma after working too hard outside the home; when she wakes up, she is fully in support of her husband (and never works again in any of the remaining movies).

I know that Rocky's love for Adrian is supposed to be his defining characteristic throughout the films, showing that he is a fighter with "heart," but I never bought their relationship. Only in *Rocky Balboa*, in which the mourning Rocky returns to the ring to get over his grief at losing his wife (and growing old himself) does their relationship seem to have any kind of resonance.

*Rocky* is a great movie — beautifully filmed, carefully considered, one of the all-time classic sports movies. The newest film echoes the first one in many ways, in its pace and lack of an actual win in Rocky's final match.

But after watching every film, I have to say that *Rocky III*, released in the summer of 1982, is the best one. Not only is

was the only film that I actually found myself rooting for Rocky to win.

*Rocky III* explores the fleeting nature of fame once the underdog is the top dog. Rocky gets knocked out by Mr. T's character, Clubber Lang, so Apollo Creed (who becomes Rocky's trainer after his longtime trainer Mickey Goldmill (Burgess Meredith) dies) takes Rocky to the slums of L.A. to train for the rematch.

The difference between this movie and the first two is the difference between filmmaking in the 1970s and the 1980s. This is a movie focused on a plot, a soundtrack and lot of fighting. It is also a lot of fun to watch.

*Rocky IV*, however, is just terrible. Despite starring Dolph Lundgren as Soviet boxer Ivan Drago and Brigitte Nielsen as his wife, this 1985 movie's only redeeming feature is the over-the-top performance of the late James Brown singing "Living in America."

*Rocky V* is pretty terrible, too — the dialogue is leaden, the flashbacks are trite. But it is the only film in the series to end not with a bout in the ring but a full-out street brawl, between Rocky and his former protégé, Tommy Gunn (real-life boxer Tommy Morrison), which Rocky, of course, wins.

*Rocky Balboa* is, in its way, a brave film. Stallone directed the film (he also directed *Rocky II*, *Rocky III* and *Rocky IV*) and clearly realizes how ridiculous it is for a 60-year-old to attempt climbing back into the ring against the young heavyweight champion Mason "The Line" Dixon, played by boxer Antonio Tarver.

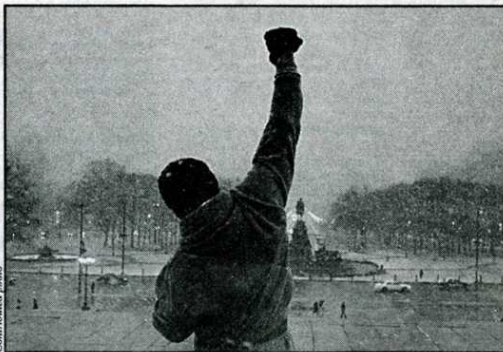
Balboa's arguments about his return to boxing with the Pennsylvania Athletic Commission (to get his license) and then his son Robert (a.k.a. Rocky, Jr., played by Milo Ventimiglia of *Gilmore Girls* fame) sound like arguments Stallone must have had with the studio heads to get this film made.

In the final fight scene, despite his extensive training, Stallone's flesh sags and jiggles in sharp contrast to Tarver's smooth muscle-bound skin. It's gross. But it is also courageous — he is willing to make a fool of himself, but, surprisingly, he doesn't.

*Rocky Balboa* is an homage to all previous *Rocky* movies. It also returns to the series the sly humor of the first three films.

If you liked the films, if they were a part of your childhood, then you'll enjoy the movie. If you somehow escaped watching *Rocky*, go rent the first one, at least, before seeing the new one.

Better yet, watch them all and be filled with your own punch-drunk love for Stallone. **F**



Contributed photo  
Power to the... Philadelphians.

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