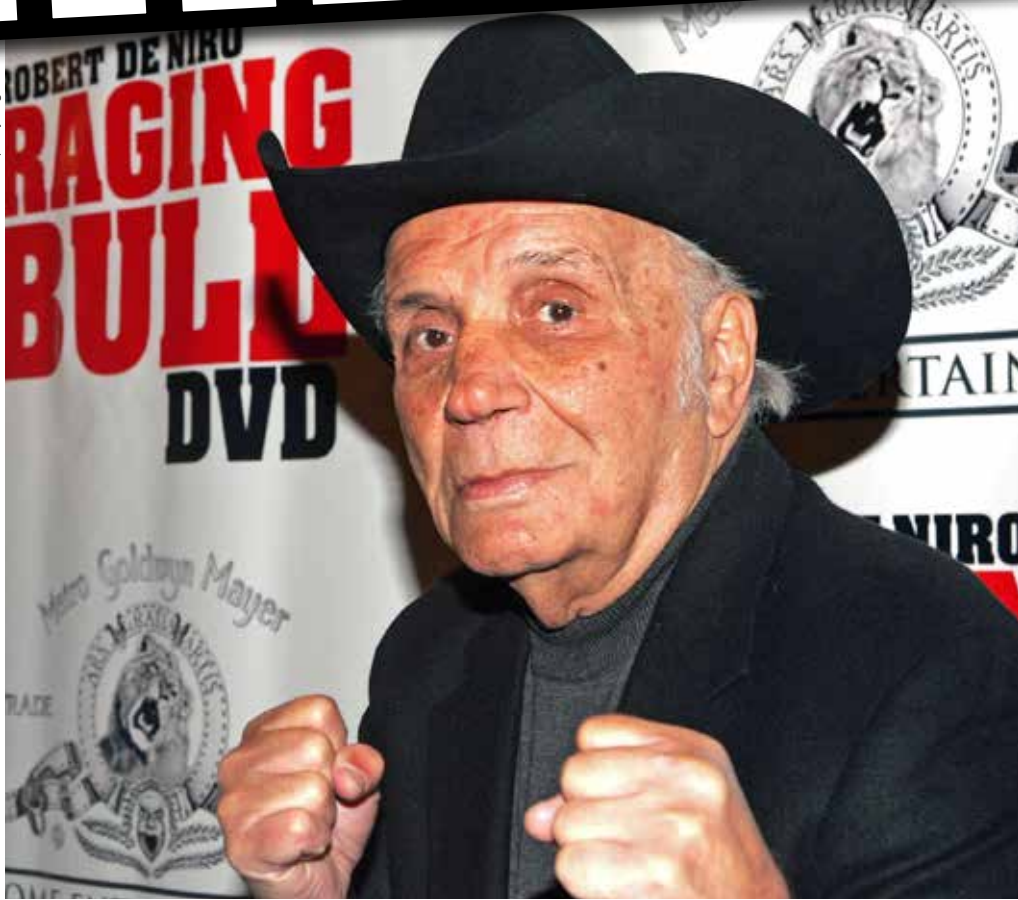


SWEET SCIENCE T



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PUT 'EM UP: Jake LaMotta helped publicise *Raging Bull*, the film based on his turbulent life. LaMotta didn't have an acting career as such although he did have a part in a Paul Newman movie

Many former boxers have given movies a try, with varying degrees of success. MICHAEL RENOUF looks at the fascinating history of fighters in films

Rocky Graziano would have turned 100 years old on the first day of the year. The colourful middleweight lost to, then beat, then lost again to Tony Zale in middleweight title fights in the 1940s. The first two bouts were epic, as boxing fans know. What some may not know is that Graziano, who shared a ring with Sugar Ray Robinson, also shared the silver

screen with the likes of Frank Sinatra and Zsa Zsa Gabor. After retiring from boxing, the man born Thomas Rocco Barbella turned his hand to acting and made his TV debut only 10 days after his last fight — a loss to the southpaw Chuck Davey — in September 1952 in the TV series *All Star Revue*. Graziano's most prolific role was in the drama series *Miami Undercover*, in

which he co-starred alongside Lee Bowman in all 38 episodes. His acting career came to an end in 1971, but not before he was reunited with Zale in his last feature film, the lightly regarded 1970 movie *Cauliflower Cupids* — a film in which the two ring rivals starred alongside former fighters Jake LaMotta, Willie Pep, Paddy DeMarco and Petey Scalzo as part of a gang run by Peter Savage, who would later go on to co-write *Raging Bull*.

LaMotta and Graziano had a lot in common. They grew up in the same New York neighbourhood, knew each other as adolescents, would both become world middleweight champion and have films made about their life stories.

"Bronx Bull" LaMotta appeared in more than just the film with Graziano. In a twist of fate, the fighter who faced Sugar Ray Robinson on six occasions played a bartender in *The Hustler*, which starred Paul Newman as Fast Eddie Felson, five years after the multi Oscar-nominated actor took the lead role of Graziano in *Somebody Up There Likes Me*.

Just to the keep the coincidences flowing, the star with the striking blue eyes would win the best leading actor Oscar for his depiction of Fast Eddie over 20 years later in *The Hustler* follow-up, *The Color of Money*, directed by Martin Scorsese, who also sat in the director's chair for *Raging Bull*.

It is no surprise that LaMotta's greatest ring rival, Sugar Ray Robinson, also appeared in movies. With his good looks and charismatic personality, Robinson seemed an obvious choice to make the switch from hitting an opponent to hitting his mark on the movie set. In the 1968 release *Candy*, he worked with an all-star cast that included Charles Aznavour, Marlon Brando, Richard Burton, Walter Matthau, John Huston and Ringo Starr. However, Robinson was never in demand for major film

SILVER SCREEN

roles, although small parts included playing a New York cop in *The Detective*, which starred Frank Sinatra in the title role.

Setting the trend

One of the first fighters to make the crossover from boxing to acting was Jack Dempsey. The “Manassa Mauler” started his career in front of the camera while still an active fighter, mainly playing Tiger Jack O’Day in the *Fight and Win* series.

The fighter who defeated Dempsey in their famous “Battle of the Long Count”, Gene Tunney, was a former marine who starred as Dick Farrington in the 1926 film serial titled — surprise, surprise — *The Fighting Marine*.

Dempsey often played himself, but in the film *The Prizefighter and the Lady* he played a promoter — something else he did in real life. This film warrants a mention as it also stars two other heavyweight champions, Max Baer and Primo Carnera, both of whom would go on to have long acting careers. Baer and Carnera fought in the film’s climactic scene and they fought in real life a year later, when Baer stopped Carnera in the 11th round to win the heavyweight championship.

Although mainly featured in Italian-language films, the huge Carnera, who turned to wrestling after his boxing career was over, did appear, at the age of 49, as a villainous grappler in the 1955 British film *A Kid for Two Farthings*.

Baer, who died in Hollywood at only 50, worked more in the mainstream. In 1956, he played Buddy Brannen in Humphrey Bogart’s last-ever film, *The Harder They Fall*, which was based on a novel by Budd Schulberg and was said to be loosely based on Carnera’s career. Another former heavyweight champion, Jersey Joe Walcott, played the part of the kindly trainer, George, in his only feature film.



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Acting as well as boxing obviously runs in the Baer family as on more than one occasion, including his last movie (*Once Upon a Horse*), Max was joined by his brother Buddy. The younger sibling didn’t win the heavyweight title but challenged for it twice against Joe Louis, losing one by disqualification and the other by first-round knockout. Buddy Baer arguably had the better acting career with roles in films such as *Quo Vadis* and playing Haldar in 37 of the 39 episodes of the TV series *Tales of the Vikings*.

Max’s son, Max Jr, did not follow him into the ring but did follow in his father’s footsteps in making a living in front of the cameras, becoming best known for playing Jethro Bodine in *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

Former heavyweight Victor McLaglen was, of course, highly successful as an actor. His career in movies started in 1920 and lasted until the late 1950s. McLaglen, who was born in London in 1883, retired from the ring with a modest 16-8-1 record. McLaglen was Jack Johnson’s first opponent after Johnson took the heavyweight title from Tommy Burns in 1908 — albeit in a six-round exhibition. (For more on this, see Gary Lucken’s updated piece published last year on the *Boxing Monthly* website).

Virtually all the other boxer/actors are far more famous for their performances in the squared circle than in front of the camera. Not McLaglen, however, who is known far more as an actor who used to box, rather than a boxer who turned his hand to acting. ▷

LIFE IMITATES ART: Max Baer left and Primo Carnera fought on screen in *The Prizefighter and the Lady* and later met in a real boxing match

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MOVIE GREAT: Victor McLaglen (here with Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man*) was a rare exception — far better at acting than he was at boxing



McLaglen starred in over 100 films and in 1960 he was granted a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. This, along with receiving two Oscar nominations, for *The Quiet Man* in 1952 and *The Informer* in 1935. He took home the Oscar statuette in the Best Actor category for his performance in *The Informer*, which established him as one of the finest actors of his day.

In his last film, McLaglen played a character called Bellew, which reminds me that, for my money, Tony Bellew put in an excellent performance in *Creed*, playing fighter Pretty Ricky Conlan. (McLaglen's younger brother, Arthur, boxed briefly and also acted, although with nothing like the success Victor achieved.)

Brits who acted the part

Gary Stretch, the St Helens southpaw who challenged Chris Eubank for the WBO middleweight title in 1991, was a model as well as a boxer. He made a go of it as an actor, his roles including a gangster in the 2004 British thriller *Dead Man's Shoes*.

The late London heavyweight Noshier Powell made a career out of being a movie stunt man as well as having parts in films. His many screen credits include *The Magic Christian*, *The Mackintosh Man* (playing an armed guard) and *Eat The Rich*, and he was employed as Gert Frobe's double for *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines*.

Another heavyweight who was much more successful in the ring than Noshier Powell — Texas-born Randall "Tex" Cobb — had a number of movies roles, most famously *Uncommon Valor*, in which he played one of a band of Vietnam veterans on a rescue mission.

Britain's Freddie Mills, who like Graziano would have chalked up his century this year were he still alive, was the most famous sporting icon to come out of Bournemouth, the town I called home for 20 years, until AFC Bournemouth got promoted to the Premier League in 2015.

Mills, who won the world light-heavyweight title in 1948, at the second attempt, against Gus Lesnevich, played the part of a boxer in the 1952 British film *Emergency Call*, two years after his last fight. In this thriller, he was billed as "Freddie Mills — Former Light Heavyweight Champion of the World", rather than just by his name, as he was in all his other screen credits. (Noshier Powell was Mills' opponent in the movie's boxing sequence.)

Other screen credits included two of the saucy double-entendre-laden *Carry On* series while Mills was a regular on the popular light entertainment BBC TV programme, *Six-Five Special*. Unlike Graziano, Mills did not get to enjoy his retirement as he was found dead from



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a gunshot wound outside his nightclub in London in 1965. The coroner's verdict of suicide has long been disputed and the exact circumstances of Mills' death remain a mystery.

When Mills retired in 1950, a New York heavyweight named Coley Wallace made his pro debut. Wallace, who beat Rocky Marciano in the unpaid ranks and was a judge whose opinion was not needed in the second Ali-Liston fight, had a sporadic acting career that lasted 36 years but only had six credits to his name. Of those screen appearances, exactly half of them were for playing Joe Louis (the first and last being 27 years apart). Wallace's facial and

physical resemblance to The Brown Bomber was instrumental in Wallace getting the title role in 1953's *The Joe Louis Story*.

The future great that Wallace beat as an amateur, Rocky Marciano, was yet another fighter who tried to take advantage of the fame he had gained in the ring. However, Marciano never achieved any fame as an actor — unless you consider his fictional "computer fight" with Muhammad Ali, released to selected cinemas in 1970, as an acting performance. ■

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Top Coley Wallace's resemblance facially and physically to Joe Louis got the 1950s heavyweight contender the lead role in the tribute movie *The Joe Louis Story*

Bottom Former heavyweight contender Tex Cobb played a Vietnam War veteran who joins an elite fighting force on a rescue mission in *Uncommon Valor*