

# FILMS THAT PACKED A PUNCH

**AUTHENTIC LOOK:** Martin Scorsese's decision to shoot *Raging Bull* in black and white paid off

**With *Creed II* hitting cinemas in the US, MICHAEL RENOUF takes the opportunity to look back at 10 of his favourite boxing movies, in reverse order**

## 10. GRUDGE MATCH

Two of the most famous fighters ever depicted on celluloid go head to head in director Peter Segal's 2013 film. Rocky Balboa faces off against Jake La Motta. Well, not quite, but the two actors who respectively played them, Sylvester Stallone and Robert De Niro, play the two leads in *Grudge Match*. (Although we do get to see parodies of *Rocky* and *Raging Bull*.)

Henry "Razor" Sharp (Stallone) and Billy "The Kid" McDonnen (De Niro) are rival fighters from Pittsburgh who are tied at one win each when inexplicably Razor announces his retirement, denying the general public and especially The Kid a highly anticipated rubber match.

Thirty years have passed, and circumstances lead to a highly unlikely decider. The film has plenty of twists and turns and with both fighters having to face ghosts from their past, this is much more than just a comedy and far better than I expected. In the acting stakes there is decent support from Alan Arkin, Jon Bernthal and Kim Basinger.

## 9. BLEED FOR THIS

On 1 October 1991, Vinny Pazienza is on top of the world — he has just beaten Gilbert Dele to claim the WBA 154lbs title. Just six weeks later, his world is turned upside down when, as a passenger in a friend's car, his neck is broken in a crash. Doctors tell him that he might not walk again, let alone fight.

"The Pazmanian Devil" does not give up that easily. Despite having four metal screws in his head to hold a halo in place, Pazienza, with the help of Kevin Rooney (Aaron Eckhart), starts training again in secret. The result is one of boxing's greatest comebacks — it was a miracle Pazienza ever stepped through the ropes again.

We get to see both sides of a colourful character. The film starts with our hero struggling to make weight for his fight with Roger Mayweather, then shows his incredible courage and iron will to reclaim his career. Despite some timeline inaccuracies, a very inspiring film. ▶

## 8. RAGING BULL

*Raging Bull* sees director Martin Scorsese cast two of his favourite actors, Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci, as Jake LaMotta and his brother Joey. Both are excellent.

Although the film was made in 1980, Scorsese decided to shoot the movie — which many consider to be his best — in black and white.

We see why LaMotta is called *Raging Bull* in the movie title. It is not just for his fighting style but for his jealous and destructive personality, which eventually pushes away those he loves and who love him. De Niro famously put on 60lbs to play the older LaMotta and picked up an Oscar for his performance. The music that is so evocative and haunting was taken from the works of Italian composer Pietro Mascagni as the director felt it captured the sadness of the story.

## 7. ROCKY

In 1976, the most famous fictional boxer of all time made his screen debut. Sylvester Stallone wrote and starred in this the first of a series that resulted in six films over 30 years.

Rocky Balboa — “The Italian Stallion” — is a club fighter and debt collector whose life is just one big treadmill. That is until heavyweight champ Apollo Creed decides he needs a nobody opponent to show everybody that America is truly the land of opportunity. Rocky gets his shot and the ultimate underdog story unfolds.

Rocky was nominated for 10 Oscars, winning three — including best picture. It has some memorable scenes, such as Rocky running up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and training by punching slabs of beef in the giant freezer at brother-in-law Paulie’s place of work and, of course, calling for Adrian at the end of the film.

## 6. MILLION DOLLAR BABY

This was another boxing film with another slew of Oscar nominations. Clint Eastwood stars in and directs *Million Dollar Baby*, receiving able support from Morgan Freeman as Eddie, his oldest friend, and Hilary Swank as Maggie, the female boxer who, despite not being able even to throw a proper punch, begs and bothers Eastwood’s character, Frankie, to train her.

Initially, he wants nothing to do with her. “I don’t train girls” and “Girlie, tough ain’t enough” are just two of the lines Eastwood delivers in his familiar gravel voice to Maggie.

Eventually, the trainer relents. With her determination and his tutelage, Maggie becomes a devastating finisher and on their journey to the title shot they become close, filling the gaping holes in each other’s lives.

A horrendous accident befalls Maggie in the ring that takes Frankie into deeper water than any opponent between the ropes ever could.

## 5. THE FIGHTER

*The Fighter*, starring Mark Wahlberg as Micky Ward and Christian Bale as his half-brother Dicky/Dickie Eklund, may have some inaccuracies, such as the fight timeline (again!), but it is still a wonderful film.

In this true story, we pick up Ward’s life when he is about 20 fights into his career and working on a road-paving crew, with HBO making a feature on Eklund’s comeback fight. We see Micky’s trials and tribulations, dealing with life in the ring along with having to cope with his extremely dysfunctional family, which includes not only his drug-addict older sibling but also his controlling mother.

Two of the actors in this film picked up Oscars, most notably Bale, who gives not just one of the most realistic portrayals of somebody from the boxing world but of any true story ever told on the big screen. The film closes after Ward’s fight with Shea Neary and before his famous trilogy with Arturo Gatti.

In the years after this film was released, there was talk of a sequel focusing on the most famous fights of Micky’s career. Alas, eight years on, this has still not come to fruition but it is rumoured to be in development.

**BONDING:** Michael B. Jordan’s character sought advice from Sylvester Stallone’s Rocky Balboa in *Creed*



## 4. CREED

*Creed* is the seventh film in which Rocky Balboa appears but the first in the *Rocky* universe where he is not the main character.

Instead, Adonis Creed (Michael B. Jordan), who was fathered out of wedlock by Rocky's friend and rival Apollo Creed, is the star of the show. Rescued from a children's home, he is brought up by his dad's widow, Mary Anne, and wants to follow in his father's footsteps. But, as he does not wish to piggyback on Apollo's legacy, he fights under the name Donny Johnson.

The one way Adonis Creed does want help from the past is by tapping into Rocky's knowledge. He eventually persuades "The Italian Stallion" to step back in the gym. The two not only train together but form a strong bond.

This is an excellent addition to Rocky's story and has plenty of nods to the previous films in the series while at the same time being fresh and strong enough to stand alone.

## 3. ALI

Not everybody agrees that Muhammad Ali was the greatest boxer of all time but he was the most famous and surely the most charismatic. So who would get the near-impossible job of portraying him on the silver screen?

In Michael Mann's *Ali*, that challenging task fell to Will Smith, who took the role and aced it to such a degree that when "The Greatest" left us in 2016, the actor was one of the pall bearers at Ali's funeral. Playing opposite Smith is Jon Voight as his verbal sparring partner, Howard Cosell. Both actors were rightly nominated for an Oscar.

This film covers the 10 years of Ali's amazing life from 1964 to 1974, starting just before his first fight with Sonny Liston and ending just after the *Rumble in the Jungle* with George Foreman.

Just as Ali was far more than a boxer, this film goes well beyond the ropes and captures the era it was set in, thanks in no small part to a terrific soundtrack.

## 2. SOUTHPAW

I have mentioned actors who have either won or been nominated for an Oscar for their work in boxing movies and I cannot believe that Jake Gyllenhaal did not achieve either in probably the most moving performance in a boxing tale I have ever seen.

Billy Hope has his world in perfect order — he is the light-heavyweight champion of the world with a perfect record, a comfortable lifestyle, a wife he adores and just as importantly adores him back and, lastly, their beloved daughter.

Then, one night, an unspeakable tragedy befalls Billy and his family. His world slowly unravels — sometimes because of rash decisions he makes in his state of grief — and he starts to lose everything that he holds dear.

When Billy is at rock bottom, he meets trainer Tick Wills — an excellent turn from Forest Whitaker — who gives Billy the chance to turn his fortunes around. But will he succeed?

This is far more than a boxing film. It is a love story, a redemption tale and an inspiration.

## 1. CINDERELLA MAN

Director Ron Howard, a master of true stories, once again delivers a gem with *Cinderella Man*. Starring Russell Crowe as James J.

Braddock and Renee Zellweger as his wife, Mae, this is the incredible, awe-inspiring story of New Jersey heavyweight Braddock.

We first meet the "Bulldog of Bergen" in the late 1920s as an undefeated fighter who, unlike many boxers, does not fritter away his money.

Instead, Jimmy invests wisely. But the Wall Street crash of 1929 is just around the corner, which plunges America into the Great Depression.

A few years later, our hero has had his boxing licence revoked, has little or no work, and every day is a struggle.

Out of the blue he is granted a one-off comeback for a fee of \$250. In a fight Jimmy is not expected to win, he is knocked to the canvas. But he has obviously not read the script and manages to beat the count. He wins the fight and the beginning of the legend — "Cinderella Man" — is born as he starts his ascent towards the title.



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