

# Sylvester Stallone's Triumph with Rocky Balboa

by Sandy Struss

**With the release of *Rocky Balboa* in theaters over Christmas, the world got a poignant and impactful conclusion to the Rocky movie series, and Sylvester Stallone defied expectations by earning kudos from critics. After the disaster that was *Rocky V*, this is sweet redemption, and a triumphant finale for one of the most beloved underdog stories in the history of film.**

It took Stallone seven years to convince a studio to take on the project because everyone thought *Rocky's* time had passed and that the story had run its course. He endured endless criticism and ridicule, being called things like "Olden Gloves" and "Stallone's Final Failure" in the New York Post. But like his character in the film, Stallone knew that he had something left to give, and wanted to go out on a high note. On the day of the film's premiere, he must have been beaming with pride as the New York Post then had a huge color photo of *Rocky* with the bold headline declaring "Knockout!" followed by a glowing review.

Stallone uses his trademark simplicity to deliver a powerful message:

**"It ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can GET hit, how much you can take, and keep moving forward."**

And isn't that true for anyone pursuing a worthwhile endeavor against the odds? The people we most admire in society are those who face unimaginable challenges and defeats on their way to success, whatever their dream is.

**When you get knocked down, GET UP.**

There is so much truth, beauty, humor and hope in this film – you can't help but be impacted emotionally as it represents a struggle that is universal for all of us. Boxing is just the metaphor. The original *Rocky* was a masterpiece in storytelling, and this last film of the series was equally as compelling and sentimental, and "went the distance" to represent the true character of an underdog.

I've been to see *Rocky Balboa* three times in the theater already, and each time the audience actually cheers out loud, and inevitably there are even a few people wiping away embarrassed tears. There is something about this story that just grabs your heart, especially if you've ever felt like there's a dream burning inside you that nobody sees but you.



For Sylvester Stallone, the story rings true in his real life as well, as this is a guy who risked everything to pursue an acting career. He studied drama at the University of Miami and left for New York to seek his fortune, but after little success there, he decided to head for Hollywood. At age 30, he drove across the country with his dog, Butkus, in his rusty old 1964 Oldsmobile, with no connections and no plan. The odds of success were not exactly in his favor, but what he did have was *unstoppable desire*.

He made the rounds to studios and casting agents and managed to get a few small roles in movies and television, but it was one meeting in particular (with producer Robert Chartoff) that changed his life forever. After being told yet again that there was no acting work suitable for him, Stallone decided to create his own – and boldly asked, "By the way, I also do some writing. Would you be willing to look at a script?" And the rest, as they say, is history.

Stallone wrote the script for *Rocky* in long hand in 3 days. He wrote from his heart about a situation he was all too familiar with (and one common to many of us) – the story of a man struggling to survive and make a living, but never getting the right opportunities in order to make something of himself. But what would happen if he actually got a shot? What would it take to rise to the occasion? And most importantly, what is it inside someone that really inspires them to dig deep and give his or her personal best? Like Stallone in his real life, *Rocky* was a story about a man fighting for something beyond money – integrity, self-respect, and personal pride. And that is something we can all relate to.



Several producers offered to buy the screenplay, but only if Stallone wouldn't star in it, for they wanted the title role to go to a "big name" actor. It was a moment of truth for Stallone, for here he was with only ~\$100 in his whole world of assets, at the end of his rope, having sold his dog in order to survive – and turning down offers worth over \$100,000 for he knew in his heart that *Rocky Balboa* was a character only he could play. It was a gutsy move, but by some miracle the beauty and magic of the script brought the right people together and the story of prizefighter *Rocky Balboa* came to life.



*Rocky* won the Oscar for Best Picture in 1976 and created a fan frenzy worldwide. The steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art became a major tourist attraction, a "pilgrimage" of sorts among *Rocky* fans, for running up those steps represents personal victory. We love the story because it gives us all hope that as long as we keep reaching higher and challenging ourselves, there's an opportunity to go the distance in our lives.



The message is to give it every bit of what you've got in you, and let the chips fall where they may. That is a life of no regrets. Use your life for something that inspires you. We each have our own demons to confront and a chorus of people around us who would rather 'play it safe' – but what matters is that YOU know you've given your very best. Our hope and our faith are challenged constantly, but true character and underdog spirit is demonstrated by how you can take the hits and keep on swingin'. **SS**