

## THE ROCKY STORY

It could be any sport. As long as it's not a team sport and we can see this man fail or succeed on his merits alone then we've got ourselves a vehicle. Now, tennis is too refined, running is too repetitive...but boxing works. It's brutal, it's simple, it's visual—it's dramatic. And though the six *Rocky* movies generate a lot of humor and fun action, they are really dramas without all the cooked-up art house flim-flam that alienates otherwise willing audiences.

But the *Rocky* films don't make the opposite mistake either. They're not self-aware, they're honest and true, devoid of the embarrassed self-parody that can corrupt great story telling. In the *Rocky* universe, Good is good, Bad is bad, Life is hard, and winning the love of a woman is an accomplished man's most satisfying accomplishment.

We must remember that Rocky never aspired to much. He was a simple man, and so followed his desires. He never asked for riches; he just wanted to better himself, to prove himself worthy of a great challenge after a whole life of being told he was nothing and wouldn't—couldn't—be anything more. Until he was given the chance of a lifetime, his days consisted of ambles to the docks and Mickey's gym, punctuated by fights and calculatedly casual visits to the pet shop. All he really wanted was Adrian. Sure, in *Rocky II* he loses his head a bit, in *Rocky V* he is understandably put-out, but his primary concern from the very beginning was Adrian.

Growing up poor, all you have that is your own is your name, your reputation, your honor. And next to Adrian, maintaining honor is Rocky's highest priority. He goes against Adrian twice (once in *II* half-heartedly, in *IV* full-out). Adrian's classic dilemma is found in *II*, *IV*, and *V*, but best encapsulated in *II*. Her deepest desire is to support Rocky, but she's afraid he'll go blind, and she can't resolve her feelings until after she's awakened from the coma. Only then does she come to the realization that would be echoed in *III*: If something stirs him deep inside, to the point where he feels his honor is in question, she must support Rocky lest he no longer be the man she fell in love with. No scene in the series better distills their mature relationship than the beach confrontation in *Rocky III*. Here, Rocky says that for the first time in his life he is afraid. That's why he's mumbling and stumbling through training. Adrian won't allow any more of it, saying that he'll doubt himself for the rest of his life if he backs down now and their great love affair will be irreparably poisoned. After years of being quiet and kind, she lets Rocky have it, revealing to him the fighter that he inspired in her. In *Rocky V* the issue is not honor but money, so Adrian cajoles, entreats, and pleads with her husband to stay out of the ring, and he demonstrates his great love for her by doing as she asks. In *II* his fervent desire to provide for his wife is finally satisfied in the bout with Apollo, but in *V* he has to overcome this impulse with an even stronger conviction; if he suffers a debilitating injury, all the money in the world won't mean a thing to either of them. Their life is about sharing each other, not sharing wealth.

*Rocky V* is the film that challenges what the series is about. For a while The American Way took precedence, and Rocky, himself, came to embody the national spirit. The penultimate film pushes all that aside. The *Rocky* series is not about money, success, or even winning

against all odds. If the series is anything besides *The Times and Tribulations of Rocky Balboa*, it's about Rocky and Adrian...this is what the first film concerned itself with. What's more important than the Bicentennial fight, more important than "going the distance" and all that? It's Adrian. She believes in Rocky, believes in him when no one else cares. When the fight is over he's not listening for the judges' decision—he's shouting for his girl, and upon their embrace she, for the first time, declares her love for him.

The importance of Adrian to Rocky is most directly stated in *II*, where he is willing to give up the rematch with Apollo because he desperately believes his willfulness reduced her to a coma. But her great wish, to see him win, to beat Apollo and do what he once thought impossible, is all Rocky needs to endure punishing training and to finally overcome the world's greatest boxer.

When all the smoke has cleared, the key issue of *Rocky V* is Rocky's son. Tommy Gunn is a counter-weight to Rocky, Jr., eliciting adolescent contempt while rekindling in his father the glory days of yore. In the very neighborhood Rocky trained, laboring and sweating when no one knew his name, Tommy Gunn goes to work. Staging Gunn's first fight at the same strangely-lit iconographic-Jesus hall that opened *Rocky*, seeing Tommy don Apollo's shorts, and watching Rocky match the title fight punch for punch—all this completes the circle. Rocky has been forced to bring his family back to the crummy neighborhood he was happy to leave. Any intelligence he's gained over the years has been quashed by his brain injuries. He dons the same old outfit in which he once stalked dead-beats. And he's back in Mighty Mick's gym, training the young, hoping to instill in them *The Eye of the Tiger*, *No Pain*, and *Heart and Fire*. And his son, the archetypal symbol of circularity, defeats the school bully, emulating the training methods his father relied upon for years. His mother doesn't want Junior to fight, hoping, as Rocky hopes, that their son will rise above the privation and sadness that marked their early lives, that he will use his head more than his fists.

When Rocky realizes, there in the street with Adrian, that he's losing his boy, he immediately sets out to remedy the situation. He knows that after all his great successes, to find himself estranged from a son who was slowly destroying his life would bring all their endeavors to naught. But to conclude that, we have to make sense of Duke's 15th-round pep talk in *Rocky IV*. "All your strength, all your power...now this is your whole life here!" It's exhilarating stuff, and it's what Rocky needs to finally topple Drago. But is it true? Is the series, itself, objectively stating what Rocky's life is about, or is it just Duke's opinion? Duke said earlier in the film that Apollo was like a son to him, that he sees in Rocky's match with Drago an opportunity to lessen the pain brought on by Apollo's death; a victory will ensure that "he didn't die in vain."

So, of course Duke's Apollo-centric take on life would lead him to believe that this was what Rocky was born for. Well, if that's the case then what did Apollo die for? What made him fight? As voiced by Creed, the reason is two-fold: One, the killer instinct finds no expression throwing tennis balls to the pool-hounds; and Two, American pride has been damaged and the Soviets need to be taught a lesson—"This is us against them!" Apollo went on to say, just before that fatal Vegas exhibition, that if Rocky didn't understand the reasons for the boxing match before, he would when it was over. In his eulogy for Apollo, Rocky says that now he understands. And thus he seeks the martyr's vengeance.

Apollo said, just before his last boxing match, that he felt "born again." Upon returning from Russia, all Rocky wants to do is reunite with his family, saying to his son that having him is like being born a second time. He's not eager to fight; he says he never wants to leave home again. His honor is intact, his family is secure. His life was never in the ring—it was outside it, with Adrian and, by extension, his son. *Rocky V* shows us what Balboa really cares about by taking the ring, his family's unquestioning love, and all that money away from him to see how he reacts. And the one he ultimately fights hardest to get back is his family's love. Tommy Gunn had become an adopted son to him, and after betraying Rocky's trust, he finally saw Tommy as an affront to his family, and that's why the ingrate got slammed into a SEPTA bus.

Rocky always won because of his heart, because his cause was righteous, his opponent's base. Apollo was a prideful, arrogant, greedily insecure self-promoter. Clubber Lang was tasteless, tactless, crude, rude, a blight upon the sport. Drago was "Death from Above," cold, heartless, amoral, and a Communist, to boot. Each man is less likable than the one before, and Rocky's challenge is, for each, correspondingly more extreme. And with each challenge Adrian is there, but for each fight he seems to rely on her less. What's actually happening is that as Rocky becomes more certain of his wife's loyalty, he doesn't need to hear it; he feels it, trusts it. Comparing the long hospital montage in *II* to the drawn-out beach confrontation in *III* to the short snow-bound affirmation session in *IV*, progressively less screen time is devoted to Adrian reassuring her husband. In *Rocky IV* she tells him, "You can't win!," which confounds the champion, who once found victory by his wife's faith. But before long she says she's with him "no matter what," and, really, what could be a more convincing gesture of loyalty than for a wife to back up a husband she knows is making an incredibly dumb mistake? Ah, such is love.

Now, Adrian (along with "the kid") may be what *The Rocky Story* is all about, but it's not what brought the fans back through the first five movies. The following is a basic *Rocky* set-up keeping in mind that the first and fifth films offer a number of variations on the formula:

- 1) Rocky is content.
- 2) Rocky faces a challenge (his honor could be called into question, the family may need money, or the death of someone close triggers guilt and confusion).
- 3) Rocky begins to train half-heartedly.
- 4) Rocky reconciles his doubts, finds strength through Adrian.
- 5) Rocky trains full-out in a soul-stirring montage of guts and glory.
- 6) Rocky summons his courage and dedicates his mind, body, and spirit to the fight, winning because of his heart, not his skill.

Rocky's fighting style is pretty consistent—he's able to take a punch better than any man in history and he hits harder than he gets hit—which is pretty darn hard. Only in *Rocky III* does he take a different tack, wearing out Clubber by quickly darting about, making the champion swing and miss. Rocky employs psychological warfare, substitutes jabs for hooks and, for the first time, makes himself an offensive fighter. Clubber, the fool, wears himself out chasing the spry Stallion. Then Balboa springs the trap. Clubber's down in three rounds.

In *II*, *III*, and *IV*, Rocky's trainers seize upon a fresh way to win—in *II* it's fighting right-handed, in *III* it's gaining agility, in *IV* it's finding more endurance, but it's mainly the same deal each time—the odds are against Rocky, the fight goes the other man's way, his trainer emphasizes that his opponent is just a man. Considering Rocky's reputation, it's astounding that in each film ringside commentators see his chances as nil. Don't they get it? Rocky might have a tough time winning, sure. But nobody is harder to *beat*.

In *Rocky II* our hero gets positively pummeled but never gives in, resolutely declaring that he is not going down anymore. The presentation of the fight is distinguished by two abrupt interludes where real time is suspended and we endure with Rocky some brutal shots. Somehow, by forcing Apollo to punch an excessive amount, the Master of Disaster is worn out and Rocky is able to squeak by. This 10-count sequence is the third abrupt interlude—action is slowed down, sounds are distorted and intensified out of their usual proportions, and the relentlessly ratcheted suspense is brought to a most winning conclusion.

In *Rocky IV* all the plot points—adversity, disillusionment, training, fighting, and triumph—are rendered succinctly (it's the shortest of the first five films) and with tremendous visceral impact. In this movie the ante is upped about as far as it can go. Balboa fights for his honor, a little revenge, and the selfless hopes of American Dreamers just like him. In the beginning apolitical, out-of-touch with Apollo's icy Cold War jingoism, Rocky soon launches a one-man anti-Communist crusade more effective at winning hearts and minds than Radio Free Europe. And broadening the scope of the narrative, extending the struggles of Rocky Balboa to an entire nation groping for self-respect, introduces an element of heightened risk—if Rocky fails, not only he will suffer but his country as well.

Introspective montages abound in *Rocky IV*, leading the audience to closely identify with the protagonist while serving to unite the series as a single unit. (The recap fights at the start of the films serve the same purpose.) Further distinguished editing is seen in the fantastic, bombastic "Living in America" set-piece and the training sequence contrasting Drago and Rocky. In an idea *Rocky III* tentatively explored with cuts to Clubber Lang toiling alone while Balboa goofed around in high style, here the Soviet Captain Drago, surrounded by ominous laboratory button-pushers, is driven to the limits of human endurance by the cold technology of the technocratic state as his opponent labors in isolation. Rocky builds his strength amidst earth, wind, and fire, conquering the elements that confront him. Their endeavors are further linked by the similarity of their routines and by Rocky crushing Drago's picture before yelling his enemy's name loud enough for all of Russia to hear and fear. The pinnacle of the sequence is not the mountaintop Rocky scales, but the transition from "Heart's on Fire" to the synthesizer score just as Rocky is evading his bureaucratic handlers. After vertical sit-ups, reverse sit-ups, lifting, swinging, running, and shadow boxing enough to kill him *before* the fight, the emotional acceleration of the music energizes the audience for the final ascent. It's like down-shifting and hitting the gas.

The staunchly anti-Russian perspective maintained throughout the film is nicely tempered at its climax; Drago finally claims his importance as a person. Protesting, "I fight to win...for me!," hidden indignities only hinted at in the narrative become readily apparent as Drago, the broken giant made transparently human, confronts buried fears exhumed by Rocky

Balboa. Partly as a result of this, the converted fans, dismissing the dour Politburo, cheer the American's name, recognizing the presence of a true champion. And Rocky, himself, divests his resentments and delivers a plea for peace made poignant by the personal war he's so painfully concluded. By finally rescuing the Soviet roles from the oblivion of stock caricature, *Rocky IV* is inexorably strengthened and brought to a worthy conclusion.

Still, the series suffers on a number of minor levels. One of these concerns the treatment of Paulie, Adrian's brother. In *Rocky* he is a counterweight to Adrian, arrogantly presumptive and perpetually hurt while she remains supportive and strong. In *II* he reappears, thinner, wearing a suit and tie, bailing out Rocky when he needs to unload the Trans-Am. He's also a lot calmer, only lapsing into Standard Paulie when he berates Adrian in the pet shop. (Interestingly, he's doing it for Rocky and not for his own selfish desires.) In *III* his character has reassumed the profile of whiskey-swilling brother-in-law perpetually stung by jealousy. But, before long, he's one of Rocky's ringside attendants. In *IV* we see him hesitantly expressing his great admiration for Rocky, and in *V*, the punch he receives from Tommy Gunn triggers Rocky's pugilistic spark in a kind of distant variation on the fallen Mickey and Apollo which stimulated Balboa's quiet rage in *III* and *IV*, respectively. His inconsistent characterization seems less the result of character development than storyline expediency. With *Rocky Balboa*, Paulie's character strikes the right balance—the tough-as-nails hard-head remains, the sentimentality is gone, and we see just enough pain and sensitivity to make him a serious counterpoint to Rocky. At last, Paulie is more than comic relief.

Time is compressed and in other ways left to artistic license through the series. Rocky, Jr. seems to age in correlation to the years the movies were made, not when they take place. Though we have dates like the Christmas Day Moscow fight, we have only the bookends of *Rocky*, November 25, 1975 to January 1, 1976; and Mickey's death, July 15, 1981. As a result, the series has its own built-in timelessness. Certain things really don't change—when Rocky returns to the old neighborhood in the fifth film, it looks just as beat-up and left-for-dead as when we first met these wonderful characters—pugnacious Mickey, show-boatin' Apollo, jealous Paulie, and the elusive Adrian—many years before. But with *Rocky Balboa* we witness a paradigm shift. We know Adrian has been dead since 2002 and Rocky fought Apollo for the first time thirty years before. Time has caught up with the Stallion, and he is very aware that soon he will turn the corner into old age and his own death. He almost falls in the same trap that Apollo did, thinking that fighting was all he was made for, that Time must be denied its penchant for stripping pugilists of skill and glory. This might be reading into things too much, but Apollo is portrayed as having the ring and nothing else. Rocky is a fighter, first and foremost. But the fight is not always in the ring, and it doesn't always involve fists. Apollo wanted to die. Rather than growing old, ashamed, he prefers death by Drago's hand. Right until the very end of his life, Apollo will not be denied the adulation of the masses—they can't leave him if he's not around; so he chooses to leave first. In contrast, Rocky realizes before it's too late that self-respect is the only kind of respect that matters.

Time, in the sixth installment, reasserts its independence, no longer aiding the title character, but tormenting him. He's learned since *V* to accept humility and quiet defeats, but now he must learn this—he doesn't have power over death, but he does have power over life.

That's what takes him back to the ring for the right reasons, and that's why Rocky enjoys a moral victory in the greatest sense of the term. Dixon doesn't lose. He wins, too, secure in the knowledge that he can stand up to one of the greatest fighters in history, can break his hand and still survive. He proves to himself that he is more than a paper champion. It's a lesson in courage he'll never forget.

An oft-repeated theme of the *Rocky* saga is the importance of having 'heart'—demonstrating valor, controlling fear, and winning the mental game as a precursor to winning the physical contest. Rocky tried to instill this into Tommy Gunn, who rejected his mentor's counsel, exchanged patience for greed and, outclassed and outgunned, had his face rearranged by his ex-manager. As always, Rocky was in the right, morally, but in Rocky's heart there isn't just conviction, but kindness. One of the great strengths of his character is his generosity and love for others. In *Rocky V* our title character spends most of the film feeling sorry for himself. But with *Rocky Balboa* the great man of old returns in triumph.

The old slugger has abandoned Mick's gym and tries to satisfy himself with the operation of his restaurant. His late wife, a victim of cancer, dominates his thinking, to the consternation of his brother-in-law. Paulie exhorts Rocky to make the most of the chance to fight Mason "The Line" Dixon—he must get rid of everything in this fight, all the pain he's clinging to. The devastation of Adrian's death must be exorcised in this, "the last round of [his] life." Rocky's son is not enthused, and begs his dad to call off the fight, lest he never emerge from his father's shadow. Instead of being sorry, Rocky tells his son to live his own life, and that he's just making excuses; instead of worrying what everyone else thinks, make your life something *you* can be proud of—go out and get what you're worth, but be willing to take the hit. The pair are reconciled and the "home team" is restored.

Just as Adrian told Rocky in *V* that we can't live backwards, Paulie tells Rocky in *Rocky Balboa* that Rocky is living backwards. First Rocky was trying to prolong his glory days in the ring through Tommy Gunn. Now he is trying to bring Adrian back by continually calling on her memory; maybe then he won't have to confront life without her. Cue Marie. She told Rocky in the first film to blow off when Rocky tried to warn her about hanging with the wrong crowd. Meeting her in a bar thirty years later, she re-introduces herself and, over the course of the next few weeks, returns the favor with some good advice of her own; when Rocky is about to throw his chance away, she tells him that if this fight is something you have to do, then go do it—nobody tells you to move until you're ready. And just like Adrian came to realize, Marie knows Rocky is a Fighter. For good or bad, right or wrong, it's what he was born to do. Their gentle way with each other gives the audience hope for his future. Thus, a seed sown thirty years before on fallow ground at last begins to sprout.

Ironies multiply as the fight against Dixon will be an exhibition, with proceeds going to charity. So even with his brain on the line, Rocky won't be able to pull himself out of the neighborhood—he'll still be grasping the short end of the economic straw. Maybe he's okay with staying. Thankfully the same thing that happened to Apollo doesn't happen here.

And in a final, crazy, fantastic twist, the man who bristled at the word "punchy" now embraces the label as an acknowledgement of adversities overcome. It's his badge of honor! He accepts the name "Punchy" for an old ugly dog at the pound, tacitly accepting Steps's view of him. If he's not too far gone, surely Rocky remembers that he has permanent brain damage

from the fight with Drago. In *V* his doctors promised to keep it quiet, and even though a promoter found out, after all this time it's likely no one remembers or cares. The boxing commission missed the problem in their physical assessment of the ex-champ, and Rocky, with Adrian gone and his son grown up, has nothing to lose. He *is* punchy, and he could end up brain-dead or dead-dead, but it's all worth it just to "stand toe-to-toe and say, *I am.*" In his last great run up the steps of the museum, he takes Punchy with him. He is at peace with who he is, and he can take back his life. He has Paulie, Steps, Rocky, Jr., and old Duke for ringside support. (It's quite the entourage, but it's also more people with whom he can share his eventual triumph.) He trains as hard as he can, fights the last good fight with what he's got "in the basement" and waves goodbye to his wife, leaving Adrian to rest in peace, now that he's found his own.

After a life of glory and pain, the cheers but a memory on the winds, it was just as Adrian promised; it was him and her, alone.

With his wife gone, Rocky's got memories but no future. The prospect of a fight with Dixon, while resurrecting the past once more, also provides Rocky an escape to the future.

Rocky has changed, but he hasn't—the old is new, and life still has some magic to spare. The Rocky Story is the Hero's Quest, with the hope for an unqualified success complicated by the hero's reluctant return to where it all began. In *Rocky Balboa* he's not just back in the old neighborhood, he's alone in the old neighborhood. Everything he's gained has been lost, even his greatest success—winning Adrian. Learning to cherish the memory of his wife without yielding to desolation was the hardest fight in a life of hard fights. But everything he sets out to do, he does. No challenge can withstand the spirit of man. And that's why we believe in Rocky—all of us have something, but none of us have it all. Rocky Balboa is a man who made the most of what he had been given, and if any of us will do that, a life of passion and triumphs, no matter how small, can be ours. There is a never-say-die spirit in all of us. But we never know what we are capable of until we succeed. Failure doesn't mean Forever, it just means Keep Moving Forward. Our hero didn't always succeed, but he managed to do the right thing when it really counted. In the end, he found a simple, easy peace knowing that whatever people thought of him, he had proven to himself that he wasn't just another bum from the neighborhood.

No matter the odds, if the fight is right, he'll be there. But it's the struggle to perform, the effort to push the body and the mind, that is really inspiring. That's why the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art convey Rocky in a way no boxing ring could. The real victory comes before the fight.

*Rocky II* gives us the most beautiful image of the six-film saga. Rocky, returning to the methods that prepared him for the first Creed fight, runs through the neighborhoods of South Philly. This time he draws a crowd of children as he heads north through Center City, past Independence Hall. Children cheering his name keep pace with the contender. But now he shifts into a sprint, he pulls away—he has his fans, but only he can enter the ring. Next comes the shot—Rocky tearing up the steps of the museum, waves of children cascading around the distant fountain, effortlessly running, sharing their hero's triumph.

In *Rocky III* the mayor unveiled a statue memorializing Rocky's accomplishments, a monument "which will stand always as a celebration to the indomitable spirit of man" dedicated to "Philadelphia's favorite son." In *Rocky V* it's still there at the museum. Years pass, and the cheers fade, and though he has his fans, he's a hero for an earlier generation. The statue celebrates the glories of Balboa in his youth, and is linked to his retirement as soon as it is unveiled. It is a symbol of the past, preserving the legend while the man lives on alone. The human spirit is personified in Rocky, and the statue recalls that man.

Steeling himself for one last struggle in the ring, Rocky invests all he has left. His training culminates at the top of the steps amidst falling snow, signifying the winter of his life. The statue is gone. The real Rocky has returned to take his rightful place, embodying the legend, displacing the symbol of the man, and becoming the man he was. He will not rest in glories past, he will struggle on. But he has already prevailed. By choosing to fight one last time within the ring, he can live without.