

Million Dollar Baby (spoiler warning!)

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Million Dollar Baby (spoiler warning!)
FEBRUARY 14, 2005

I will start today with a warning, something that perhaps I should do more often. The subject today is the film "Million Dollar Baby." If you have not seen the film and intend to see it you may want to stop reading now. Reading this will reveal things you don't want to know before you see the film.

Over the past few weeks "Million Dollar Baby" has become a target of the ultraconservative media types like Rush Limbaugh, Michael Medved, and an assortment of those non-spinners who pile-on at FOX. Once the film picked up a bundle of Oscar Nominations the outcry quickened. If you think this is a film promoting assisted suicide or some other liberal agenda, then you did not see the same film as I did.

"Million Dollar Baby" is an interesting boxing film with stereotypical characters drawn from a thousand other boxing films and stories. It's plot, to a point, looks like one more cliché from the tired formulas of the boxing genre, but only to a point. If you like big knockout punches you'll love the rise of this boxer.

The film is sustained and indeed lifted above the mediocre by superb acting in every performance down to the smallest part. An ordinary screenplay burdened by formula driven dialogue needs a lot of help, and gets it. I sat through the first three-quarters of "Million Dollar Baby" alternating between states of irritation with the story and wonder at the acting.

The plot line is relatively simple. A thirty-something woman, Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), from a lower class background seeks to make something of her life by developing a talent she believes she possesses. The talent is boxing and she believes it will give her life some meaning and rescue her from her lowly state. Hoping to develop a boxing career Maggie insinuates her way into a seedy gym and attracts the sympathies of an ex-boxer, "Scrap" (Morgan Freeman), who lives in and manages the place. "Scrap" in turn becomes her ally in cajoling Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood), a retired cut-man and trainer with a trauma in his past, into training Maggie. The story develops slowly giving time for all three main characters to reveal their complexity.

Much of the strength of the film relies on the relationships among the principle characters, but also those between the club fighters and hangers-on in the gym, including both the delusional and the hopeful. "Scrap" is the perfect ringmaster for this Damon Runyon Little Theater. The exchanges between Frankie and the Catholic priest at his parish church offer another of the exquisite little touches in this film.

Prior to the high drama this is a story that reveals a very sharp class edge to it, primarily through Maggie's family from hell. She could not go home again, and her family did not want her to come home again—just send the money. The attempt to buy a new home for Mom, such a common gesture among successful athletes who rise out of poverty, turns into a nightmare, and is one of many superb small scenes that give "Million Dollar Baby" added strength.

Predictably, Maggie has great success and moves from choreographed fight scene to choreographed fight scene finally arriving at the holy grail of the title shot. At that point the movie shifts in highly dramatic fashion, and for the remainder of the story Maggie is paralyzed while retaining her full mental capacity and speech powers.

The last quarter of the film is stunning as it grapples with several themes of interest. First, the obvious one involves Maggie's choice of life and death in the face of the hopelessness and helplessness of her condition. This reality is given further drama when a leg is amputated and it is clear that other limbs will follow. She will literally die piece by piece. Maggie at one point attempts to end her life, and after that attempt fails, she seeks assistance from Frankie. The resolution is difficult as the moral and the personal pull Frankie in opposite directions, and in the end shades of gray dance all over the screen.

Was it the physical loss or the psychological loss that moves Maggie to seek death? She had done everything in her life that she wanted to do. She achieved all that she ever wanted or needed to achieve. She had reconnected to her dead father through Frankie, and Frankie reconnected to his estranged daughter through Maggie. Indeed the father-daughter relationship is another major chord of the film. Maggie had escaped the dysfunctional family, become a very good boxer, achieved fame and some fortune. Her expectations for life had been stunted at an early age, yet she managed to achieve the escape she had imagined for herself. What more was there to do?

The catastrophic turn then is interesting and puts the question, "Is there life after sport?" into very sharp relief. "Million Dollar Baby" can be read as much about the fulfillment of life's expectations, as about the right to die. What does this athlete want? Maggie's needs are minimal, while grandiose. Once completed she feels no need to live facing her ultimate retirement crisis.

Athletic careers often end with a crisis of identity. For the athlete in retirement, forced or otherwise, the future is full of uncertainty. Some handle it well, others do not. Some choose alcohol, drugs, mysticism, or some other form of escape. Some choose death. Many arrive at the point of retirement believing their life is over. Others know their life will never again have the same "rush," a feeling they equate with "meaning." This is a major reality in the athlete's career and it is quite difficult even for those who handle it well.

In the middle of the dramatic trauma that pushes the story to its conclusion, this lesser theme may get lost. Most athletes are more likely to be confronted less dramatically than Maggie is, but still they will face a crisis. "Million Dollar Baby" presents the crisis at career's end, and although qualitatively different, it provides one more parable in this very fine, if somewhat overrated, film.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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