

Q & A: Hilary Swank – Sports Illustrated



The boxing star of *Million Dollar Baby* discusses the sweet science

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By Richard Deitsch, SI.com

Former Academy Award winner **Hilary Swank**, 30, stars opposite **Clint Eastwood** and **Morgan Freeman** in Eastwood's latest movie, *Million Dollar Baby*. She recently spoke to SI.com's **Richard Deitsch**.



SI: Anyone who sees this movie will recognize it's not a boxing movie per se. It's a movie about relationships. The movie uses boxing as a metaphor for perseverance, redemption, dignity. How did you see the relationship between boxing and your character, Maggie Fitzgerald?

Swank: For her, it's one of those hard things to explain. It's that moment when you realize this is what I have to do with my life. You can't explain it. It's just a feeling. It's something that happens. For Maggie, boxing is her dream. It's a calling to her. I also think it's an escape. A way out. It's a way to gain respect and love from her family. I think there are a lot of different reasons why she does it but certainly it's her way out.

SI: What did you know about boxing before you took the role?

Swank: Not much. It's not that I didn't like boxing. I just didn't have an opinion about it. I didn't think about it. I didn't quite understand why you would want to hit someone. It alluded me. But as I started boxing, like anything in life, you realize a deeper meaning and you get a deeper level and a deeper respect. I started boxing and it was so much more than a physical thing. It was such a mind challenge, such a strategic mind game, like a great game of chess. I see so many parallels between boxing and life. One is to really stay in the moment. In boxing, the second you think, "Wow, how did they hit me like that? I didn't see that coming," the second you are out of it, they will hit you again. Or the second you hit someone really well or have a great connection and say, "Wow, that was so good. How did I do that?" that's when you get hit. You have to stay in the moment. You have to let everything go and as you punch, if it's solid, you have to let it go and think about it later. You really have to be in the moment -- and you have to stay humble. You have to stay respectful of the other fighter as you're trying to figure out their

strengths and weakness. And at the same time you are realizing your own.

SI: Before this film, did you think of yourself as being physical tough?

Swank: I've never felt weak necessarily That's just because I've been an athlete all my life. I've always had an awareness of my body and the power that we can create and generate with it. Having said that, I've always been pretty light. Having an awareness of what your body can do and what it is capable of gives you kind of a strength.

SI: Did you get ever to spar with Clint?

Swank: We never spared but we definitely moved around.

SI: You trained with **Hector Roca**, who has trained a lot of great fighters. He said you looked like "a worm" before you started with him. Did he tell you that to your face?



Swank: When we first met, he didn't say it but later as I started training and getting bigger ,he brought out some pictures of me on my first day and said, "Look at you! Can you believe this!" and he started laughing.

SI: Choose one: Golden Globes or Golden Gloves?

Swank: I can't. There both great, and a reward of working really hard.

SI: Does Clint make a better trainer than **Pat Morita**, your guru in *The Next Karate Kid*?

Swank: I would say Clint makes a better trainer just because he boxed. For Pat, it was more of a movie thing.

SI: Will you continue to follow boxing?

Swank: Absolutely. I'll go to matches and I'm a fan for life.

SI: You trained at Gleeson's Gym in Brooklyn. Did you get recognized in the gym?

Swank: I would say they did recognize me. They all new I was an actor training for a movie and these men and woman were so supportive of me. I'm sure there were a few who were like, "Oh, she's just an actress," but I felt so supported. They all wanted me to do the best job possible. When I walked in they treated me like a boxer. They treated me like I belonged.

SI: In high school you competed in the Junior Olympics and Washington state championships in swimming and even ranked fifth in the state in all-around in gymnastics. Did being an athlete help convince you that you could pull this off?

Swank: Absolutely. The body never ceases to amaze me. It's truly a machine and it can adapt to anything you ask it to adapt to. As far as weight training, I had only three months to work with. I went to one trainer who said I would never be able to do it. I

asked how long it would take to put on 10 pounds of muscle and he said it would take a year. I said, "OK, this is not my guy because this is my job. I have to do it. I have to be believable and convincing as a boxer." That's when Clint introduced me to **Grant Roberts**, the weight trainer I eventually worked with. He said we would do it. Between Hector, Grant and **Oz Garcia**, a kind of nutrition guru in New York, I started eating 210 grams of protein a day, drinking flax oil, and eating every hour and a half. I needed nine hours of sleep because I learned when you're resting, your muscles grow. I had to wake up in the night and drink protein shakes because I couldn't go nine hours without eating. What I learned is that your mind is your biggest obstacle.

SI: What do you consider your greatest athletic achievement?

Swank: Probably going to Junior Olympics. I had to swim up to four hours a day -- two hours in the morning before I went to school and two hours after. I started out as a breaststroker and then I started doing the backstroke and the back ended up as my stroke. I have this weird double-jointed flexibility which really helps in backstroke because you can really get your arm turned around. I swam longer than I was a gymnast. I was a better swimmer than I was a gymnast. I did it from a very young age. I started gymnastics a little too later to be really good at it.

SI: Has there ever been a sports person or type of athlete that you have been itching to play?

Swank: I can't think of one person in particular but I can definitely say the great thing about acting is we get a chance to dive into all these different ways of life. The fact that I got to live as a boxer for five months was brilliant. I would love to play another athlete because I'll get to work with the best trainers. And I do love sports. I really love it.

SI: How long did it take you to get either used to feeling of being hit or at least past the fear?

Swank: I felt really protected because of Hector. He would let people hit me just in the body at first until I got used to moving around. Then we gradually got up to letting people hit me in the face. I kind of graduated to different stages. Then there was a time he said that he would let people go all out. That's when it became a different game and it made me better. It was completely different for me. When they hit me hard, it challenged me. It was always form before power with Hector. You're not going to be able to hit hard unless you have the right form. Once I got my form down, he let people start hitting me harder which in turn made me hit people harder. You don't necessarily know exactly what he is doing when you are in it; you just trust him. He was protecting me while helping me become better.

SI: What's your best punch?

Swank: My right hook, though I'm southpaw so it's weird. But the right hook is my shot.

SI: Have any paparazzi or pain-in-the-ass agents felt this blow?

Swank: Not yet

