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Sculpting million-dollar body no act: Former Saskatonian overcame accident to become top trainer

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Imagine you're away on business and your cellphone rings. It's Clint Eastwood. Clint go-ahead-make-my-day Eastwood.

Grant Roberts, a personal trainer and owner of Pro Fit Athletic Club at the Delta Bessborough, got such a call while he was in New York. Roberts, who also owns fitness centres in Los Angeles, Vancouver and Calgary, met Eastwood through a mutual friend and helped set up the star's home fitness centre.

"Pretty cool in itself to have Clint call me out of the blue," said Roberts.

Eastwood was getting ready to shoot the new boxing movie, Million Dollar Baby. He needed help getting his star, Hilary Swank, in shape. Roberts agreed to meet Swank, who was training in New York.

When Swank walked into the Warner Bros. office, Roberts admits he had no idea who she was.

"So you're an actress?" Roberts asked.

An Academy Award-winning actress, Swank gently pointed out. Swank won a best actress Oscar for her role in Boys Don't Cry in 1999.

Swank proudly showed off her muscles, but Roberts had misgivings.

"At 5-foot-7 and 110 pounds, she was intending to stand in the ring with the 140-pound champion of the world," said Roberts. Despite the fact that Swank had been training for a while, she had yet to gain any weight.

Roberts decided to take Swank to the Equinox gym to work out.

"She absolutely convinced me that she was so dedicated and so serious about making the changes happen," said Roberts. "She was just so willing to do everything I said to the letter."

The pair had just nine weeks to transform Swank's model-thin frame into the hard-sculpted physique of a professional boxer.

Roberts took charge of her nutrition and training. "It was a very scientific approach."

Her caloric intake was recalculated daily to adjust for the lean muscle mass she gained. She drank flaxseed oil and egg whites. Though she required nine hours of sleep to give her muscles a chance to grow, she couldn't go that long without eating. So, she woke at night to have a protein drink.

Her physical training included lifting weights daily with Roberts and working with legendary boxing trainer Hector Roca on boxing skills.

Over the next nine weeks, Swank gained almost 20 pounds of lean muscle mass. The impressive change is evident on posters for the movie where Swank's sinewy back is visible. A testament to her trainers, Swank didn't use any stunt doubles in the filming.

Eastwood was so impressed by Swank's physique, he gave Roberts a cameo. In the climactic fight scene, Roberts plays the corner man for Swank's opponent.

Despite the challenges, Swank and Roberts managed a feat other trainers called impossible.

But then 'impossible' is not something Roberts accepts easily. Born and raised in Toronto, his family moved to Saskatoon when he was a teenager. Roberts graduated from Aden Bowman Collegiate and pursued his passion for weightlifting. At the age of 17, Roberts opened his first gym in Prince Albert. At 19, he won the Canadian heavyweight bodybuilding championship.

His success and physique brought attention from pro wrestling, pro football, and various muscle magazines. He travelled all over North America exploring different opportunities and giving seminars on fitness and nutrition.

At the age of 26, disaster struck. Just outside Edmonton, the car Roberts was driving flipped end over end. Ejected through the sun roof, the car came down on top of him, leaving a body-shaped imprint in the windshield.

Barely alive, Roberts was taken to hospital with head trauma, every rib broken, two collapsed lungs, broken clavicle and a broken back. Months later, he left the hospital 70 pounds lighter.

The accident had a profound effect on the bodybuilder. "The accident ended one life, but began another one for me," said Roberts.

Physically broken, Roberts vowed to return to his previous physique. A return to his involvement in athletics was impossible, doctors urged, noting he should simply be happy to be alive.

But Roberts was undeterred.

The long road to recovery would be difficult. Looking in a mirror for the first time, he said, "it wasn't pretty. I was completely black from all the dead blood that was underneath my skin."

Roberts could barely walk two steps without gasping for breath because of his collapsed lungs.

"The hardest thing to deal with in the gym is that your brain still believes you can do what you used to, but bio-mechanically everything has changed," explained Roberts.

Roberts moved to Costa Rica for four years to facilitate his rehabilitation. While he still can't bench press his career best of 635 pounds, Roberts has made remarkable progress.

"There probably isn't anything I wouldn't give to go back but that isn't very productive thinking," he said. "I just try to look forward instead of back and just do my best."

For those interested in his productive thinking, Roberts is holding a seminar on fitness and nutrition at the Delta Bessborough hotel on Jan. 26. Call Pro Fit to reserve a seat.

Meanwhile, Million Dollar Baby was nominated for five Golden Globes.

The 40-year-old Roberts watched the awards show from his condo in Vancouver as Eastwood and Swank picked up honours. He was touched by the personal thank you Swank included in her acceptance speech. Swank's remarks even elicited a call from Roberts' mom in Saskatoon.

"The credit has to go to Hilary," maintained Roberts, "because for her to average two pounds a week, over a nine-week period, of solid muscle is phenomenal."

Illustration:

• Colour Photo: CanWest News / Grant Roberts, an Aden Bowman grad and owner of a local athletic club, trained Oscar-winning actress Hilary Swank for the film Million Dollar Baby

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