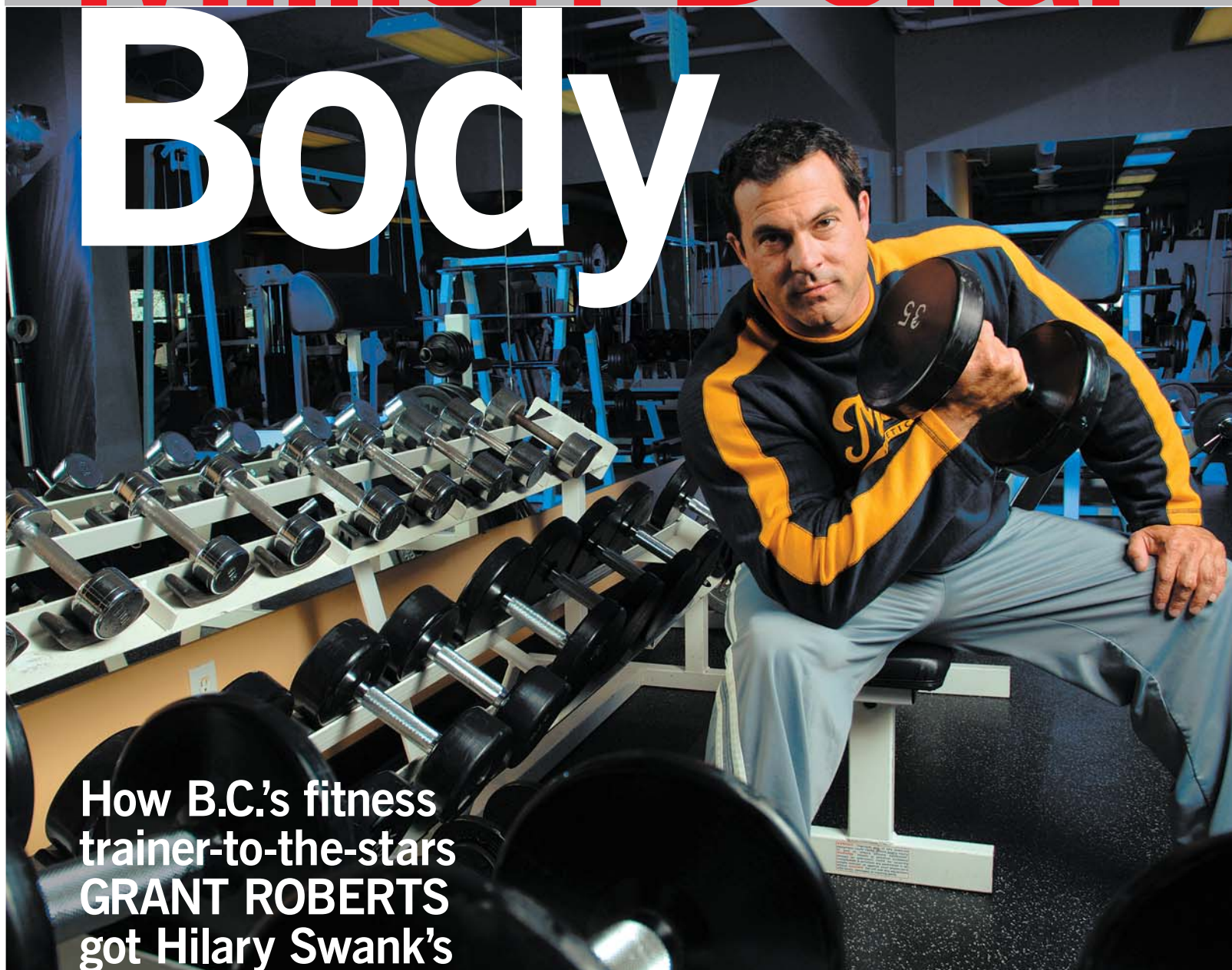


Million Dollar

Body



How B.C.'s fitness trainer-to-the-stars GRANT ROBERTS got Hilary Swank's body looking like a million bucks for her Oscar-winning role in **MILLION DOLLAR BABY**

BY JENNIFER ZUROWSKI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON SANGHA

“Girlie, tough ain’t enough.”

— Frankie (Million Dollar Baby)

PITT MEADOWS ATHLETIC CLUB CO-OWNER GRANT ROBERTS COULD have delivered that same line to actress Hilary Swank when he met her for the first time in New York, but what he said was even more memorable. Roberts had been asked by Hollywood legend Clint Eastwood to train Swank for a role as boxer Maggie Fitzgerald in his new movie *Million Dollar Baby*. When introduced to Swank, Roberts remarked innocently, “So, you’re an actress?” Swank politely responded by mentioning the Best Actress Academy Award she’d picked up for 1999’s *Boys Don’t Cry*.

Clint Eastwood was so impressed with Roberts that he gave him a cameo in his movie

Swank (right) shows off her newly sculpted bod on Oscar night.

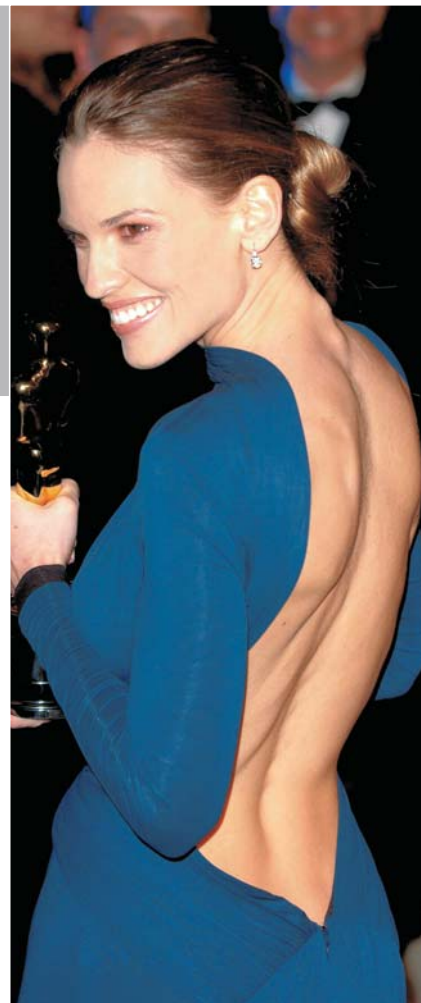
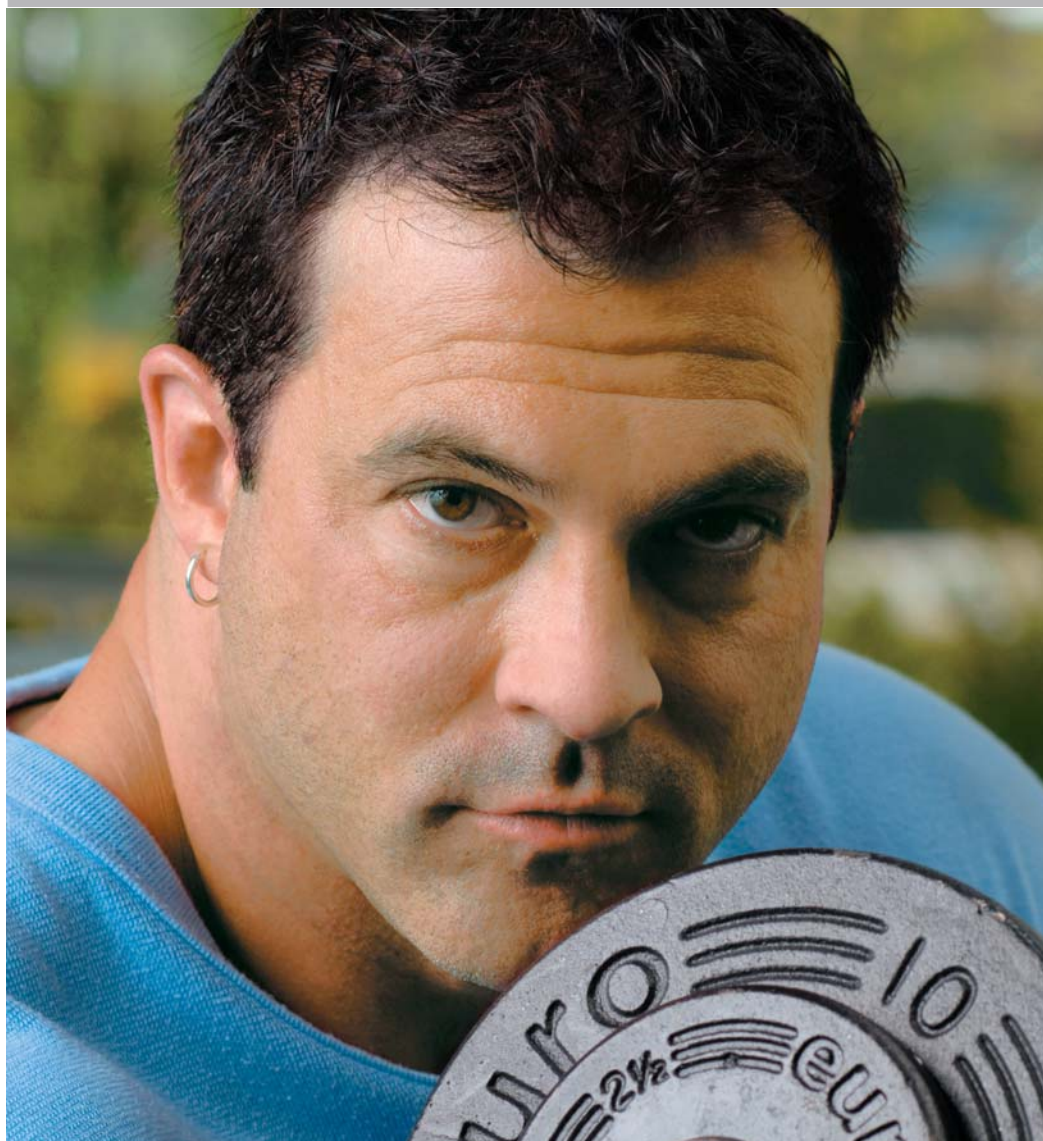


PHOTO BY DOUG PETERS/ALL ACTION/KEystone PRESS

Fortunately, the faux pas didn't prevent the pair from becoming fast friends as they began to work together. "Right away she started flexing her arm and asked me to feel her muscles. Of course, there was nothing to feel. But it was adorable," laughs Roberts.

At 110 pounds, Swank was model-thin when Roberts took on the seemingly impossible task of building her up to look as if she belonged in the boxing ring with 140-pound **Lucia Rijker**, a real-life female champion boxer — all in only nine weeks.

Swank had been working with another trainer, but three weeks into it, had lost weight instead of gaining it. Eastwood needed help fast. As luck would have it, a friend (who happens to be co-owner of the Pitt Meadows Athletic Club) recommended Roberts for the job.

"I was really concerned about it," Roberts admits. "The studio wanted [Swank to gain] 10 pounds, and I thought that was not enough. If she didn't look like a boxer, forget it. That was the whole premise of the movie."

Swank had to prove to Roberts that she was a quick learner and motivated enough to push herself to the limits.

"I took her to the gym and she absolutely convinced me that she could do it," recalls Roberts. "There was no 'prima donna' status — I can honestly say she complained less than anybody I've ever trained. She was so passionate about this film, and she really wanted to do it."

Swank's training consisted of spending the whole morning with her boxing coach, followed by about an hour-and-a-half of weight training with Roberts in the afternoon. In the interest of time, Roberts focused on the muscle groups that would be revealed the most in the movie: her calves, back and arms. Her diet consisted of mostly proteins (including egg whites and fish), almost no carbohydrates, plus flax seed oil. Roberts also made sure Swank got nine hours of sleep every night and drank lots of water.

The results were incredible — in nine weeks, Swank packed on 23 pounds of muscle while reducing her body fat, getting her up to 130 pounds. Her physique in the *Million Dollar Baby* poster, which shows off her defined back muscles, is truly her, says Roberts, no retouching.

In fact, when he speaks about Swank,

Roberts beams like a proud parent. “For her to gain 23 pounds of muscle is a testament to her, she completely dedicated herself to this role and deserves every award she got . . . I am so proud of her and what she accomplished.”

The admiration and respect was reciprocated. Eastwood was so impressed that he gave Roberts a cameo in the movie as boxer Lucia Rijker’s corner man.

And when Swank took home her Oscar for *Million Dollar Baby*, she personally credited her trainer in her acceptance speech: “Grant Roberts . . . you pushed me further than I ever thought I could push myself . . . I thank you.”

“Both Hilary and Clint refer to me as their friend,” says Roberts, “which is probably the most rewarding because it goes so far beyond the scope of work.”

“Trouble . . . comes by the pound.”

— Maggie (*Million Dollar Baby*)

If that were true, Grant Roberts would be a whole lot of trouble. He weighs in at about 270 to 275 pounds now — and he’d like to be about 10 pounds heavier. As a teenager, Roberts moved with his family from Toronto to Saskatoon, where he started playing high school football but soon discovered he enjoyed the strength training more than the game itself. Then at age 17, he moved to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, a community without any gyms at all. He learned to build his own equipment, and eventually opened his own gym.

“I was sort of delusional. I thought this was great — I could open a gym and train all day. Of course, that couldn’t have been further from the truth, especially when the gym is open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. and you’re the only employee.”

Roberts sold the gym and headed for California to follow his dream of becoming a professional bodybuilder. At 19, he became a Canadian heavyweight bodybuilding champion, and opportunities seemed to pour in, from professional wrestling offers to TV and movie deals.

A few years later, trouble struck in the form of a serious car accident outside Edmonton. He was ejected through the sunroof and crushed by the car as it landed on top of him. The accident damaged his back, broke his clavicle, caused head trauma, broke every rib and punctured both lungs. All his opportunities disappeared as

quickly as they had come. He was only 26.

“Problem is, this the only thing I ever felt good doing.”

— Maggie (*Million Dollar Baby*)

Although the medical community told him not even to think about returning to athletics, it never crossed Roberts’ mind to give up.

“That would be like me telling the doctor that he couldn’t be a doctor anymore, and that he should go work at McDonald’s,” says Roberts. “To me, there wasn’t an option.”

He began to rehabilitate himself in the swimming pool in his home, using the water for resistance. It took him more than a year to breathe normally again, not to mention undergoing numerous surgeries in the ensuing years before he fully recovered his strength.

Today, Roberts says he feels as if things have come full circle and he’s back where he started before the accident happened — surrounded by opportunities. He currently owns four gyms (one in L.A., one in Pitt Meadows and two in Saskatoon) and is in the process of expanding his clubs under the umbrella name of Mecca Fitness (www.meccafitness.com).

Roberts also designs and sells fitness equipment for a company called Apex USA, and is in talks to produce his own brand of supplements. Although he no longer competes in bodybuilding, he’s still active in other types of competitions, such as the Highland Games (in events like shot-put) and Strongman contests (where Roberts enjoys events like flipping cars). And he’s even testing out his acting chops. Roberts recently shot a scene in the locally filmed sci-fi series *The Dead Zone*, where he played a bouncer referred to as a “Coke machine with a head.”

The former bodybuilder is also passionate about making a healthy lifestyle more accessible to all Canadians. Roberts has been lobbying the federal government to create a tax credit for consumers who join an accredited fitness facility, and to increase school fitness programs for children.

“My biggest goal is to provide an education for people,” Roberts says. “Educate, motivate and create new lifestyles.”



According to Roberts, people are so bombarded with health information that they can’t tell what’s true from what isn’t. In addition to speaking at seminars and training sessions, he will be expanding his educational efforts later this year when he releases his book *The Unified Diet*. The book will explain in simple terms the effects of certain foods and specific activities, to help people understand what is happening to their body instead of just taking advice blindly. While it will include a fitness plan, the book will focus primarily on nutrition, which Roberts says is the key to getting the results you want.

With so many projects keeping him on the go, it’s no wonder Roberts doesn’t have much time for personal training anymore, aside from the new celebrity clients whose names he can’t divulge. But chances are, if Clint Eastwood called him up again for a favour — especially if it involved training another beautiful actress — he’d surely agree. ■

Check out page 77 for Week 1 of our exclusive six-part fitness series, designed by Grant Roberts to get you in shape for summer in just six weeks.