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Winner and new champ: Russell Crowe's 'Cinderella Man'

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Cinderella Man **** out of four Stars: Russell Crowe, Renee Zellweger, Paul Giamatti, Craig Bierko, Paddy Considine, Bruce McGill
Director: Ron Howard Distributor: Universal Rating: PG-13 for intense boxing violence and some language Running time: 2 hours, 24 minutes Opens today nationwide --- A premier boxing movie and a forceful Depression remembrance for the socially conscious, Cinderella Man also ices it for stargazers that Russell Crowe is the dominant screen actor working today.

Ron Howard's biopic of world heavyweight champ James J. Braddock, like its '30s brother Seabiscuit from 2003, is a test case to see whether a prestige picture can be sold in the summer. (Cinderella surpasses Seabiscuit in every way.) Sparked by some of the most excitingly staged bouts and resonant ringside "business" ever, it also fills a gap.

Everyone knows about Joe Louis and his famed '30s bouts with Max Schmeling. We know Primo Carnera because his fictionalized story became *The Harder They Fall*, Humphrey Bogart's swan song. We know Max Baer because he acted in many films (including his unforgettable turn in *Fall*) and because Max Jr. played Jethro on *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

But who was this Jimmy Braddock who intertwined with so many of these figures? A 1920s fighter of promising merit -- his fall in fortunes is conveyed in a brilliant transition -- he was a dock laborer by 1933 on the rare days he could find work.

Renee Zellweger plays Braddock's wife, trying to feed three kids in basically one room with no place to cry (except outside in the snow; that was the Depression for you). She has several strong scenes that the amazing Crowe also makes special. Let Crowe enter a nightclub in real life, and the thoughts of many bartenders turn to bubble-wrapping the glassware. But on screen, this master and commander projects sensitivity like no one else around.

Paul Giamatti has a likable turn as Braddock's manager, and Craig Bierko puts a superbly idiosyncratic spin on Baer, a fatal puncher whose butchering of Carnera in a pre-Braddock bout still chills 70 years later.

Champ Baer was a 20-to-1 favorite, despite sweating booze during limited training. Man's climactic matchup, which is far from the only long shot we see Braddock face during a miracle run for title contention, works splendidly for two reasons. There's so much on the line -- Braddock's mortality, for one thing -- and the staging is breathtaking. I've never seen a boxing movie that has so convinced me I was seeing a pro bout both real and sustained.

Unlike many ex-champs, Cinderella Braddock's stagecoach never changed into a pumpkin. And his movie is a Rolls.

Mike Clark

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