

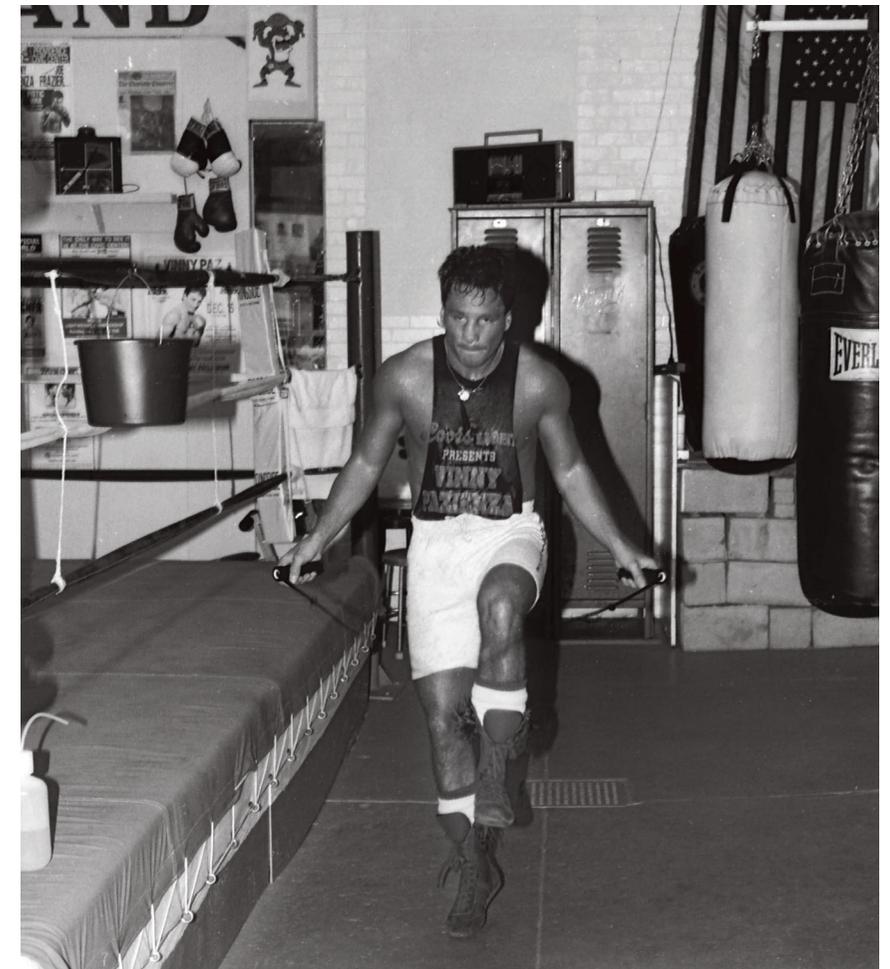
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PAZMANIAN DEVIL

> Boxer Vinny Paz was left with a broken neck after a near-fatal car crash. Thirteen months later he became world champion again. Stories like this only seem real in movies. But his is real, and it's coming to a theater near you in *Bleed for This*.

BY BOB GUCCIONE JR.

DEVIL IN FRILLY TRUNKS
Vinny Pazienza punches the head of Lloyd Honeyghan in a middleweight fight in Atlantic City, NJ, June 26, 1993.



Boxer Vinny Paz with one of his five championship belts in his Warwick, RI, home (left). Vinny training circa 1990 (above).

It is ironic that the story of the man who calls himself the Pazmanian Devil starts with a pitchfork. During the second world war in Italy, Angelo Pazienza, then only 18 but the future father of Vinny Pazienza, who became five-time world boxing champion, killed a German soldier trying to steal an animal from the family farm, driving a pitchfork through his heart. To avoid arrest, he fled to America. In his late 20s, he met his wife Louise and they settled in Rhode Island, and in December 1962 their son Vincenzo Edward was born.

“My father was the toughest man I ever met,” says the toughest man I’ve ever met. “He was a beast, mentally and physically. Although maybe my mother was tougher. One time she was coming back from the store and fell and hurt herself. All the bags went everywhere. She picked everything up, walked home, climbed two flights of stairs, made and served the family dinner, and when it was over, said, ‘Angelo, take me to the hospital.’ She’d broken her knee. But she didn’t let

any of that stop what she had to do.”

Vinny Pazienza, who legally changed his last name to Paz in 2000, started boxing at 5, inspired by Muhammad Ali. From the beginning it was obvious he was gifted. “You have to be blessed with talent,” he says. “God made that plan for me. I was born a fighter. At 5 years old, everybody came to see me.”

He had 112 amateur bouts, winning an even 100, and sparred as a teenager

with Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield at the Olympic trials. In May 1983, aged 20, he had his first professional fight, a fourth-round TKO of Alfredo Rivera, in Atlantic City. By the end of that year he had fought nine more times and won all of them, three by knockout, the rest TKOs. From 1984 through 1986 he fought 12 more times, losing for the first time in December ’84, in Milan, Italy. In June 1987, he got his first crack at a title and won the IBF lightweight championship with a 15-round decision in a war over reigning champion Greg Haugen.

In February ’88, Vinny lost the rematch, and belt, but by November was given a shot at the WBC junior welterweight title, which he lost to

Roger Mayweather, Floyd Mayweather’s uncle. In 1990 he had two more cracks at world championships at that weight, the WBO and WBA belts, and lost them both, to Hector Camacho and Loreto Garza. A year later, in October and in Providence again (where he never lost), he won his second world championship, beating French WBA junior middleweight champion Gilbert Dele, knocking him out in the 12th round. He was 28 years old and in all the ways that we understand the phrase, he was on top of the world.

Weeks later he was nearly dead.



On a late fall evening in 1991, on a highway near Warwick, RI, where Vinny lived and lives now, a car

suddenly cut off the Camaro Vinny’s friend Kurt Reader was driving, and they swerved into oncoming traffic and were hit by a van. At first Vinny, in the front passenger seat, thought he was fine, but he couldn’t move when firefighters extracted him with the jaws of life and was in unbearable pain. At the hospital the doctor treating him told him he had a broken neck with two broken vertebrae. With luck he’d walk again, but he would never fight again.

He was released after a week and fitted with a “halo,” a cumbersome, heavy, metal contraption, the bottom of which rested on his shoulders and the top was literally screwed into his skull in four places to immobilize his neck. He was told that if he merely

banged the halo into something, he could be paralyzed for life. At home, his parents had set up a hospital bed in the living room.

His first thought after the accident was, “Really? I just won the title and now I’m maimed?”

“Then I thought, ‘You know what, Vinny Paz, it’s not just you, this could’ve happened to anybody,’” he says. “‘Get up, bite your fucking teeth, and get it done. If not, get out of the game.’ I wanted to get it done.” It was, he said, “the darkest time imaginable.” A day after he had returned home, he painfully, unsteadily, got out of bed and went downstairs and tried to work out.

“My father went to work and my mother went to the grocery store,

VINNY PAZ

and I said ‘I got to get out of this fucking bed. I went down to the cellar, I picked up the first weight and it killed my fucking head. I wasn’t prepared for that. I screamed and dropped the weight. Tears were coming out of my eyes and I was sitting on the bench and looking at it, and I went again, and I started lifting, and that was it.

“After a while they found out because my mother found the wet

clothes in the hamper. She said, ‘Vinny, please don’t tell me you’re working out!’ “No, ma, I’m good.” ‘What do you mean, Vinny? Why are your clothes wet?’ There’s a pause. ‘I don’t know.’

“One night I was with my mother. I said, ‘Ma, I’m gonna fight again, or I’m gonna die trying.’ She said, ‘Oh, Vinny, don’t say that,’ and I said, ‘Alright Ma, I won’t say it again, but that’s how it’s gonna go down.’ And I

was serious. Obviously I didn’t know what was going to happen. But I wasn’t taking no for an answer.”

His father took him to the gym daily so that Vinny could work out more effectively. The halo caused him unimaginable pain every time he strained but he learned to compensate positionally. There is video online of him lifting with that sci-fi looking appendage around his head, and he’s training harder than the uninjured

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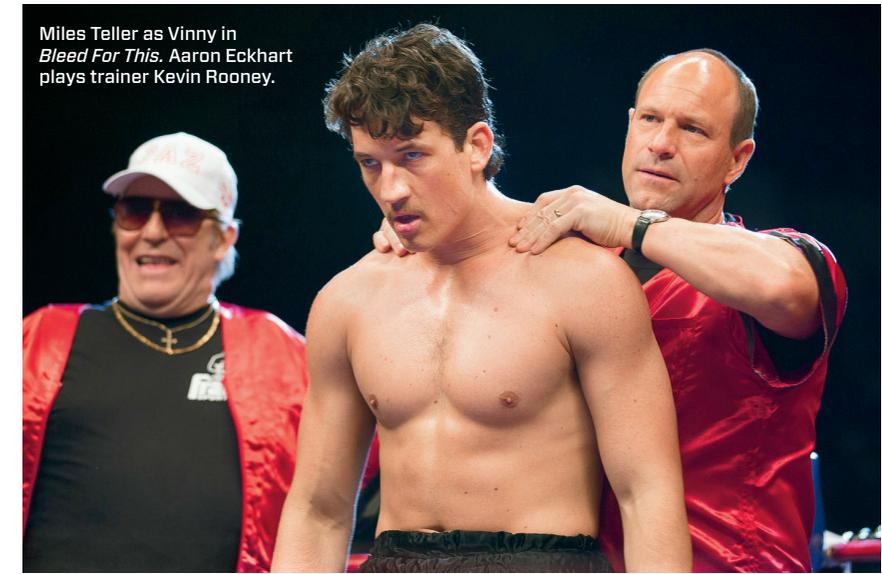
people around him. Giovanni Cipolla, a longtime friend, says: “To see him bench-pressing and doing dumbbell curls with a large metal contraption screwed into his skull was inspiring. To this very day, when I feel too tired or not quite in the mood to work out, I think to myself, ‘Pazman had a broken fucking neck and still worked out. What’s your excuse, wimp?’”

In retrospect, weightlifting probably hastened his recovery, which his doctor admitted to him later.

You didn’t have to come back, I tell Vinny. You were champ. You had nothing to prove.

“That’s what my mother said,” Paz says. “Know how many times I looked in the mirror, tears would come out of my eyes and I’d say, ‘What the fuck are you doin’?” But I had to do it.

“The only time I got nervous was the first time I sparred, against a great fighter, Ray Oliveira. We were friends, so he didn’t want to hit me. I



Miles Teller as Vinny in *Bleed For This*. Aaron Eckhart plays trainer Kevin Rooney.

said, ‘Ray, you gotta fucking hit me.’ Then the second round was on and he wasn’t hitting me; I could tell he was pussyfooting around. Then, in the third round I started smashing him, and at the end we were going at it, and after that round was over, I was back! I gave Kevin Rooney [Paz’s trainer] and my father high fives.”

Thirteen months later Vinny was back in the ring and defeated Luis Santana in a 10-round decision. A year later he won his third world championship, the IBO super-middleweight championship.

And he won two more world titles after that.



They should make a movie about this guy, right? Well they did. *Bleed For This*, starring Miles Teller as Paz and Aaron Eckhart as the legendary trainer Rooney, comes out nationwide Nov. 23, is produced by Verdi Productions, a Rhode Island-based company.

Teller, who was in his own near-death car crash, was not an obvious choice, physically or looks-wise, before the movie. But after months of intense preparation, including transforming his body into that of a honed athlete, he looked the part.

“Some of my best friends are special forces guys. Vinny’s got that mentality. He’s a warrior in the ring. When I met him, he said, ‘Miles, you’ve got to be tough as nails. Eat nails for breakfast, kid.’ One of my friends is from Providence. When I said I was playing Vinny he told his dad, and his dad was like, ‘No way! Oh, man. That guy was the best!’” says Teller.

Eckhart looked even more unlike Rooney, who also trained Mike Tyson and died of Alzheimer’s in 2013. But he too transformed himself, going the other way and putting on 45 pounds.

“Vinny is one of those guys that legends are made of, that don’t say quit.



(Opposite page) Vinny poses outside his home in Cranston, RI. (Below) Paz lands a left against Roberto Duran at the Atlantic City Convention Center, Jan. 14, 1995. Vinny won on a unanimous decision.





Appearing on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* June 17, 1994. (Below) Vinny in his corner against Lloyd Honeyghan in Atlantic City, June 26, 1993.



To think of what he went through, in terms of personal pain and overcoming adversity and believing in himself. That's a lesson we could all learn something from," says Eckhart.

If movies are a little larger than life, Vinny's life is a little larger than this movie. In one moment of the film, after winning a fight in Atlantic City, Teller's Vinny goes to the gaming

“
Ma, I'm gonna fight again or I'm gonna die trying...that's how it's gonna go down.
”

tables with \$500, and hours later comes back to his room having won \$20,000, and triumphantly throws all the chips over his Penthouse Pet girlfriend lying on the bed, and whoops in maniac celebration. When Vinny saw that scene, he turned to Ben Younger, the writer and director, and said: "Ben, what the fuck! I won \$65,000, not 20,000! I told you that!" and Ben said, "I know Vinny, but no one would believe it."

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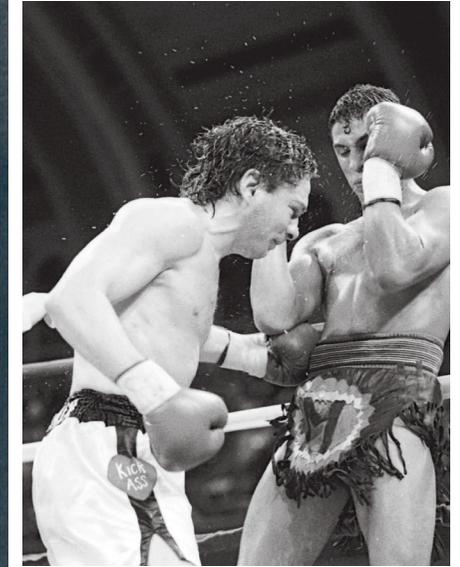
In real life, Vinny does not look like Miles Teller. He has the flat, hard face of a veteran fighter, the eyes set back under brows that look like stone masonry. At 53, his body is rock hard and muscular. And he has that professional fighter's aura of not exactly menace but invincibility, like a force field. Despite being universally nice to everyone he comes in contact with, you know he is dangerous in a way you are not.

When he was fighting, he used to abstain from sex for a certain number of days before a fight to work up a

MARGARET NORTON/GETTY IMAGES; AL BELLO/GETTY IMAGES



Vinny poses with his belt in January 1996 in New York. (Right) Vinny (L) throws a punch against Hector Camacho during their fight in Atlantic City, NJ.



super middleweight champion. "When I fought Duran the first time, he was nasty to me at the press conferences. After we fought, he was way different, because he knew I could fight. I got his respect after he knocked me down in the fifth round. I thought, 'What the fuck am I doing here?' and I jumped up and after that round I followed him back to the corner and said, 'I ain't going nowhere.' And he went loco. Then I kicked his ass."

These days Vinny's next project is a line of Paz-branded wines from Italy—a sparkling rosé, a pinot grigio white, and a simple (but delicious) red with the slightly less than humble label—5X Better Wine. The idea came from his publicist/de facto manager, Zena Sciarrino, who describes her mission with him as: "He and I have a job to do, to inspire and fight with a big heart!"

A journalist once asked Vinny what one word would describe him, and he said, "Fortunate. Bam! That's my word. I'm lucky. Fortunate to be blessed with the genes I've got, fortunate to have had great parents, to do what I do, fortunate enough to come back with the broken neck. Just fortunate." **M&F**

hatred for his opponent that he could take into the ring with him. Five days abstention was the most; that would froth him into a murderous rage. I asked him who got five days.

"Haugen. Duran, first fight, and this guy"—he stabs at a poster of his fight with Dana Rosenblatt that he has taped to the side of his desk in his house. "He was a maggot. He said I

was on my last leg, and he was going to kill me. He was a decent fighter from Boston, who was undefeated in 30 fights. I had just lost to Roy Jones so everybody thought I was done. I knocked him out in four. That was my fifth and last world title."

Vinny twice beat Roberto Duran, albeit in the twilight of his career, but the first time while he was still

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