

The Champ

US : 1931 : dir. King Vidor : M-G-M : 87 min
 prod: Harry Rapf : scr: Leonard Praskins & Frances Marion : dir.ph.: Gordon Avil
[Jackie Cooper](#); [Andy Shuford](#)
 Wallace Beery; Irene Rich; Roscoe Ates; Edward Brophy; Hale Hamilton; Jesse Scott;
 Marcia-Mae Jones

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ≠ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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“Don’t fail to get a ringside seat!”
“The knockout picture of the year!”



Wallace Beery's expression around Jackie Cooper often had the aspect of a man bravely concealing a cronic toothache. Like Abbot & Costello, their on-screen camaraderie may not have been as warm as audiences supposed.
Sources: (left) Tim Dirks' film poster website; (right) That Was Hollywood – the 1930's

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 2001 review:

“Superb tearjerker about a washed-up prizefighter and his adoring son, played to perfection by Beery and Cooper (in the first of their several teamings). Simple, sentimental in the extreme, but extremely effective. Beery won an Oscar for his performance, as did Frances Marion for her original story. Remade in 1935 (as "THE CLOWN") and 1979. ***½ ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review:

“Slow-moving tale of a young boy's trust in his father, a professional boxer who's had his day; worth watching thanks to the good performances of Cooper and Beery (who won an Oscar). Remade in 1953 (as "THE CLOWN") and in 1979. ***½ ”



Male bonding – heavyweight style. Those whom Lord Queensbury hath joined together, let no woman put asunder.
Source: NFT Bulletin

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"A young boy has faith in a washed-up prize-fighter. Maudlin drama, highly commercial in its day and a box office tonic for its two stars. Remade as **"THE CLOWN"**. Academy Award: Best Original Story (Frances Marion); Best Actor (Wallace Beery). Nominations: Best Picture; Best Director (King Vidor). * "

"This picture will hit 'em all, large or small, and that means lots of money" - **Variety**

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"A young boy (Jackie Cooper) is the only person who still has faith in his father (Wallace Beery), an ex-heavyweight boxing champ. Two terrific leading performances and Vidor's almost documentary-style direction made this predictable father-son melodrama a very effective tear-jerker in its day - and it still works, for all but the most cynical. It's a lot better than the two remakes, **"THE CLOWN"** (1952) and Zeffirelli's prettified **"THE CHAMP"** (1979). 5/10 "

"Rancid" - John Simon, 1979

"Soggy load of heart-breaking melodrama"
- **Pauline Kael**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"A small boy (Jackie Cooper), happy living with his boozy, impoverished father (Wallace Beery), is offered a home by a very wealthy lady (Irene Rich), who just happens to be his mother. The material becomes merely a tearjerker, since the film, like a Victorian pulp novel, sees matters only in extremes. * "

Excerpt from filmography of Cooper in **Great Child Stars**:

"...Cooper claims he only won the role [in **"SKIPPY"**] because his uncle Norman Taurog was directing the Metro picture. Regardless, the film made Cooper a top star. Thereafter, Jackie made a hit in a series of popular film fare. In **"YOUNG DONOVAN'S KID"** (31) at RKO he confronted a dope-peddling Boris Karloff and heroic Richard Dix. Back at MGM, where he was to become a contract star, he co-starred with gruff Wallace Beery in **"THE**

CHAMP" (31), for which Cooper won an Oscar nomination. The youngster became a major audience-pleaser, especially when he turned on the tears..."

Excerpt from filmography of Beery in **The Great Movie Stars - the Golden Years**:

"...Paramount were convinced that Beery was not going places with Talkies, and dropped him. MGM were, however, interested... He was put into John Gilbert's **"WAY FOR A SAILOR"** in order to bolster Gilbert at the wickets; he did a strong gangster melo, **"THE SECRET SIX"** (31) and then **"THE CHAMP"**, playing his usual role, a dirty rogue: but nothing could shake the devotion to him of boy star Jackie Cooper, and this time Beery had a heart of gold. Under King Vidor's direction he was more lovable than he had been with Dressler. Audiences cried buckets: enough of them to put this one, too, among the year's top grossers. Beery won a Best Actor Oscar (in a tie with Fredric March for **"DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE"**) and at the end of 1932, when the film played off, found himself for the first time among the year's top 10 box office draws..."

The M-G-M Story review:

"Sheer hokum, really, but **"THE CHAMP"** was made with such superb professionalism in all departments that it achieved record business in depression-stricken 1931 - and Academy Awards for Frances Marion and Wallace Beery. It was MGM's biggest smash hit of the year. This third ideal role Miss Marion wrote for Beery was that of a broken-down boxer who made a comeback for the sake of his idolising son, Jackie Cooper. The nine-year old graduate from **Our Gang** got even greater praise than Beery from the critics, and audible sobbing from audiences. King Vidor extracted genuine pathos from both stars and good work, too, from Irene Rich, Roscoe Ates, Hale Hamilton and Edward Brophy."

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Director King Vidor's sentimental story of a washed-up boxer and his doting son living the happy low-life in Tijuana. Rich's performance is accomplished as the mother who has



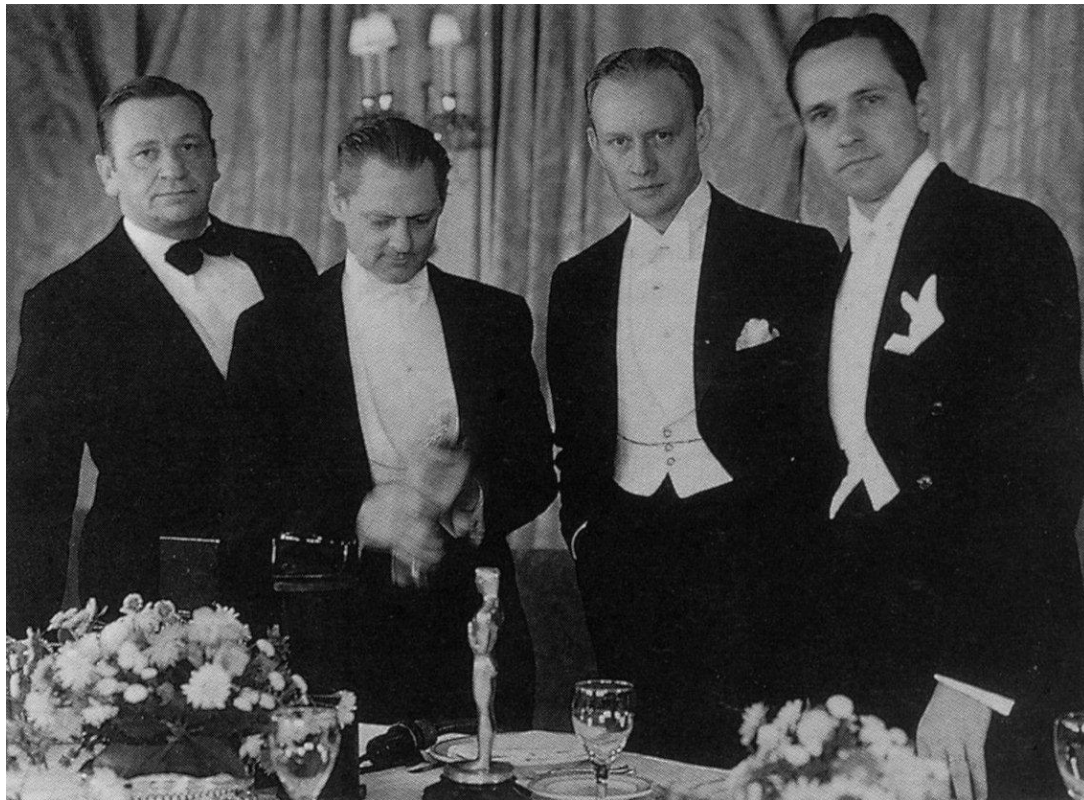
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"THE CHAMP"
An M-G-M Release

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R62/215

One girl, one white boy, one black boy: in 1931 neither the stills photographer nor the director would have had any thoughts of complying with some rigorous template of "social inclusion" – the scene simply fell together that way – but three generations later it would become mandatory representation in all television advertising and political "photo opportunities" involving children (Tony Blair replacing Jackie Cooper in this still). Source: indeterminate website



Beery looking ever so slightly out of place at the 1932 Academy Award ceremony, with Lionel Barrymore, Conrad Nagel and co-winner Fredric March (what, no Whoopi Goldberg?) Source: *That Was Hollywood – the 1930's*
 abandoned them. Beery shared an Oscar with Fredric March. *** ”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Creaky though this 1931 tear-jerker about boxer (Wallace Beery) who makes a comeback for his adoring son (Jackie Cooper) may be, there is something compulsive about King Vidor’s direction. Remade in 1979. 3”

That Was Hollywood – the 1930s review:

“MGM had noted Jackie Cooper’s appeal in “SKIPPY” and fashioned its own vehicle for the young actor, including another sad ending. He played the son of a washed-up ex-fighter (played by Wallace Beery); his shining faith in his father encourages the old derelict to attempt a comeback. Originally he lost his fight and died, but producer Irving G Thalberg realised that the film needed a more positive ending, so once again MGM doctored a production, having Beery win the match before dropping dead. Leonard Praskins and Frances Marion wrote it,

and King Vidor directed. The studio was next trying to figure out a way to team Jackie with Marie Dressler. “THE CHAMP” was remade as “THE CLOWN” with Red Skelton and released in 1952.”

“The Academy Awards covered the season from August 1931 to July 1932 and were presented at the Ambassador Hotel on 18th November [1932]. “GRAND HOTEL” was voted Best Picture. Fredric March picked up most votes for Best Actor for “DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE”, but Wallace Beery was only one vote behind for “THE CHAMP” and under the rules of that time this meant that both actors won... while Frances Marion won for the Best Original Story which she devised for “THE CHAMP”...”

Those Endearing Young Charms still caption:

“King Vidor directed this film and cast Jackie and Wallace Beery in the principal roles. Jackie played the son of a broken down boxer, who chooses to live a life of poverty with his father than be reared in luxury with his mother.”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"A good picture, almost entirely by virtue of an inspired performance by a boy, Jackie Cooper. There is none of the usual hammy quality of the average child actor in this kid.

What also makes "THE CHAMP" a good talker is a studied. Understanding adult piece of work by the co-star, Wallace Beery, who had to step to keep up with Jackie, and a Frances Marion original story that isn't bad for a boxing story.

Beery plays a broken-down ex-heavyweight champ. He's anchored in Tiajuana [sic] with his kid and a couple of training camp leeches, and training for a comeback between stews. When not stewing he's gambling and the comeback always seems more distant. He wins enough to buy the kid a racehorse. Then he loses the horse in a crap game.

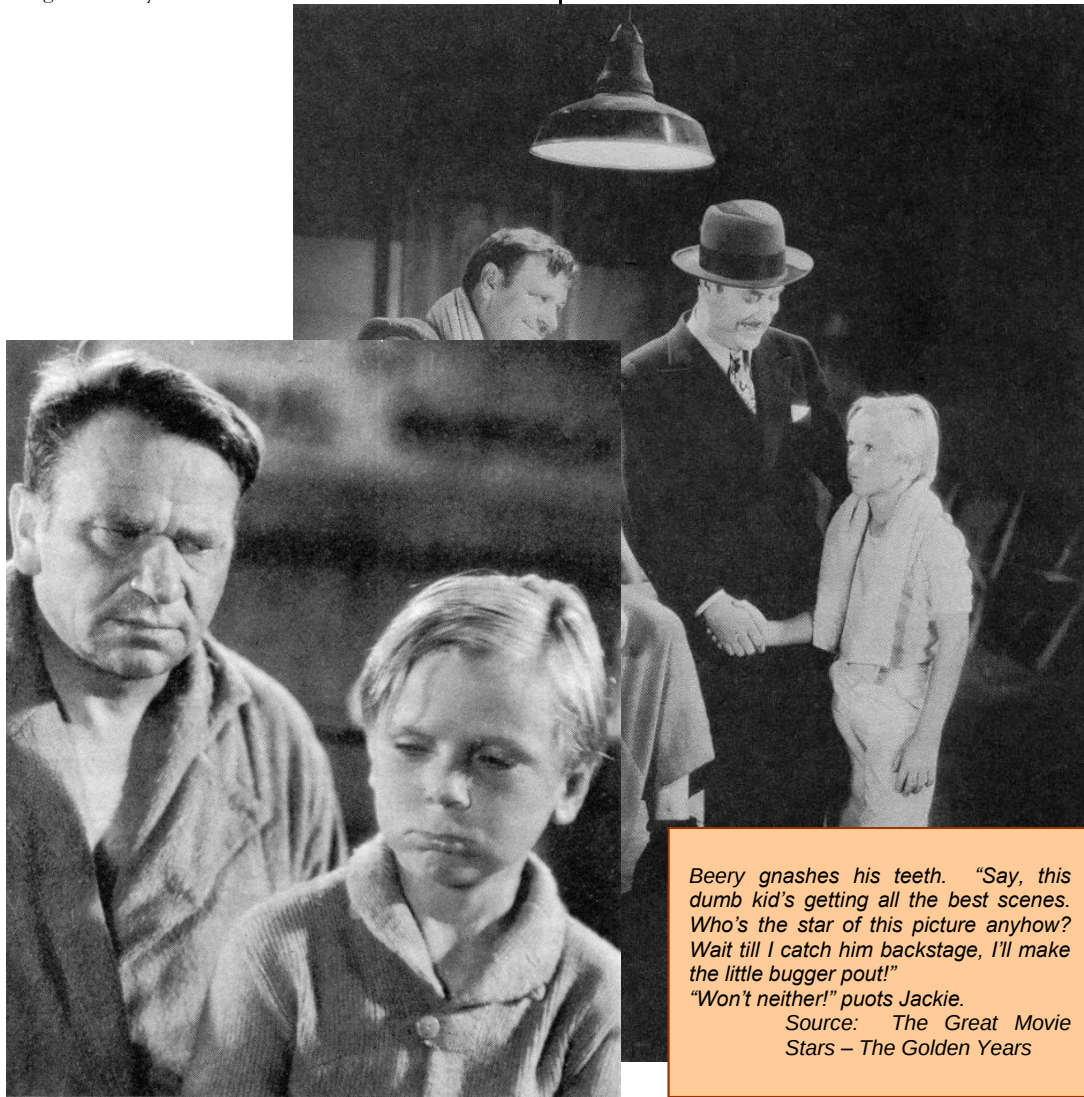
In the attempts of the Champ's former wife and the boy's mother to regain her son there is some menace, though Irene Rich as the mother and Hale Hamilton as her second husband are painted lily white by the script. Oscars 1931/32: Best Actor (Wallace Beery), Best Original Story. Nomination: Best Picture."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Wallace Beery is at his absolute best in the Oscar-winning title role of this tearjerker, about a washed-up fighter and his adoring son (Jackie Cooper) who are separated against their will. King Vidor manages to make even the hokiest bits of hokum work in this four-hankie feast of sentimentality. **** "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Beery won an Oscar for his role as down-at-heels ex-heavyweight boxing champion who trains for a comeback in Tijuana in between boozing and gambling, egged on by his pipe dreams and those of his young son (Cooper). When he wins some money, the "Champ" buys the boy a racehorse, but promptly loses it in a crap game. The boy's mother (Rich) and her wealthy husband (Hamilton) appear at the track where the boxer works and convince him that the boy would be better off with them. He reluctantly agrees, but the boy later sneaks back to his father's side in time to witness the



Beery gnashes his teeth. "Say, this dumb kid's getting all the best scenes. Who's the star of this picture anyhow? Wait till I catch him backstage, I'll make the little bugger pout!"

"Won't neither!" puots Jackie.

Source: The Great Movie Stars – The Golden Years

older man's bout against a much younger opponent.

A famous tearjerker of its day, **"THE CHAMP"** is unabashed in its assault upon the audience's emotions. Cynics are advised to keep their distance, but in defense of this extremely sentimental film one should note the genuine rapport between Beery and Cooper and the quiet skill of director Vidor. A film with a lot of heart, unafraid to bare its emotions. **"THE CHAMP"** still plays well, its slightly gritty look more effective than the softness Franco Zeffirelli brought to the lesser 1979 remake.

***½ "

Cast :

"Champ".....Wallace Beery
Dink.....Jackie Cooper
Linda.....Irene Rich
Sponge.....Roscoe Ates
Tim.....Edward Brophy
Tony.....Hale Hamilton
Jonah.....Jessie Scott
Mary Lou.....Marcia Mae Jones

[no listing in "50 Years of the Movies", "The Movie Book – a Comprehensive, Authoritative, Omnibus Volume on Motion Pictures and the Cinema World", "The Movie Book – an Illustrated History of the Cinema", "The Movies – The Sixty-Year Story of the World of Hollywood from the Nickelodeon Days to the Present", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide" or "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995"]

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Cooper:

"His name has been variously rendered as (1) John Cooper Junior (2) John Cooperman Junior, and (3) James Bigelow. His father, at any rate – who left home when Jackie was two – acted in silent film comedies as Jack Cooper; his mother, Mabel Bigelow, was a professional pianist, later a secretary at 20th Century Fox; and his uncle was the prolific director Norman Taurog. So there was no lack of screen pedigree.

Taurog, who had himself been a boy actor, was busy around 1925 directing Lloyd Hamilton's two-reel comedies, and cast his characterful

nephew in some of them, billing him (this does not get easier) as Leonard Cooper. Jackie – as we shall continue to call him – also appeared with the comedian Bobby Clark.

In 1929 he graduated to feature films (not his uncle's) and also became a leading member of **"Our Gang"**, with whom he remained till 1931 and his break into the big time with **"SKIPPY"** and its sequel, **"SOOKY"**. Both were directed by Taurog, and both also featured Jackie Coogan's kid brother Robert. Between them came **"THE CHAMP"**, directed by King Vidor.

"SKIPPY", which won Cooper an Academy Award nomination, was a huge popular hit, and until the mid-Thirties he was big box office – in fact he and Shirley Temple were to be the screen's last child superstars. No later child has approached their universal acclaim.

Unlike Temple, Cooper had neither beauty of face nor of voice. He achieved what he did solely through personality and talent. His tough, vehement ten-year old manner was endearingly comic, and when he jerked the tears (as he was doing even, now and then, with **"Our Gang"**) he did so with genuine pathos and a certain tact – not the maudlin barnstorming which Rooney would sometimes lay on. With an "Aw, gee.." the defiant face would begin to melt, the lower lip stick out still further¹, and he would weep like a man. The world wept with him.

His four-time partnership with Wallace Beery (from **"THE CHAMP"** to **"TREASURE ISLAND"** and **"O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BOY"**) was an inspired pairing of rough diamonds – often, as in **"THE BOWERY"**, almost like a married relationship, with tantrums, jealousies, stormings-out and tearful reconciliations. (There are even "infidelities": on one occasion Jackie storms out and shacks up with George Raft instead.) When disreputable Beery totters home after a late night out, Cooper the homemaker is virtually waiting behind the door with a frying pan poised. It's a funny and tender parody of the real thing, though to imply it's *not* real is to underestimate it.

By 1936 Cooper was becoming too big to be cute, but his popularity lasted through the Thirties, with characteristic leads in **"BOY OF THE STREETS"** (37), **"GANGSTER'S BOY"** (38) and the serial **"SCOUTS TO THE**

¹ if humanly possible

RESCUE" (39). Also in 1939 he played Henry Aldrich in **"WHAT A LIFE"**, when Clifford Goldsmith's successful Broadway play was filmed, and again in **"LIFE WITH HENRY"** in 1941. Thereafter, Jimmy Lydon took over the role for the nine remaining **"Henry Aldrich"** movies.

In the late Forties, having returned from the war, Jackie was reunited with both Coogan brothers in the dismal comedies **"KILROY WAS HERE"** and **"FRENCH LEAVE"**. These depressed him so much that for a decade or so he devoted himself to the stage, including a nationwide tour with Mr Roberts. Then in

1955 he got the chance to direct and star in a TV sitcom called **"The People's Choice"** (sharing the limelight with a "talking" basset-hound called Cleo). It ran for three years, and he followed it up with **"Hennessy"** (a further three years) in which he was a Navy doctor.

He directed his first feature film, **"STAND UP AND BE COUNTED"**, in 1972, and occasionally appears as an actor in the cinema - for instance in **"CHOSEN SURVIVORS"** (74) and the **"SUPERMAN"** films - or on TV. Jackie Cooper is still very much in the business."

Boxing films are all hooey, so one can't hold that against **"THE CHAMP"**, which was MGM's Christmas release for 1931. By all accounts it's less about boxing, in any case, than about masculine camaraderie and loyalty. Beery and Cooper in this instance are blood relations, but they might just as well not have been, the story works on the same level as a big buddy/little buddy weepie like **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"**, another saga of devotion and adversity in a resolutely male environment.

Interest is piqued by the suggestion that MGM may have commissioned this, not as a vehicle for Wallace Beery, but for their rising golden calf Cooper, lately graced with an honorary Academy Award for **"SKIPPY"**. Cooper has remarked in interview that Beery was fairly offhand with him when the cameras weren't turning, and if it's true that the veteran bruiser found himself playing second fiddle to an ex-**Our Ganger** one can understand his indignation. That the critics heaped more praise on Cooper than on him would have smarted further. Yet not only did the studio persist in pairing the two off like Tracy and Hepburn, Beery found himself saddled sooner or later with every MGM child star that came along, from Margaret O'Brien to Dean Stockwell. It can't have sat very well with his perception of himself as essentially an affable heavy.

Major stars of the 1930s like Cooper, Rooney or James Cagney are often surprisingly modest and self-effacing about their own abilities. Cooper insists he was never a very motivated actor, and he finds the flaws in his child performances all too visible, but *Variety* are not given to idle praises, and audiences were clearly captivated by the pugnacious tyke. **"THE BOWERY"** and **"TREASURE ISLAND"** are still televised intermittently, but never **"SKIPPY"** or this film, which was possibly his best boy role. As with Rooney, the studio tried to retard his adolescence by casting him in a string of boyish roles long after he'd outgrown them, and military service probably didn't come a moment too soon for a needful sabbatical from the screen. I confess I've never been taken with Cooper's charms myself. The prodigious bottom lip and the ready scowl seem too mechanical, and his weeping too vaudevillean. The homely ragamuffin look chimed best with Depression audiences, I suspect.

"THE CLOWN" has been indicated (to excess) above, but other rehashes of this basic story would have to include **"O'SHAUGHNESSY'S BOY"** with Cooper and Beery, **"STABLEMATES"** (38) with Mickey Rooney and Beery, and **"THE MIGHTY McGURK"** with Dean Stockwell and Beery.

See also the 1979 remake with Ricky Schroder, and subject index under **DADDY'S BOYS, DIVORCE / CUSTODY BATTLES, MARTIAL ARTS / BOXING** and **OSCAR-WINNERS / AWARD-WINNERS**.