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Oscars flashback: 20 years ago the director race was fierce





Clint Eastwood was in good company when he won the best director Oscar for “Million Dollar Baby” in 2005. (Kevork Djansezian / Associated Press)

By Randee Dawn

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The big guns come out late in any Academy Awards broadcast — and the 77th Oscars, held on Feb. 27, 2005, at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles — was no different. Except on this night, there was fierce competition between (and a lot of speculation about) the five best director nominees.

Would it be Clint Eastwood for “Million Dollar Baby,” which had already won for lead actress (Hilary Swank) and supporting actor (Morgan Freeman), and which would go on to win best picture shortly after this award? Would Martin Scorsese (“The Aviator”) finally earn his first Oscar? Could it be Taylor Hackford, who had directed Jamie Foxx into a lead actor award? And what about the indie spoilers, Alexander Payne (“Sideways”) and Mike Leigh (“Vera Drake”)?

And then Julia Roberts made the winner clear: The award would go to Clint Eastwood.

Worth every penny

By winning his second directing Oscar, Eastwood became the oldest winner in the category in the awards show's history; he was 74 at the time. Despite his many nominations over the years, he's never won for his acting — only for producing best pictures (“Unforgiven” in 1993, and shortly after this award, for “Baby”), and directing (also “Unforgiven”).

After presenter Roberts read out his name, it was heartening to see “Million” co-star Freeman give Eastwood a squeeze on the shoulder. Eastwood gave his then-wife Dina Ruiz a kiss and headed to the stage, where Roberts wiped Ruiz's lipstick from the Oscar winner's mouth with a finger.



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After thanking Ruiz “who is my best pal” (they would divorce in 2014), he acknowledged his mother — who was in the audience, noting that she was also with him for “Unforgiven's” Oscar run in 1993. “She was only 84 then. But she's here with me again tonight. So at 96, I'm thanking her for her genes,” he said. (Margaret Ruth Wood, who sat in the row behind Clint, would die the following year.)

He added that making “Million” was “a wonderful adventure. To make a picture in 37 days it takes a well-oiled machine.” He thanked the cast and crew, and even gave a shoutout to Warren Beatty. “I'm just lucky to be here,” he said. “Lucky to be still working. And I watched Sidney Lumet out there, who is 80, and I figure, I'm just a kid. I've got a lot of stuff to do yet.”

Not yet, guys

The remaining nominees were all veterans of Hollywood, but none had yet received an Oscar for directing. The lack of a win was underscored most heavily with Scorsese, who despite having 16 nominations over the years, had never won an Oscar for anything. By not winning this year, he joined Robert Altman, Clarence Brown, Alfred Hitchcock and King Vidor as the most-nominated people in the directing category without a win.

Fortunately, two years later he would win his first — and still only — Oscar for directing “The Departed.”

Meanwhile, Hackford did already have one Oscar — for his live-action short “Teenage Father” in 1979. His other two nominations (picture and director) were for “Ray,” but he lost both this night. Alexander Payne has never won in this category but does have two wins — both for adapted screenplay for “Sideways” (shared with Jim Taylor); and 2012’s “The Descendants” (shared with Taylor and Jim Burke). As for Mike Leigh, he has seven nominations in writing and directing categories — but no wins. He was the only non-American director to be nominated this year.

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