

[00:00:00]

**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

**Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. Dolph Lundgren, my first guest this week, stumbled his way into acting. Or I guess, if I'm being more descriptive, he kicked, punched, and roundhoused his way into acting. He was born and raised in Sweden, came to the United States on a student visa to study engineering. He was athletic, particularly gifted in martial arts and karate. He is also a handsome, gigantic, steel-eyed, sort of muscle man from space. So, it was easy for him to find under the table work in New York. He modeled. He worked the doors at nightclubs. He was a bodyguard. His first acting part was a non-speaking role in *A View to Kill*, a James Bond movie. He was a henchman, alongside his girlfriend at the time, Grace Jones. Yes, Grace Jones. We will get into that, I promise.

Then, shortly after the Bond movie, Dolph Lundgren was in *Rocky IV*. He was the bad guy. The Russian super fighter, Ivan Drago.

**Transition:** Music swells in the fades.

**Clip:**

**Music:** Ominous, orchestral action movie music.

**Announcer (*Rocky IV*):** What started out as a joke has turned out to be a disaster.

**Reporter:** Creed appears to be in very serious condition.

**Bystander:** Is the man alive? Is the man alive?!

**Rocky:** You can make it. You can make it, boss.

**Ivan:** If he dies, he dies.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** The rest is action movie history. Lundgren played giant, steel-eyed, handsome monster after giant, steel-eyed, handsome monster, one after another after another. Lately, he's had a bit of a renaissance. You might have seen him in the *Expendables* movies or in *Aquaman*. Maybe you heard him in one of the *Minions* movies.

This year, Lundgren directed and starred in *Wanted Man*, an action movie about a border town police officer who takes one last job escorting some witnesses into the United States. It seems like an easy gig, but this is a Dolph Lundgren movie. It leads immediately to kicks, punches, and shootouts.

I did want to give a heads up before we get into this interview: Dolph grew up a victim of parental abuse. It's something he's talked about before. We'll discuss it here too—nothing especially graphic, but the topic does come up. I'm excited to welcome Dolph Lundgren onto the show. Let's get into it.

**Transition:** Buzzy lo-fi synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** Dolph Lundgren, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

**Dolph Lundgren:** Thank you. Pleasure.

**Jesse Thorn:** I heard that this most recent film is something that you rewrote. It was something that you had had for a while and rewrote relatively recently. And one of the things that you changed about the script when you rewrote it was that you made your protagonist a more—let's say a more complicated character than he had been. Which is to say that he starts out this film as a real racist jerk.

*(They chuckle.)*

Why did you do that?

**Dolph Lundgren:** I just wanted to have more of a challenge as an actor. And I thought, you know—since the movies about immigration, I thought—you know, I was actually at a party. I was at a pool party, and there was a guy there. You know, he was a kind of an acquaintance of ours, and he had a few too many tequila shots, and he started going off on immigration. And about the immigration policies. And I'd had the script at the time, kind of tinkering with the script. And I thought, well, maybe if the protagonist has this sort of preconceived notion about immigration and immigrants because of his job and because of his friends and, you know, the environment he lives in, then it makes it more interesting to see how he's going to react to what happens to him than if it's just a guy who is—you know, who doesn't change and who just stays the same through the whole picture.

**Jesse Thorn:** I imagine that when you came to the United States, it was on an educational visa of some kind?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, I came in. First time I was here on like I think it was a J1 student visa. I came as a chemistry student the first time, and then I came back doing some research in chemical engineering, and then I came back again, you know, in chemical engineering to do as a Fulbright scholarship when I was about 23/24.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you ever think about how your life would have been different if your immigration circumstances had been different?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, I mean—you mean as if I would have come from a different type of country you're talking about? Or—?

[00:05:00]

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, or had a different opportunity. If you had not had the opportunity to come to the United States legally?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah. When I came kind of on a student visa, and I came to study chemical engineering, but I knew sort of on a deep level that I wanted to do something else. I didn't know what that was, but I knew I wanted to be in America since I was about—I'd say about 13/14. I just had this attraction to this country. I came over when I was 18 the first time, and I came back again when I was about 22/23. Yeah, I think that, you know, the movie you mentioned is about immigration, and I understand people that want to come here. And I understand, you know, that in some other countries—you know, I'm from Northern Europe, but there are other countries where it's more difficult to come to America unless you have a—you know, unless you're privileged, or you know the right people.

**Jesse Thorn:** What did you imagine America to be when you were a 13-year-old?

**Dolph Lundgren:** I just imagined it to have a lot of energy and be exciting and be a place where, you know, you could be a new person. Which kind of—I experienced that when I came over when I was 18. You know, the first thing I experienced was—you know, I think I had a layover in Seattle. I was going to a small place called Pullman, which is an interior of Washington State prairie country. And I had a couple of hours off in Seattle to change flights. This is 1976, so air travel was still kind of special and unusual. Anyway, some university professor walked me around, took me to get some pancakes or breakfast or something in his car. And I remember seeing all of these used car lots, and there were vehicles everywhere, and Boeing. We went by the Boeing factory, and it was felt like a country full of energy, and it was a dynamic country that I wanted to be part of.

**Jesse Thorn:** When did you start studying?

**Dolph Lundgren:** You know, when I was younger—like nine or ten—I had very good grades. And my dad was a civil engineer, and my older brother was a chemical engineer. So, I had it kind of from our home. I knew that—you know, my dad would sit around and do calculus with my older brother, and I would listen in, and I'd copy the various, you know, formulas. I didn't know what it was, but I got involved in math kind of young. And so, I was good at school up till about 10, and then because of the abuse, I started kind of losing my focus, and then I lost it for a few years. But when I came up north, it took me about a year to start back into studying and becoming interested in the natural sciences and, you know, chemistry, physics, and math.

**Jesse Thorn:** Were you trying to prove something?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Oh, for sure, yeah. I think I was trying to prove something to my dad on a deep level. You know, that I was, you know, as smart as he was. And you know, on an even

deeper level, he always had spoken about MIT. That was his favorite school in America, and that's where all the best scientists were. And I ended up getting a scholarship there many years later. So, I did have that sort of path in my head that I was going to excel in academia, you know, to sort of prove to him that I wasn't useless as he would—sometimes if he got upset, he would beat me, and he would tell me how useless I was, and I was never going to become anything.

And you know—and of course those—you know, when you tell a kid that, when you're a kid, it into you on a very deep level. You know. So, I'm still struggling with it a little bit, you know, but it's also given me ambition in life. So, I think he—you know, even though he didn't mean it, he helped me in some ways too.

**Jesse Thorn:** We have to go for a quick break. When we return, even more with Dolph Lundgren. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Dolph Lundgren. He is—(chuckles) well, he is Dolph Lundgren! The steely muscle man, Ivan Drago from *Rocky IV*, Gunner from *The Expendables*, He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*.

[00:10:00]

Earlier this year, he wrote, directed, and starred in the action crime film *Wanted Man*, which is available to rent and stream now. Let's get into the rest of my conversation with Dolph Lundgren.

When did you get serious about martial arts and your body?

**Dolph Lundgren:** You know, when I was about 10 or 11, you know, I already had kind of a problem with my self-confidence, because of my dad and having been beaten. But I mean, the beatings kind of stopped to some degree I think by the time I was about 12 or 13, because you're getting, you know, bigger. You're turning into a young man, soon to be, rather than a kid that you can beat up. But I mean, when you beat up a child, a boy who's 12 or 13, it's a bit different. It becomes, you know, more of an assault than just, you know, spanking a child. So, at some point in there, I think the beatings stopped. And I immediately became interested in physical culture. And I—

There is a Swedish version of Charles Atlas. And you know, was the famous Atlas kick—the bully kicks sand in the weakling's face on the beach, and then he buys the course, and then he trains, and he beats up the bully a few years later. So, there is a Swedish version of that. I purchased those letters that would come in the mail, like a little booklet every couple of weeks. And I would train doing that like when I was about 12 or 13. And then when I came up to the northern part of Sweden and got away from my dad, a friend of mine one day came—had bought a book called *Karate*. And it was about martial arts. And there was guys in there who were, you know, in karate uniforms but also with no shirt or with muscles,

breaking wood, hitting heavy bags, lifting weights. And I thought, woah, this looks pretty good. I want to do something like that.

**Jesse Thorn:** When you moved to New York, it was sort of in an interregnum between your chemical engineering career and what was going to be a Fulbright scholarship at MIT. And correct me if I'm wrong; this was like a six-month period that you had planned. It was like a summer break type situation, and you ended up falling into a world that was very different from the University of Sydney, where you'd been studying chemical engineering.

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yes, you're right. It was a complete 180. But what happened was I was in Sydney, and I did some security work on the side with some karate guys I knew, because I wasn't making much money. I was in a student scholarship, so I couldn't work. But I could work for cash. You know, concert security was cash work, so I could do that. I was working a few concerts, and one was Grace Jones, who was a kind of famous singer at the time from the disco era. And then she left town, and then I was back to fighting and studying. And then I went to Tokyo to train at the main dojo, and she was in Tokyo doing a commercial for Honda, and then we met again. And I ended up going to New York.

I had six months off, and I was gonna start MIT in my Fulbright scholarship that fall. So, I came to New York, and this was 1982. Studio 54 had reopened. Steven Rubell had been in jail. And now they were at it again. And I ended up hanging out with Grace. And she—you know, her life was kind of like—it ended up being a lot of times sleeping until 4PM and getting up, to some diner for breakfast around eight or nine, and then staying up all night. And I ended up living that life with her, you know, even though I was training as well and boxing and doing other things. But I was in pretty good shape. So, I met Andy Warhol and David Bowie and Michael Jackson bunch of people and—you know. (*Laughs.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, Dolph, I watched a documentary about Grace Jones that came out a few years ago, and here she is in Jamaica with her family.

[00:15:00]

And you know, like you, she's a literal senior citizen at this point in her life. You know, she's in her—this movie, she's in maybe her mid-60s or something like that. And she is in the most human circumstances she could possibly be in, right? She's in Jamaica. She's with her family members, you know, her siblings and stuff. Like, it is the most normal place she could ever be. And still, in that world, she seemed like she had beamed down from another planet. Like, an incredible other planet. (*Chuckling.*) Like, another planet that you would really want to visit.

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, you're right! No, she is an incredible person. She is just one of a kind. Like I say—I've said this before, you could go into a celebrity restaurant or the Oscars, anywhere where the biggest stars of the world are, and if Grace shows up, guess who everybody's gonna look at?

**Jesse Thorn:** That must have been a weird sort of thing to fall into, you know?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, it was strange for me. And what was stranger was that I started to realize that people were kind of checking me out, wondering like who's this guy? Like, what's he doing here? You know, and I don't know, maybe I sucked up some of the energy from her. I don't know. But I started getting interested in the creative world. And I actually went to a couple acting classes, because she was studying. She was going to be in the new Bond movie with Roger Moore and Chris Walken, and she was studying with his coach, Warren Robertson, who was like a big deal in New York. And I went to a couple of his classes, and I did some scenes there. Or whatever it was. Some improvs on stage. And I got very emotional, you know. I get—

He was very smart, Warren. He saw—he kind of knew what had happened to me without asking me. And I felt that, wow, it makes me feel good, kind of, to be in this space and explore these things. And at some point he told me, “You know, maybe you're a frustrated artist. Maybe that's—you know, maybe you should think about, you know, being in the arts.” And of course, when I was very young, I painted a lot, and I played music, and things like that—before the whole thing with my dad got out of hand. But you know, I think meeting him and then meeting Grace and all the people that she was around—you know, some amazing artists. And a lot of them aren't with us anymore, because a lot of them died from AIDS and HIV in those days, you know. Unfortunately, you know. But it was a fantastic time in Manhattan, really.

**Jesse Thorn:** Your first big part—you had a small part in the Roger Moore James Bond movie that Grace Jones was in, but you had your first big part in *Rocky IV*. Which, you know, still might be the biggest part of your career. And this is sort of from Rocky's revenge scene, and it starts with the announcers talking about the final showdown that's going to happen.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Clip:**

*(Other announcers translate in the background.)*

**Announcer:** The Russian towers above the American. It is a true case of David and Goliath here. It's unbelievable the condition of both men—

**Ivan Drago:** I must break you.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** *(Chuckling.)* And like, one of the things about this movie is Sylvester Stallone at the time—and at many points during his career—was a huge muscle man. But you're a lot taller than him. You're very tall. And he's not especially tall. He's sort of medium-sized. *(Chuckles.)* And the physical contrast is like unbelievable! And you know, usually if a movie star like Sylvester Stallone is in a movie and he's going to be standing toe to toe with a bad guy, they're not going to cast a bad guy that's, you know, eight inches or a foot taller than he is. You know what I mean?

**Dolph Lundgren:** You're right, and that was very clever from him. Because you know, when I first went up for that role in New York, there was a cattle call of hundreds of people. And I came up to this table, and there was a woman there. And she says, "Okay, what's your name? How tall are you?"

And I'm like, "6'4" or whatever I said, 6'5"."

And she goes, "Too tall. Next." So later, when Sly met me—you know, he had originally thought that, you know, the character should not be that tall. And he should not look like a superhero or Superman.

[00:20:00]

He should look kind of like a, you know, hairy ape or something like, you know, more brutal. And then he changed his mind, he said, when he met me. And a lot of times during the shoot, I was wearing lifts in my shoes. And also, sometimes he put me on a box, because he realized that the more he builds up the adversary, the more people are gonna think he's gonna lose, and the better it is for the outcome of the fight. It makes him look better, actually, at the end. So, you're right, it was—you know, it was very clever by him to do that.

**Jesse Thorn:** Some of the things that you have to do to your body to be a movie star who is famous for their muscular body are not healthy things. Not just—you know, I know that you used steroids sometimes in the '80s and '90s, but also things like intentionally dehydrating yourself.

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, I did a lot of crazy stuff to look good for—you know, to take my shirt off. And you know, I was always dehydrating for important scenes. So, that means you don't drink water for about two days. You drink Diet Coke or coffee and eat mostly protein, no carbs. And now your body starts shredding water. And then that dries up your joints as well as your organs. So obviously, if you're doing big action scenes on top of that, you're putting a lot of strain on your body. So, it wasn't healthy at all. And you know, with the superhero movies, actors end up wearing muscle suits, and they're not—there are a few actors that have the real muscles these days, but not as many as back in those days. I think in those days, Arnold and Sly, people like that, myself—you know, you had to keep that really hard regimen to be able to deliver.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll be back in just a second. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Playful, quirky music.

**John-Luke Roberts:** *Sound Heap with John-Luke Roberts* is a real podcast made up of fake podcasts, like *If You Had a Cupboard in Your Lower Back, What Would You Keep in It?*

**Speaker 1:** So, I'm gonna say mugs.

**Speaker 2:** A little yogurt and a spoon.

**Speaker 3:** A small handkerchief that was given to me by my grandmother on her deathbed.

**Speaker 4:** Maybe some spare honey?

**Speaker 5:** (*Seriously.*) I'd keep batteries in it. I'd pretend to be a toy.

**Speaker 6:** If I had a cupboard in my lower back, I'd probably fill it with spines.

**John-Luke Roberts:** *If You Had a Cupboard in Your Lower Back, What Would You Keep in It?* doesn't exist. We made it up for *Sound Heap with John-Luke Roberts*, an award-winning comedy podcast from Maximum Fun made up of hundreds of stupid podcasts. Listen and subscribe to *Sound Heap with John-Luke Roberts*, now!

(*Music ends.*)

**Transition:** Thumpy rock music.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is actor and martial artist Dolph Lundgren.

When you were at the height of your acting career, you drank a lot and were absent from your family a lot. I heard you say that you apologized to your children. What led you there?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, I was in Spain. I got married, and my wife hated LA. Didn't want to be here. We ended up moving to New York, then to London, and then finally to Spain. This is like when I was like 40 years old. So, it's kind of like at the top of my game, I would say, as an actor and as a man, right? Physically, my strength and so forth. And I up having a family and living in Spain for about 15 years, which was great for the family, and I had a good time. But I was never really happy, because I knew I wasn't really getting as much out of my career as I wanted to get, so I ended up drinking too much and having affairs.

And part of it was the situation I was in. And part of it was, as I learned later, is called escape behavior. So, if you have a trauma—say, if you're a frontline soldier or if you've been abused—you're trying to escape that, right? And escape could be alcohol, it could be drugs, it could be sexual affairs, it can be violence, but you can't escape really, because it's inside you. So, you know, there's no way out. You're trying to escape that feeling. So, when I came back, started moving back to America, because to—for financial reasons and for career reasons, I started doing therapy here in LA. And I realized that—suddenly it all came back to me.

[00:25:00]

You know, my dad, what had happened to me. I started connecting the dots in my life. Why have I done all this? Why am I here? What happened to me? Why did I become a fighter?



Why am I drinking too much? Why did I get divorced? And then once I felt more comfortable with it myself and it wasn't really running my life anymore, the trauma wasn't running—I wasn't just reacting off of things, then I went back to Spain. And I apologized to my wife and my kids too, you know. And I remember, I said—I had only said half the sentence, and then I started crying. So, I knew that it was the right thing to do.

**Jesse Thorn:** It must have been a scary thing to do.

**Dolph Lundgren:** It was scary. But I just wanted them to know that I was sorry for what I'd done, some of the things. And that also I wanted them to know that you can change, that you can—that nobody's perfect, and because I'm their dad doesn't mean I'm perfect. But it also means that I can recognize that. I can apologize, you know.

**Jesse Thorn:** You've had some serious incidences of cancer. You're in remission right now.

*(He confirms.)*

Do you think that the fact that you had gone through this process and were in this process of learning to live with yourself changed how you responded when you found out that you could die?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Yeah, for sure. I mean, I was closer to myself already. And it was almost like that became an extension of my treatment, became, “Okay, now I have cancer. So, did I get this because I deserve it? Is it my fault?” I mean, those were thoughts that would hit me, because that's—I had already been blaming myself because of my dad and so forth. I'd already—I was close to putting myself down all the time. And I think dealing with the cancer and dealing with the treatment and realizing that everybody can get it, and you know, no matter what you've done to yourself or not done to yourself. And that I had to just—it was another fight. It was another fight like fighting my trauma or becoming a martial arts champion. It was just something I had to really dedicate myself to.

But yeah, you're right. I think that it was in the cards all along somehow. *(Chuckling.)* I was going to have to go through—it wasn't over because I did therapy and apologized to my kids. That wasn't the end of it.

**Jesse Thorn:** Before we go, can I ask you about something dumb?

**Dolph Lundgren:** Sure.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you know this scene from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* that I'm about to play for you?

*(Dolph affirms.)*

Okay, so *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* is one of my favorite shows, and this is two of the characters brainstorming movie ideas.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Clip:**

**Mac** (*It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*): Who is the most underrated actor of all time?

**Charlie:** It's Dolph Lundgren.

**Mac:** Correct. Why?

**Charlie:** Well, because of his spiky hair and his ice-cold demeanor and his big muscles.

**Mac:** Yep. Absolutely. Okay, alright. Alright, so we have our actor. Okay, that's great. Now we need a really great role for him.

**Charlie:** Oh, you know what I was thinking? Scientists are cool. What if he's a scientist?

**Mac:** (*Thoughtfully.*) Okay...

**Charlie:** He's wearing like a hot, mesh tank top.

**Mac:** I like that. Now does he like fight crime or something?

**Charlie:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. He fights crime with his brain and his brawn—dude!

**Mac:** Yeah?

**Charlie:** What if this scientist runs around on all fours?

**Mac:** Why would he run on all fours?

**Charlie:** It's a science experiment with a dog that goes absolutely haywire. Suddenly he wakes up with the ability to run around like a hound. You know?

**Mac:** We're not making the lead of our big-budget action movie half dog!

**Charlie:** No, he's not half dog, he's all dog.

**Transition:** Music swells then fades.

**Jesse Thorn:** (*They laugh.*) I don't know. What do you think?

**Dolph Lundgren:** I like it! I like the reasoning. Uh, why not? I mean, you know, it sounds like a hell of a comeback. (*Chuckles.*)

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I mean—look, I don't mean to be rude, but I don't think you're going to be able to do this when you're 75.

**Dolph Lundgren:** No, no. I better do it now.

**Jesse Thorn:** But I think you've still got it in you right now.

**Dolph Lundgren:** I think so. Yeah, I could do that. I could just get some knee pads, you know. And yeah, I think I can do it. Um, no, it's funny. But I just wanted to say, a lot of stuff you asked about, you know, there's a documentary that I've been shooting for a couple of years, so—and it's gonna come out this year sometime. So, it's interesting.

[00:30:00]

The interview is kind of moving around all those areas that the documentary is about.

**Jesse Thorn:** Including the dog thing?

**Dolph Lundgren:** The dog thing, I'm gonna add that now. I'm gonna add it. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Did that come up in the documentary? Okay, put that in!

**Dolph Lundgren:** I love it!

**Jesse Thorn:** Because if the cut is not locked, you're gonna want some dog stuff in there.

**Dolph Lundgren:** I love it. It's funny. Thanks, man.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, Dolph Lundgren, I sure appreciate you taking the time to talk to me, and it was really nice to get to do it.

**Dolph Lundgren:** Thanks, man. Yeah.

**Jesse Thorn:** Dolph Lundgren. His new movie, *Wanted Man*, is available to rent and stream now.

**Transition:** Dreamy synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye*, created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, my new dog, Junior, just ate a canceled check.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Roby. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. Our theme song is “Huddle Formation” by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team, thanks to their label Memphis Industries. *Bullseye* is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We hope you will follow us there. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*