

## Film

*Cobb* (1995), Dir. Ron Shelton, starring Tommy Lee Jones, Robert Wuhl, and Lolita Davidovich, a Warner Brothers film.

Hal Erickson, in his book *Baseball in the Movies*, writes that the major problem in capturing baseball on film is that there is little real inherent drama in baseball. Film narrative needs a clear dramatic thread, rising action and a concise climax summarized in an obligatory moment. But baseball consists of many small stories and conflicts waged between players and teams; so many, in fact, that film cannot hope to capture even a fraction of the complexity of the game. So filmmakers reduce baseball to "the big moment": it is the ninth inning home run at the climax of *The Natural*, the big strikeout against the home run slugger in *Little Big League*, the surprise game-winning bunt by the wounded catcher in *Major League*. These moments are dramatic confrontations that even non-baseball-fan audiences can recognize and enjoy, but they give the game of subtle tensions a false sense of immediacy and closure.

The same can be said of the 1995 film, *Cobb*. Its director and writer, Ron Shelton, has previous experience with sports films, having written and directed the popular 1988 film, *Bull Durham*, and written the less successful *Blue Chips* in 1994. *Cobb*, based on the book by Al Stump, *Cobb: The Life and Times of the Meanest Man Who Ever Played Baseball*, takes an overly dark, negative view of the man many claim was the greatest ballplayer in the history of the game.

For Ty Cobb, baseball was a war of attrition. His aggressive style of play and relentless mind games wore teams out; spiking a baseman was intimidation, a warning to others that Cobb played to win with an intensity second to none. Ron Shelton's film about the last weeks of Cobb's life amplifies his aggression but fails to bring his competitive intensity to the screen.

The fact that there is so little baseball in the film is a disappointment. We see none of the greatness that made Cobb one of the top gate attractions in early twentieth-century baseball, and what we do see casts Cobb in the worst possible light. There is no mention of his methodical work ethic or his scientific approach to the finer points of the game; instead, most of the footage shows the singular cliché of Cobb's life—his gamesmanship confrontational base-running style. In an opening sequence, Cobb barrels over a first baseman, upends a third baseman with a hard slide, and gets into a pushing match. Later, an abrasive Cobb insults one of his own teammates, berates the umpire, and embarrasses a catcher by pulling a pair of lady's underpants out of his back pocket and proclaiming, "Here, you'd better give these back to your wife. She left them in the back seat of my car last night." He then exchanges rough words with the pitcher, gets into another shoving fight with the second baseman, and finishes the time-at-bat by stealing home with a leaping slide that spikes the catcher in the chest.

If Cobb was a hostile, almost vicious player at times, he was also a great competitor whom players and knowledgeable baseball fans all over the league

respected. Cobb did not invent the “inside” game, as the film suggests (John McGraw and the Baltimore Oriole clubs of the late 1890s did that). but his knowledge and practice of that style of play made him a legend. His aggression and competitiveness spoke to a great many men of the era and translated well into the world of business and politics; he made a fortune in the stock market (especially with a then unknown commodity called Coca-Cola), and played poker with presidents and state governors. He listed General Douglas MacArthur and Ernest Hemingway among his close personal friends. Cobb was a paradox, a remarkably complex and ambiguous man whom the film reduces to a flat, one-dimensional figure.

Cobb was seventy-three and dying of prostate cancer when he first met Al Stump. While he was combative, prone to throwing whiskey bottles and salt shakers, and always carried a Luger for self-protection, he was also dissipated and unable to walk without help, let alone to physically intimidate people. Shelton takes Stump’s portrait of a lonely, frightened, deeply suffering human being and turns it into a simplistic image of an emotional victim traumatized by a tragic childhood incident. But this is only Hollywood’s version of the psychological “big moment.”

Shelton takes dramatic license with the facts of Cobb’s life and his association with Stump. The entire first meeting between Al Stump and Cobb is fictitious: Stump arrives at the Lake Tahoe retreat to discover Cobb, in a fury, dismissing a black cook, barking orders to a stockbroker, and shooting up the interior of the lodge. In fact, Stump had known Cobb for well over a year before traveling with him to Tahoe to work on Cobb’s autobiography. In a later scene, Cobb shoots and shatters a glass next to the typewriter where Stump is working. This act of intimidation shows a Cobb who is robust and trigger-happy, an image amplified by a following scene in Reno where Cobb forces a woman to strip and assume a humiliating sexual position at gunpoint. Unable to perform, he gives her one thousand dollars and threatens to kill her unless she agrees to tell people he was the greatest lover she had ever known.

There is no record in Stump’s book, or any other source, that any of these events took place. Once again, Shelton overstates his point. This approach is simpler than dealing with the facts, and it was probably assumed by the filmmakers that mainstream audiences would not want to see a real picture of an aging athlete dying of cancer. Such a portrait would carry too much ambiguity, remind viewers that bodies grow old and decay, and that Cobb’s real anger might be the honest rage of any individual past his or her prime and long forgotten. By making Cobb such an overt sociopath, Shelton sets up the audience for a series of “big moments” to gain sympathy for the central character.

The film’s climax is a confrontation between Stump and Cobb, first in the family mausoleum in Royston, Georgia, then later in a local motel room. Cobb reveals that his father was shot to death by his mother when he was a boy, not as an accident but in a murder perpetrated by Mrs. Cobb and her lover to cover their indiscretion. This “big moment” allows us to understand the force that has driven

Cobb all these years to emotional self-destruction. This scene is followed by another in a motel room where an almost sympathetic Cobb discovers Stump's hidden notes concerning the real facts of Cobb's life. Cobb rages at this perceived betrayal, but his rapidly deteriorating physical condition places it all in perspective, and he has himself committed to Emory Hospital in Atlanta. Here, Cobb forgives Stump and gives him permission to publish the truth, but in a decision that recalls an old Hollywood axiom—"When there is a conflict between the truth and the legend, always print the legend"—Stump publishes the heroic version of Cobb's life.

The problematic ideology and sentiment aside, once again, these scenes are fictional. In Stump's book, Cobb tells the reporter about the accidental death in the family mausoleum, but Stump tells us Cobb never again spoke of the incident and to his death steadfastly refused to believe the rumors concerning a lover with murderous intent. Nor was Cobb a boy; he was eighteen when the event took place in 1905 and playing minor league ball in Augusta. But changing the facts lends the character a more dramatically sympathetic air.

The same can be said about the motel scene. In truth, Stump and Cobb fought continually over the contents of the autobiography, but Stump did not keep a secret cache of notes to be discovered by Cobb. The book, entitled, *My Life in Baseball*, by Ty Cobb, was finished in California, and Stump said his final farewells in May of 1961. Cobb went to Atlanta and checked into the Emory Hospital where he remained until his death on July 17. There was no final confrontation over Cobb's death bed, nor did Cobb ever have any suspicions that 33 years later Stump would publish his final words on the story.

*Cobb* is a nicely made film with some very fine performances, but it is a major disappointment as a biography. And while it is not a baseball film in the usual sense, it disappoints those who know baseball because it takes a man whose life was as subtle and complex as the game he dominated and reduces him to a few "big moments."

Penn State University

Patrick Trimble