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# Sports Films and Hall of Fame Museums: An Editorial Introduction

*By S. W. Pope*

Douglas Booth's essay on surfing films is the first in a series of genre reviews that will explore how our understanding of sport is shaped by contemporary cinema. Although scholars have recently become interested in the contribution of film in illuminating sport in society, we are still a long way away from any consensus on how to evaluate the nature of that contribution. Hopefully, this essay and future ones will stimulate a debate about how best to use this medium in our research, writing, and teaching.

The basic conventions of the sports genre were established early in cinematic history and have changed only slightly over time. Tom O'Brien characterizes the contours of the typical sports film storyline in the following way: an athlete struggles to make a name for himself or herself; achieves both initial victory and a defeat; makes a comeback (e.g., surprise knock-out, miracle touchdown, or game-winning home run); and throughout, family and friends exist as supports and stage props, maneuvered only to inspire the success of the story's protagonist. As O'Brien (and most recently, Patrick Trimble) concludes, such scenarios misrepresent sports by leading viewers to believe that the athletic experience merely comes down to "one big [defining] moment."

O'Brien's assessments need not be accepted as definitive. Sport scholars should scrutinize carefully the presence or absence of characteristic conventions and motifs as well as assess the ways sport films succeed or fail in the cohesion of form, structure, texture, style, and meaning. Scholars remain divided on the issues of cinematic historicity. Some maintain that only explicitly "historical" films are worthy of analysis. Others like Robert Rosenstone, one of the leading film historians and an editor of the *American Historical Review*, argues, "every film is 'historical' in the broadest sense—a visual record of the reflected surface of whatever portion of the world that existed in front of the camera at a particular moment in time." What makes a film "historical" according to him is "its willingness to engage the discourse of history—not necessarily literally—but by constructing a world in which images, sounds, and words combine to help the

viewer understand and feel, or at least gain insight into the meaning of events and movements of the past." And, as historian William Hughes contends, feature films do not just "reveal popular attitudes," they, like other forms of cultural expression, "reveal more than they intend."<sup>2</sup>

To elaborate briefly, film became part of a seamless whole that linked big-time, commercialized sport into one great entertainment enterprise during the 1980s and 1990s. In *Sport and Society*, sociologist Jay Coakley calls the relationship of sports, film, and television a "symbiosis," with the various parties fueling each other's revenues. Certainly basketball—a game in the midst of the most commercially successful phase of any sport in history—demonstrates how the game's hold on the popular imagination is reflected in the emergence of a cadre of successful films. Since the 1970s, filmmakers have moved away from silly, frivolous, stock scripts to ones that dramatize the complex, contradictory nature of the sport in contemporary society. As such, recent basketball films challenge sport scholars to situate contemporary issues into a historical framework Coakley, as a sociologist, poses intriguing questions for sport historians: how have sports films contributed to the intensified sports/media collaboration? How have they shaped attitudes toward sports and their relation to the rest of life? What do they teach about the perceived importance of winning? What do they tell us about the playing fields themselves, where much of the audience spends its leisure time? Why, as O'Brien ponders, has Hollywood been so conspicuously uneasy about tackling racial issues? Why, he asks, is there so little realism about sports and race on the screen, and "where are films that depict the dilemma of the young black athlete who doubts society will ever reward him [or her] for what he does with his mind?"<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the African American filmmaker Spike Lee is correct in maintaining that Hollywood cannot produce a realistic film about black sport. Certainly, such questions provide abundant issues for sport historians to address in their writing and teaching.

In this sense, genre film essays point to how the nature of film as an important historical and sociocultural artifact challenges sport historians to not only expand their research and writing methodologies, but also to incorporate such sources into classroom teaching and public history projects. An upcoming special issue of the *Journal of Sport History* entitled "The Practice of Sport History" (modeled after the December 1994 edition of the *Journal of American History*) will broach these and related themes in more elaborate form.

Sports halls of fame reside at the intersection of history and nostalgia. Like museums in general, sport scholars have been hesitant to take halls of fame seriously. In 1989, Roy Rosenzweig and Warren Leon edited the first critical, book-length assessment of historical museums in the United States. The book focuses on how public history exhibitions have only recently attempted to incorporate the new scholarship (particularly the burgeoning literature on social history) for their widely diverse audiences.<sup>4</sup> Since then, and despite considerable progress, scholars have often found themselves in the cross-fire of public debate about historical exhibitions. While "serious" public historical portrayals are mired in intense controversy due to their "revisionist" preconceptions, celebratory ones

proliferate, perhaps due to what historian Barbara Melosh concludes (in her article on women's history in the Leon and Rosenzweig collection) is the public's preference for happy endings over critical perspectives.

Halls of fame are chock-full of memorabilia and nostalgic images of the sporting past. Contemporary interest in such exhibits reflect the rise in the sale of sports memorabilia since the early 1980s. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of baseball. Baseball card collecting has become an obsession: a 1909 Honus Wagner card recently sold for nearly half a million dollars, and a 1952 Mickey Mantle card goes for more than \$30,000. The baseball that Babe Ruth supposedly swatted for his 60th home run in 1927 was sold for \$200,000 in San Francisco, and a 1919 Joe Jackson autograph commands in excess of \$25,000. There is now a Nellie Fox Society in Chicago, a Burleigh Grimes Museum in Wisconsin, and a Dizzy Dean Museum in Mississippi. Major league owners and memorabilia peddlers have astutely recognized the profit potential of America's appetite for baseball nostalgia. Old-timers' games grow in popularity. And Baltimore's new Camden Yards ballpark recalls the classic 1920s stadiums, with old-time Coca-Cola billboards, ushers wearing bow ties and suspenders, and baseball nostalgia piped into both men's and women's restrooms. "The beatification of baseball's past and the consequent miasma of wooly commentary, mawkish sentiment, and cardboard portraits" are, as Nicholas Dawidoff lucidly recognizes, more than a cultural "fad"; these "social balms are responses to an increasingly fractured society that is so swamped in baseball nostalgia that the game threatens to be obscured by a cloud of kitsch."<sup>6</sup>

Sport scholars have only begun to analyze the seemingly unquenchable desire for nostalgia masquerading as history. As Warren Goldstein has explained, fans entertain a dual conception of sport history—a linear one which coheres around institutional developments, and another, more powerful one that resides within the emotional, generational attachment to imaginary "golden ages." In his book *Big Leagues*, Stephen Fox maintains that every generation has its own "golden age" and a corresponding, selective criteria for them based on the particular historical context. Such "historical" conceptions of the sporting past are institutionalized in hall of fame museums. Given the museums' popularity, sport historians must confront this vexing dilemma: either they play the role of "egghead" iconoclast in criticizing such displays as mere pulp fiction; or they can scrutinize such museums' merits and assess the consequent shortcomings.

This edition of the *Journal of Sport History* commences work on the latter. Rather than treat sports halls of fame as beyond the pale of serious scrutiny, several scholars will review them from a critical perspective. Bruce Kidd's analysis of the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto is a model for future reviewers of this important dimension in public history. This type of critique should be continued and expanded upon in the future.

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1. Tom O'Brien, *The Screen of America: Movies and Values from Rocky to Rain Man* (New York, 1990); and Patrick Trimble's review of "Cobb," *Journal of Sport History* 22 (Spring 1996), 78-80. For an astute analysis of sports films, see Aaron Baker's unpublished 1994

- dissertation (Indiana University) "Contested Identities: Sports in American Film and Television."
2. Robert Rosenstone, "Film Reviews," *American Historical Review* 97 (October 1992), 1138-1139; William Hughes, "The Evaluation of Film as Evidence," in Paul Smith, ed., *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge, 1976), 71. I encourage readers to see Robert Brent Toplin, "Introduction to Movie Reviews," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986), 820-821.
  3. Jay J. Coakley, *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (St. Louis, 1986); O'Brien, 86.
  4. *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*, ed., Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
  5. For more on these provocative issues and events, see "Social History and the American Political Climate—Problems and Strategies," *Journal of Social History* 29 (1995), supplement; "History and the Public: What Can We Handle?" (round table) *Journal of American History* 82 (1995), 1029-1135; Tom Englehardt, "Fifty Years Under a Cloud: The uneasy search for our atomic history," *Harper's*, January 1996, 71-76; and Englehardt, ed., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Metropolitan Books), forthcoming.
  6. Nicholas Dawidoff, "Field of Kitsch," *New Republic*, August 17-24, 1992, 22.