Sports Films, History, and Identity

by Aaron Baker
HUMANITIES PROGRAM
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

> Popular culture is like the study of labour history and its institutions. To declare an interest is to correct a major imbalance, to mark a significant oversight. But, in the end, it yields more when it is seen in relation to a more general, a wider history.
>
> —Stuart Hall

Since the beginnings of the motion picture industry in the United States, professional sports have been a frequent subject for the movies.[1] Hundreds of films about sports have been produced for the same reason that synergistic ties have been established between American movies and other cultural forms including theater, literature, fashion, television, advertising, and toys.[2] From the documentary-style "news films" of major prizefights and the World Series that were an important part of the early film industry to contemporary blockbusters such as *Angels in the Outfield* (1994), *Space Jam* (1996), and *Jerry Maguire* (1996), collaboration with professional sports has helped sell the movies.

Because they frequently draw upon real contests and athletes, sports films have often claimed historical status. Although one might regard any film as historical in the sense that it offers what Robert Rosenstone calls "a document (text)" representing "the social and cultural concerns" of the time when it is made, most sports movies that make explicit claims to historical meaning do so instead by portraying the past while looking back in time through the lens of present concerns.[3] Rosenstone identifies several characteristics shared by most of the latter type of explicitly historical films, whether dramatic features or documentaries. They generally tell history "as a story" with a strong degree of closure that leaves the audience with "a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift."[4] *Hoosiers* (1986) does this by employing the climactic contest conventional to sports films to reestablish a moral order that rewards the hard work and determination of underdog protagonists.

Even historical sports films that are more qualified in their optimism generally suggest that things have gotten or are getting better, although they may emphasize the price paid for such progress. Two examples of the "progress doesn't come

cheap" ending are *Knute Rockne—All American* (1940) and *Pride of the Yankees* (1942), both of which end with the death of their biographical subjects. These two films suggest that the hard work of men like Knute Rockne and Lou Gehrig—from working-class, immigrant families—earned them fame and material comfort and therefore justified their deaths to endorse the values that made that success possible. Released just before or during U.S. involvement in WW II, these movies validate military service by suggesting that sometimes the ultimate sacrifice is necessary to ensure a free and prosperous future. The preface to the Rockne biopic states that he is killed in a plane crash that cuts short his work "molding the spirit of...millions of young men and boys who are living by the high standards he taught."[5]

Sports films frequently represent this progressive view of history in melodramatic terms. Literary critic Peter Brook says that melodrama is a common fictional mode of addressing disturbing social issues that are otherwise repressed.[6] In an essay on television movies, Laurie Schulze qualifies Brook's assertion by noting that "If melodrama involves itself with the excessive, its function consists, many critics have argued, in invoking desires or anxieties only to put them back into the box again."[7] This melodramatic containment is a common way for Hollywood films to present history—and sports films are no exception. Sports movies generally frame history as adequately represented by the individual desires, goals, and emotional dramas of the main characters, often in a biopic story. A large part of the complexity of the historical questions raised is excluded by such telescoping, and by the end of the film answers in the form of individual actions are fit into a single explanation, represented with a realistic mise-en-scène and an emotional resonance that undermine critical scrutiny.

Pride of the Yankees, like *Knute Rockne—All American* and another sports biopic from the period, *The Iron Major* (1943), defines masculinity in martial terms that emphasize the need to sacrifice for a better future. Unlike Babe Ruth, whom *Pride of the Yankees* represents as selfishly embodying the consumer culture of the 1920s, Gehrig (Gary Cooper) dutifully accepts the authority of Yankee managers Miller Huggins and Joe McCarthy. We see Gehrig attentively receiving advice from Huggins about how to become a better fielder, and in a newspaper photo with his arm around McCarthy when the latter became Yankee manager in 1932. In its opening dedication, *Pride* of *the Yankees* connects Gehrig's "courage and devotion" in the face of a deadly disease to the "valor and fortitude" of "the thousands of Americans on far-flung fields of battle." The Gehrig character's clearest statement of his submission to the rules of the game comes when he first hears the diagnosis of his illness:

> Gehrig: Give it to me straight, Doc; is it three strikes?
>
> Doctor: It's three strikes.
>
> Gehrig: Doc, I've learned one thing. All the arguing in the world can't change the decision of the umpire.

Gehrig's courage in the face of death, after a career in which he played in 2,130 consecutive games, is shown as a model of dedication to duty and acceptance

of authority even if there is little time to enjoy the rewards of that self-sacrifice.[8]

Knute Rockne—All American also exemplifies this type of personalized, melodramatic version of history. Rockne's life is shown as representative of the social mobility possible in America where even a boy from a working-class, immigrant family can grow up to become a national sports hero. George Custen comments that the first generation of Hollywood studio heads liked heroes whose traits resembled their own, which is why many biopics from the classic period use a similar narrative of "immigrant pluck rewarded by a benevolent America."[9] In his history of Notre Dame football, Murray Sperber mentions that when producer Mark Hellinger pitched the idea for the film to Jack Warner, "the movie executive liked it immediately"[10]

Yet while *Knute Rockne—All American* ostensibly offers the biography of the Notre Dame coach as historical proof of the American dream, it inadvertently makes reference to the selective nature of such opportunity. As *Knute Rockne—All American* opens, we are told that Lars Rockne brought his son, Knute, and the rest of his family from Norway, "following the new road of equality and opportunity which led to America."[11] The film unintentionally shows, however, that such opportunity did not extend to African Americans. Blacks appear only as minor characters in most sports films prior to the early 1950s, a marginalization that reflects their exclusion from the highest levels of commercial sports. Despite their brief appearance in the film, the two black characters in *Knute Rockne—All American* qualify its affirmation of the American Dream. In an early scene when young Knute plays football for the first time in a sandlot game, an African American boy running the ball for the other team knocks him flat. The only other appearance of an African American character comes much later in the film, when Rockne, now the famous football coach at Notre Dame, returns to South Bend on the train after a tough loss. A black porter stops at the door of his compartment and asks Rockne if he would like his suit brushed off before they arrive. The presence of the porter ironically recalls the boy who had run over little Rock in the football legend's first experience with the game that was to make him famous. The difference in social position between Rockne and the porter suggests why the experience of the African American boy appears nowhere but in the one early scene. The promise of equal opportunity, which both blacks and whites were called upon to defend in the War, extended to some parts of American society but not others.

Even more recent revisionist sports films don't operate entirely outside these Hollywood conventions. As an independent filmmaker whose career has been distinguished by his attempts to avoid the melodramatic, ahistorical tendencies of Hollywood, the concessions John Sayles makes in *Eight Men Out (1988)* to the dominant model of historical filmmaking demonstrate its authority. In an interview with historian Eric Foner, Sayles explains that he had to wait eleven years from the time he wrote the first draft of the script to make *Eight Men Out* because, he says, "I wanted to tell the story *Eight Men Out*. Not *One Man Out* or *Three Men Out and A Baby.*"[12] Yet in that same interview Sayles admits the difficulty of not presenting history "as the story of individuals."[13] He justifies this

compromise with the assertion that audiences will only understand and tolerate a story from three points of view at most: that of the protagonist, of an antagonistic opponent, and of an omniscient narrator. Although the eight ballplayers associated with the fix of the 1919 World Series have different interests and their opponents are both the gamblers and the owners who want to make an example of them, the film tries to center viewer identification on two characters: Buck Weaver and Joe Jackson. The sympathetic treatment of Weaver and Jackson implies that if their actions—playing well in the World Series—didn't determine the course of events, they should have.

Although the other six players are shown to adopt the self-serving tactics of the gamblers and owners, Sayles represents the outstanding play of Weaver and Jackson as both a rejection of the manipulative deal and an example of how the achievements of working people are often unrewarded and unrecognized. In the film's last scene, we see Jackson four years after his expulsion from the major leagues, playing for a semi-pro team in New Jersey. A dramatic series of shots shows him hitting a long drive to right-center field, rounding first and second, and arriving safely at third base. These shots recall a tracking shot used earlier in the film to establish Jackson's hitting ability while he was with the White Sox. In both cases, we know that the spectacular skills shown are not well-rewarded, but during the latter scene we also hear a spectator tell another that Jackson was "one of them bums from Chicago...one of the Black Sox." With this comment *Eight Men Out* sums up the distortion in public memory that it hopes to rectify by showing the social and economic forces that affected players like Jackson and Weaver. To further this revisionist project, however, Sayles is not above using the tactics of conventional history films. The identification with Weaver and Jackson that *Eight Men Out* encourages, combined with the injustice of their treatment, follows the third of Rosenstone's rules of historical filmmaking by emotionalizing history—aiming for feelings of outrage and sympathy to increase viewer investment in the story.

The primary focus on individual characters as the makers of history in most sports films fits with what Robert Ray has described as Hollywood's tendency to affirm "American beliefs in individualism, ad hoc solutions, and the impermanence of all political problems."[14] In Ray's view "history's major crises," those situations in which individuals (and groups) feel the influence of larger social institutions and discourses on the choices about how they will define themselves, "appear in American movies only as 'structuring absences'—the unspoken subjects that have determined an aesthetic form designed precisely to conceal these crises' real implications."[15] Rosenstone describes such omission as a fourth practice in most historical filmmaking, its tendency to be "unproblematic and uncontested in its view of what happened and why." Sayles refers to this reductionist approach when he says that the historical feature film has to avoid too many points of view or risk threatening the all-important emotional connection with its audience. He admits, however, that this limiting of perspective "mitigates against complexity," or what Rosenstone calls "alternative possibilities to what we see happening on the screen."[16]

Feature films about sports follow all these rules that Rosenstone and Bay describe, but Hollywood is especially fond of the idea that history is made by individuals. I can think of only six feature films about sports history that are not biopics: *The Harlem Globetrotters* (1951), *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings* (1976), *Hoosiers, Eight Men Out, A League of Their Own* (1992), and *Soul of the Game* (1996), and even these focus primarily on two or three main characters. The overwhelming prevalence of sports biography films (seventy that I know of between 1940 and 1997) demonstrates that the symbiosis between sports and movies is ideological as well as economic. Custen points out that the inclination of biopics toward the stories of a few, mostly white, men is an important part of a Hollywood version of history "limited in historical setting" and "ideologically self-serving" for those who have run the movie business.[17] Therefore, just as biopics are part of the promotion of self-reliance through classic Hollywood narrative guided by what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson call "individual characters as causal agents," sports also give the greatest recognition to star performance regardless of any gestures they might make toward teamwork, fair play, and the support of fans.[18]

At this point I want to briefly digress to make some general statements about the meaning of individual performance in media representations of American professional sports. Some of what follows may sound dehistoricized, but I would argue that since their inception in the later half of the nineteenth century professional sports have consistently been portrayed as disproving the idea of a socially constructed identity. Sports movies at least in part follow this representational tendency. Borrowing from the work of the Annales historians, Stephen Hardy has referred to such diachronic meanings as the "long residuals" of sports culture that have "crossed time and context."[19]

Like Hollywood movies, professional sports fit squarely within "the traditional American mythology" that champions the promise of unified identity through individual achievement. Despite the recent growth of women's professional sports, such a self-reliant identity is still strongly identified with masculinity, and movies about professional athletes with a few exceptions involve women only as they support male self-definition. Although they aim themselves at women more than most sports films do, Nike's ad campaigns centered around slogans like "Just Do It" or "I Can" are recent if prominent examples of the notion that sports offer an opportunity for uncomplicated self-definition; the emphasis on stars and the many sports biopics are more longstanding manifestations of this idea. Such belief in agency supports the utopian promise of sports: that once the contest begins, success depends primarily on one's own determination and effort.

Movies and other media texts about sports at times digress with endorsements of teamwork and fair play to allay audience fears about the potential for athletic competition to devolve into Social Darwinism. Yet ultimately the individualist mythology has a stronger appeal as utopian narrative, and it certainly best represents the interests of those who own teams, newspapers, networks, movie studios, and the other corporations that profit from sports. Even when teamwork figures prominently in narratives about athletics, this doesn't reduce the value

placed on individual performance. Rather, like the bourgeois nuclear family, the team operates as a social structure that fosters the development of self-reliant individuals; self-effacing play therefore subordinates itself to the more recognized actions of the star. *Hoosiers* offers a good example of this ideological hierarchy. Although much of the film is a nostalgic parable involving a big-city basketball coach who learns the importance of teamwork and community in a small Indiana town, that thematic emphasis is subordinated in the film's climactic scene to the individual heroism of a game-winning basket by a star player.[20]

As part of their affirmation of the idea of meritocracy, professional sports continually remind us of the standard of living that star players achieve. Although the constant media reports of seven- and even eight-figure salaries on the one hand create the fan resentment one hears expressed on sports talk radio, the high salaries also reinforce the belief that opportunity for economic advancement still exists in American society and that sports stars are models of success worth paying to observe. The recent blockbuster *Jerry Maguire* (1996) made this more optimistic interpretation of big contracts its central theme. Moreover, it is no coincidence that as corporate downsizing has reduced economic security for many Americans, the good fortune of a relatively small number of athletes who sign long-term, multimillion dollar contracts has increasingly received media attention. The frequent calls for athletes to act as role models further bolsters the notion of personal success achieved by following the path of agency and self-reliance that sports stars are expected to define.

This is not to suggest that historical narrative should exclude the role of individual action. In fact, borrowing from Richard Dyer's analysis of entertainment and utopia, I would claim that the idealized identity of professional athletes responds to real needs that fans have: for greater economic means, for a sense of personal accomplishment, and for recognition from others. What films about sports stars lack are specific strategies for how success in these areas can be achieved.[21] Instead, they offer spectacular celebrations of the achievements of stars offset by a realist aesthetic of reportage disavowing that the whole thing is staged for our consumption and reassurance. This realist style figures most prominently in action scenes involving footage of actual contests or set in stadia filled with crowds of extras, employing authentic uniforms and equipment and, often, real athletes. These cinematic contests are frequently narrated by announcers in the style of television or radio coverage and shown with a continuity editing style that makes the sequence of shots seem motivated by the logic of the events rather than the choices of filmmakers. For historical sports films this representational style has special resonance because it recalls real events in sports "history": athletic contests that the audience has witnessed in the past. Heightened realism in scenes in which the star competes is especially important in validating an ideology of agency that assumes that individual performance in these situations counts most in making the athlete what he is.

As Dyer points out, the conservatism of utopian entertainment comes from how it offers representations of the better life we could have if we just follow the rules and try harder. In other words, not only does such utopian entertainment

avoid suggesting specific ways to change the current social reality, it promises us happiness through adherence to the status quo. Yet Dyer adds that this utopian response only works if one ignores—as entertainment almost always does-how social identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality complicate self-definition. On the contrary, the acknowledgment of social forces in the construction of identity would make evident that the opportunity, abundance, and happiness in utopian narratives are not there for everyone to the same degree. Even when sports movies acknowledge the disadvantages of racism, sexism, or class differences (homophobia is still widely ignored), individual performance is generally held up as the best way to deny their influence. Later in this essay I analyze *The Jackie Robinson Story 1950* as an example of how sports films endorse self-reliance as the best response to social disadvantage.

The more one regards these movies as historical and not just as utopian stories about individuals, the more they reveal what Mikhail Bakhtin called "dialogism," or the combination of different discursive positions within one text. Applying Bakhtin's ideas about literature to ethnic and racial representation in film, Robert Stam has described his goal as to "call attention to the voices at play in a text, not only those heard in aural 'close-up,' but also those voices distorted or drowned out by the text."[22] Using this idea of textuality to approach historical sports films, one can see how their protagonists overcome external obstacles to succeed but are also formed in part by social forces and the choices they offer. For example, the 1942 biopic *Gentleman Jim* shows 1890s boxer Jim Corbett fighting his way to the heavyweight title, yet at the same time negotiating between different conceptions of masculinity, social class, and race. Through his "scientific" boxing, mannered charm, and stylish appearance, Corbett renounces the working-class masculinity of his Irish-American family to define a more "respectable" type of prizefighter. His formation of this "gentlemanly" style at an elite men's club necessitates his acceptance of a bourgeois notion of masculinity that invalidates the ethnic, working-class identities of his father and two brothers as well as that of the man from whom Corbett takes the heavyweight belt, John Sullivan. Corbett's self-advancement also requires that he avoid endangering the dominant discourse of white supremacy that Gail Bederman has shown intersected through the arena of prize fighting with constructions of masculinity in turn-of-the-century American society.[23] *Gentleman Jim* therefore refers indirectly to, but never mentions by name, the black fighter Peter Jackson, a top heavyweight of the period whom Sullivan, and Corbett once he became champion, refused to meet in the ring.[24]

Ironically, the social and economic discourses of Hollywood's favorite type of history themselves construct representations of identity. Custen notes that history in the Hollywood biopic is the "celebration of the individuality of the great man or woman" that also "reduces individuals to...a mass-tailored contour for fame in which greatness [for the biographical subject] is generic and difference has controllable boundaries."[25] In contrast to these narrative limits, Cornell West asserts the importance of a more contextualized understanding of history and identity in his response to conservative explanations of the black underclass. West states that one should not, as some conservatives have tried, overemphasize "the

themes of self-help and personal responsibility" by wrenching them "out of historical context...as if it is all a matter of personal will."[26] Instead, he counters, "How people act and live are shaped—though in no way dictated or determined—by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves."[27] Along similar lines, a more complete analysis of how sports films are about history can be developed by studying how they represent the athlete's identity as always a matter of negotiating the discourses and institutions that make up his or her world.

Two films about Jackie Robinson's entrance into major league baseball, *The Jackie Robinson Story* and the HBO made-for-TV movie *Soul of the Game* (1996), illustrate this dialogic tendency in historical representation by offering the utopian individualism of the biopic and also a less monochromatic viewpoint. Both films show Robinson as he reluctantly accepts Dodger owner Branch Rickey's strategy of turning the other cheek when he faces the racist abuse directed at him once he begins playing in previously all-white "organized baseball." Rickey's strategy was not only important in avoiding the interracial violence that would have created pressure to stop his "great experiment." By requiring that Robinson withstand the abuse Rickey could also represent the black player's acceptance of the self-denial and deferral of gratification that many white Americans valued and thought African Americans lacked. Sports historian Randy Roberts describes the widespread belief among white fans at the time of Robinson's debut that the black male was "an adult child,"

> incapable of organized team sports, where raw talent and brute strength were secondary to mental acuity, careful planning, and coordinated execution.... Imagine Sambo trying to master Knute Rockne's single-wing shift.... Nor could whites imagine blacks playing with the intensity of Ty Cobb, the dedication of Lou Gehrig.... Nature had designed them to laugh, sing, dance, and play but not to sacrifice, train, work, compete, and win.[28]

By going it alone in pursing the difficult task of proving himself, by shouldering the pressure and accepting the emotional and physical pain from all the racist abuse hurled at him, Robinson demonstrated that he was just as willing as any white person to pursue the path of hard work, self-reliance, and deferred gratification to ensure a better future.[29]

Perhaps because Rickey's assistant, Arthur Mann, cowrote the script and oversaw the project according to his boss's specifications, *The Jackie Robinson Story* presents its title character in terms of the same integrationist strategy.[30] Playing himself in the film, Robinson portrays the values of hard work, discipline, deferral of gratification, and self-reliance that he used to overcome white resistance to black opportunity. When they first meet, Rickey tells Robinson, "I want a player with guts enough not to fight back." After a graphic description of the racist abuse he will face, Robinson assures Rickey that he can turn the other cheek.

The representation of Robinson in *The Jackie Robinson Story* aims for acceptance by white viewers. The film's use of a white male voice-over, beginning with its very first image of Jackie as a boy continuing through commentary spoken

by a radio announcer during games in his first two seasons with Montreal and Brooklyn, and summarizing the larger meaning of his success as the movie ends, makes clear who is telling the story. This voice-over reminds the viewer of Rickey's paternalistic guidance and states clearly the film's ideology of cold war patriotism and self-reliance. Soon after the opening shot of Jackie as a boy and the statement by the voice-over that "This is the story of a boy and his dream," we see a montage sequence in which Robinson's early adoption of a strong work ethic is represented through images of him shining shoes and delivering newspapers on his bicycle. Even the film's brief reference to Robinson's time in the military reinforces the lesson of hard work and achievement. No mention is made of Robinson's battle with Jim Crow in the Army and his narrow escape from a dishonorable discharge. Instead we see a scene of girlfriend Rae Isum (Ruby Dee) showing to a friend a picture of Jackie in his lieutenant's uniform, and telling her that he has been given a position "as some kind of athletic director" by the Army.

Along with its emphasis on self-reliance, *The Jackie Robinson Story* also individualizes Robinson's experience of racism to imply the appropriateness of his unique opportunity and self-sufficient responses to its roadblocks. Unlike *Soul of the Game,* which foregrounds the injustice of offering only Robinson and not other black players a chance to enter the major leagues, *The Jackie Robinson Story* doesn't specify that Robinson was one of several African American players that Rickey considered. This glaring omission works to separate Robinson from what Ben Rader calls the "pressures that were mounting to end America's apartheid" by the conclusion of World War II.[31] As historians such as John Hope Franklin and Manning Marable have shown, at the time Robinson joined the Dodgers the civil rights movement had already begun to challenge racial restrictions on employment and housing in American society. In fact, Marable makes the case that the cold war anticommunist hysteria represented by Robinson's testimony before HUAC shown at the end of *The Jackie Robinson Story* was a factor in slowing down the start of the civil rights movement.[32]

Breaking the color barrier in baseball was not just about Rickey's desire to help the Dodgers win pennants and Robinson's ability to compare favorably on and especially off the field with white players. As Rader explains, it was also prompted by Rickey's desire to draw on a rapidly growing population of African Americans in Brooklyn as potential paying customers and to appeal politically to the city's increasingly important black voters. New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia had already begun to court African Americans when he established a special committee in 1945 "to consider race relations, including the apparent discrimination against blacks by the local Dodgers, Giants, and Yankees."[33] The nearly four and one-half million blacks who had migrated to northern cities since WW I Rader says "represented both potentially new baseball customers as well as a new political bloc." Between 1940 and 1950, the black population of Brooklyn alone nearly doubled.[34]

Disregarding such factors in Rickey's great experiment, *The Jackie Robinson Story* represents the racism directed at Robinson as occurring through individual acts of discrimination, implying therefore the appropriateness of his self-reliant

responses. Even when we see more institutionalized patterns of racism, such as when none of the schools that Robinson applies to after leaving UCLA offers him a coaching job, it is soon followed by representation of a corresponding unbiased institution (in its patriotic fervor, the film has the audacity to portray the Army as this counterweight of opportunity). Like the individualization of racism and Robinson's response to it, this depiction of equal-opportunity institutions suggests the limits of social determinism. However, despite the ways in which the film tries to isolate Robinson's experience, his performance in the title role often counters this dehistoricizing tendency. One prominent instance occurs during the action scenes when Robinson uses an aggressive, improvisational style of play perfected during his time in the Negro Leagues. Rader describes the black baseball of the Negro Leagues as,

> more opportunistic, improvisational, and daring than white ball. It resembled more the inside baseball of an earlier era, that of the Baltimore Orioles of the 1890s and of John J. McGraw's Giants in the first two decades of the twentieth century.... Nothing summed up the uniqueness of black baseball more than its sheer speed[,]... combined with the bunt [Robinson had an astounding 47 bunt hits his first year with the Dodgers], the hit-and-run play, the stolen base, and taking the extra base.[35]

In *The Jackie Robinson Story* we see at least three scenes of Robinson using this assertive, improvisational style. The first occurs when he is shown doubling, then stealing third and home while playing, appropriately enough, in the Negro Leagues. The lack of any voice-over narration of these feats suggests a "bush league" status for black baseball as indicated by its lack of radio coverage. Yet even in two later scenes of Robinson playing for Montreal and Brooklyn, radio announcers who explain beforehand the significance of Robinson's play—how for example, "In baseball, it's not who or what you are, but can you play the game"—become oddly silent as we see him in action. In the Montreal scene, a radio announcer sets the scene but then says nothing as Robinson reaches first on a bunt, steals second, goes to third on a wild throw, and then—by faking a dash for the plate—forces the pitcher to balk him home. In the game with Brooklyn that clinched the pennant, Robinson doubles, steals third, and comes home on a wild throw to win the game. In both cases the narration so important in describing the significance of Robinson's experience elsewhere in the film goes silent as if it is incapable of explaining what this style of play means.

While *The Jackie Robinson Story* briefly shows this distinctive black style, *Soul of the Game* makes it a more central concern. *Soul of the Game* focuses not just on Robinson, but also on two other Negro League stars, Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson. All three players share a similar athletic aesthetic that allows for feelings of freedom and stylized creativity in addition to being competitive. *Soul of the* Game suggests that the limited opportunity organized baseball was willing to extend to African Americans had to do primarily with how most whites, and even Robinson himself at first, misunderstood this aesthetic, took it to be about the inability of blacks to work and achieve, to control their desire to "showboat"

in order to focus on the task at hand. *Soul of the Game* offers the contrasting view that the successful performance of players like Paige and Gibson was due to their composure and confidence achieved through the balance they struck between competing and enjoying themselves as they played. Through its portrayal of black dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (who owned the New York Black Yankees of the Negro National League), and its use of a jazz score by Terrence Blanchard, *Soul of the Game* connects this black baseball aesthetic with a larger African American cultural heritage of improvisation that responds to present conditions of performance as well as the needs of the finished work.

This aesthetic represented by Paige, Gibson, and Robinson functions in *Soul of the Game* to define racial difference and also the class relations between players and owners. While Robinson's use of this black style is made more efficient by his internalization of the white obsession with winning, the showboating of black players like Paige is part of what the owners of white baseball regarded as "disorganized" about the Negro Leagues. The apparent disregard that Gibson and Paige showed for the "product" (winning), through their fraternization and pauses in the action to engage in dozens humor and generally enjoy themselves, was a big part of the draw for Negro League games. Outstanding exhibitors of this showboating style, especially Paige, could therefore demand a greater financial return for their services. Although the terms of remuneration for most players were not better than those for white players in the major leagues under the reserve clause, the style of play in the Negro Leagues, with its emphasis on an immediate return in expressive pleasure, symbolically critiqued the alienation of blacks within the economic status quo.

As if to contain the alternative black discourse of Robinson's Negro Leagues style of play, *The Jackie Robinson Story* ends quickly with a scene of Robinson testifying before the House Committee on Unamerican Activities in Washington. That he asks Rickey's advice about whether he should go, and that the Brooklyn executive strongly urges him to do so, marks this scene as another instance of Rickey's paternalistic guidance. Yet even in this testimony scene, the film can't entirely suppress different discursive positions. Robinson's statement before the committee refers to his awareness that American society offers opportunities such as he has had to only a few blacks, but he also puts forward the view that only by battling within the system can African Americans realize more of the potential rights of a democratic society. After Robinson states, "I am not fooled because I've had a chance open to very few Negro Americans," he adds, "but democracy works for those willing to fight for it." The white male voice-over then returns and disregards this criticism of the lack of opportunity for most blacks by asserting over a shot of the Statue of Liberty that America is "a country in which every child has the opportunity to become president or play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers."

Soul of the Game reassesses the integrationist strategy that predominates in *The Jackie Robinson Story* in the manner that Ed Guerrero says characterizes "the New Black Movie" of the 1990s.[36] While *Soul of the Game* also aims at a white

audience, it examines the costs of integration by contrasting Robinson's breaking of the color line with the denial of opportunity to Paige and Gibson. By showing how they were initially passed over (Paige later played briefly in the major leagues) *Soul of the Game* highlights the selective opportunity that Robinson's experience (and integration as a whole) have represented.[37] This emphasis on limited opportunity articulates what Salim Muwakkil calls the contemporary "skeptical attitude...among African Americans across the ideological spectrum" toward integration because of "its questionable benefits and its lack of mainstream [white] support."[38] *Soul of the Game* implies that while Rickey chose to commodify the African American sports culture that Robinson embodied, by denying opportunity to other black players he ignored (and confirmed) the critique of racial and economic inequality contained in that black style. Dyer refers to this critique when he describes "the inescapability of the [black] body in the economy...all that bodily energy and delight as creative and productive."[39]

Soul of the Game portrays Robinson as the right player for white baseball precisely because he is unaware of the social meaning of the way he plays. The film shows him when he arrives in the Negro Leagues as fiercely resentful of discrimination, but determined to adopt the values of the dominant white society in order to redress racial injustice. After a confrontation with Paige on the field because of his disdain for the pitcher's showboating ("You're not pitching, you're putting on a bullshit show"), Robinson lectures the other players in the locker room about how he learned as an officer in the Army "the discipline of managing your time, setting goals, taking the personal responsibility for seeing them through." Through his naive presumption that he is teaching the other players an important life lesson, *Soul of the Game* attempts to establish Robinson as an Uncle Tom who has yet to learn about the soul of the game his teammates play. In fact, it's doubtful that the real Robinson would have made such a positive statement about his experience in the Army. Arnold Rampersad describes how most of Robinson's time in the service was spent waiting around and fighting its Jim Crow practices.[40] The representation in *Soul of the Game* of Robinson's flamboyant playing style seems to me more accurate than its portrayal of his naivete. His carefully practiced skill in the Negro Leagues style, along with the early experiences described by his biographers and in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*—which testify to his belief in self-reliance yet also describe the racism he faced—suggest that Robinson even at this age was probably aware of the complex relationship between personal responsibility and race.

For the time when it was made, *The Jackie Robinson Story* was a very liberal film. The film's screenwriter, Lawrence Taylor, found that no studio in Hollywood would back the project because of its black protagonist. Two major studios did express interest, however, if the story could be changed to focus on a white male character who teaches Robinson about baseball. Although Ramersad states that Taylor regarded such a change as "out of the question," to a degree that is what the picture wound up to be.[41] On a practical level such white patronage may have been necessary to get this film on the screen, just as Robinson's restraint the first three years he played for the Dodgers was necessary to avoid the interracial violence

(at least between him and his aggressors) that would have been used to justify shutting down the great experiment. Like Robinson's breaking of the color line itself, *The Jackie Robinson Story* was a step forward in that it gave a black man an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate his abilities in a major cultural venue, and it made evident the moral incongruity between American exceptionalism and the racist resistance to such opportunity. Where the film's liberal thinking hinders its historical honesty is in its dogged insistence on showing racism as a problem best understood and responded to in individual terms. However, within the cold war climate of 1950s America, this emphasis on individualism was probably a necessary qualification of the complexity of social identity that Robinson's playing style and statement in the HUAC testimony scene bring to the film.

Writing in *The Nation* in 1995, Mark Harris credited Robinson's use of a black style of play that challenged the assumed supremacy of white baseball and his strong political stands with being in part responsible for the substantial contractual gains seen by black ballplayers in the years since.[42] While what Harris says is true to a degree, it again replicates the individualist orientation of most cultural representation of sports and results in the same limited historical perspective. In fairness to Harris, his comments about Robinson are more thoughtful and well-informed than many of the more conservative versions of the great-man-in-baseball-history viewpoint that appeared widely in the media in 1997, the fiftieth anniversary of Robinson joining the Dodgers. Yet, from what I would regard as a more historicized perspective, Ken Shropshire has documented how, except for a few stars, the gains for African Americans in professional sports have been quite limited. Shropshire notes that African Americans have been denied management and ownership opportunities (both in baseball and throughout sports) that could open up the business to blacks on all levels.[43] Extending this analysis of race and sports to a global perspective, David Goldberg makes a similar point when he states that, "The mega salaries associated with the racialized bodies of sports hides from view the exploitative conditions marking racialized bodies elsewhere that precisely make such spectacular salaries possible."[44] The recent attention to Nike's exploitative labor practices abroad and advertising using college athletes has shown the contradictions in how the sports industry addresses but also contributes to racial inequality, The contrast between Harris's appraisal of the legacy of Jackie Robinson and that of Shropshire, Goldberg, or that I have described in *Soul of the Game,* demonstrate the difference that considerations of social identity make in the study of history.

Conclusions: Teaching (Sports) Films as History

Despite his investment in the study of film as history, Robert Rosenstone acknowledges the reservations that many in his field have about movies as historical documents. While scholars may be attracted by the possibility of larger student enrollments, greater book sales, and appearances on C-Span,

> the history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian (though it may satisfy the historian as film-goer). Inevitably something happens on the way from the page to the screen that changes the meaning of the past as it is understood by those of us who work with words.[45]

I've tried to show here that for Hollywood movies there is good reason for such reservations, or at least the need for a careful methodology in approaching films about history, especially in the classroom.

As someone who has thought carefully about how to approach film as historical document, Rosenstone sees potential in "postmodern" films that convey the "intellectual density" of good written history, yet also "propose imaginative new ways of dealing with historical material." "The best of such films," he says, "present the possibility of more than one interpretation of events—they render the world as multiple, complex, and indeterminate, rather than as a series of self-enclosed, neat, linear stories."[46] *Eight Men Out* tries to be this type of new historical film by showing how history is a complex drama of multiple actors and interests whose representation involves interpretation and revision and is influenced by the dynamics of social power, including that of the media to influence (and here revise) public memory.

Even for less historically informed films, however, attention to the different discursive positions they present can provide the basis for more fruitful analysis. My own interest at present is in interpreting historical films for their representation of social identity. For scholars or students less inclined in this direction for ideological reasons, interdisciplinary analysis of the various discursive positions in historical films, whatever they might be, still more rewarding in terms of a greater potential to generate meaning than limiting historical analysis to one viewpoint.

In the classroom I have found that when students disagree with me about the importance of social identity, preferring a more individualist notion of self formation, they still appreciate the opportunity to examine and articulate their positions. As teachers we have to be honest with ourselves that for many of our students the most important skills we teach them are how to analyze and articulate their views orally and in writing. In the service and information economy most of them will work in (if they are not already), the ability to develop and communicate analyses about language and images are very important skills. As academics know all too well, the contemporary work world also often requires that one function in a state of distraction, processing and communicating about various cognitive tasks simultaneously rather than in the more linear beginning-to-end—modernist rather than postmodern—fashion many of us might prefer. The dialogic analysis of film texts that I advocate here involves a similar type of multidimensional interpretation. As my interest in sports films and history relates to teaching, then, I try to remember that the most important identities involved are those of the students themselves.

1. Harvey Marc Zucker and Lawrence Babich state that approximately two thousand sports films had been made by the middle 1980s, most of them in the United States. Since that time, I can count at least thirty more films about sports made for television, video, or theatrical release. Some of the films that Zucker and Babich describe in their book are not features (by which I mean an at least partially fictional narrative film of more than an hour in length, intended for exhibition in theaters, on videocassette or on television), or they aren't about American sports, so I have made a more modest estimate of the number of films involved. See *Sports Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1985), 3. I use the term "sports" rather than "sport" because the former is better understood by more readers as referring to the rule-governed, physical contests that are my concern here. Sports films have been made about amateur athletes, from the college films of the 1920s like Harold Lloyd's classic *The Freshman* (1925) to the slew of recent Disney productions about child athletes and extraordinary animals. Yet because of the box office potential for films about performers who already have proven commercial viability, most sports movies concern professional athletes. Moreover, because they claim to represent the highest standard of skill and organization, professional sports offer themselves as a model for how games should be played at all levels. Especially for the latter reason, I have paid greater attention to films about professional athletes in my attempt to analyze how sports movies represent history and social identity. Certain sports such as football, basketball, baseball, and prizefighting get more attention in my work because they have been the subject of the largest number of films.
2. Kristin Thompson describes the movies' relationship with vaudeville in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 163-66. Charles Eckert traces the establishment of a symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and the fashion industry in his essay, "The Carole Lombard in the Macy's Window," in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body,* eds., Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990). Mark Crispin Miller has written about the increasing use of advertising within film narrative in his essay "Advertising" in *Seeing Through the Movies,* ed., Miller (New York: Pantheon, 1990). Finally, Robert Sklar sums up this synergy between film and other forms of culture when he states that "something akin to synergy has always existed in movie culture, from the medium's ties to vaudeville in its earliest days through its later relationships with stage plays, popular novels, shot stories, radio and television." *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 339-340.
3. Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 3.
4. Rosenstone, 55.
5. Forward, *The Knute Rockne Story,* Warner Brothers, 1940.
6. Peter Brook, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
7. Laurie Schulze, "The Made-for-TV Movie: Industrial Practice, Cultural Form, Popular Reception." In *Television: The Critical View* ed. Horace Newcomb (New York Oxford University Press, 1994), 169.
8. While it avoids either of these formulaic endings, even a revisionist baseball film like John Sayles' *Eight Men Out* (1988) conveys a meliorist view of history. Watching *Eight Men Out* in the post-reserve clause era of free agency and seven-figure average salaries for major leaguers leaves one with the impression—probably true—that, as profit-driven as team owners continue to be, most players are better off today than they were in 1919.
9. George Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 8.
10. Murray Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 464.
11. This assertion that America is the land of opportunity was a common trope in WW II era sports biopics. Frank Cavanaugh, the football coach in *The Iron Major,* tells his wife

Florence that he is going to fight in World War I because, "we're lucky enough to live in America, and that's a privilege that has to be fought for." In *Pride of the Yankees,* Lou Gehrig's German immigrant mother explains to him that she and his father left Germany for the United States because "America [is] a wonderful country where everyone has a chance." The biopic *Gentleman Jim* (1942) has wealthy San Francisco socialite Virginia Ware tell the film's title character: "There really aren't two sides of the tracks . . . there's only the lucky and unlucky. Those that happened to have grabbed the right moment and those that don't." Corbett certainly does not miss his chance at equal opportunity, which comes not only in the ring but when he marries Virgina, whose father made his fortune in silver mining and banking.

12. "A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles" in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 14.
13. Rosenstone, 57.
14. Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 31.
15. Ray, 31.
16. Foner and Sayles, 13; Rosenstone, 56-57.
17. Custen, 8. Custen defines a biographical film as "one that depicts the life of a historical person, past or present." 5.
18. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 108.
19. Quoted in S.W. Pope, Introduction to *The New American Sport History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 6.
20. This explains (along with the cultural specificity of the term "Hoosiers") why the film was distributed outside the United States under the title *Best Shot.*
21. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia" in *The Cultural Studies Reader,* ed. Simon During (London: Blackwell, 1993).
22. Robert Stam, "Bakhtin, Polyphony, and Ethnic/Racial Representation" in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 256.
23. Gail Bederman, "Remaking Manhood through Race and Civilization," *Manliness & Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
24. Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Michael Isenberg, *John Sullivan and His America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
25. Custen, 26.
26. Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 22.
27. West, 18.
28. Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *Winning is the Only Thing: Sports in America Since 1945* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 26-27.
29. Ben Rader notes that "At the personal cost of persistent headaches, bouts of depression, and smoldering resentments, Robinson eased the way for his acceptance by publicly ignoring the racial slurs of the players on the other teams." See *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 152.
30. Reported in Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 223.
31. Rader, 149.
32. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1991), 31-32. Not only is Robinson's achievement best seen as part of a larger movement attempting to change the status of African Americans after WW II, his later disillusionment about race relations in the United States at the time of his death in 1972 parallels the trajectory of the civil rights movement from hopefulness and belief in integration in the latter half of the 1950s and

early 1960s to despair about the willingness of white America to offer African Americans as a group the same rights and opportunities. In his 1972 autobiography Robinson's pessimism echoes the disillusionment that fueled a move toward a more militant nationalistic strategy in the black community during the same period.

33. Rader, 149.
34. Rader, 149. United States Census figures as reported in Jerome Krase and Charles LaCerra *Ethnicity and Machine Politics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 248.
35. Rader, 145-46. A colleague of mine at Arizona State University, Keith Miller, has written a very interesting essay about Robinson's use of this style, which Miller says was called "trickeration" in the Negro Leagues: "Jazz on the Basepaths: Trickeration Baseball and Jackie Robinson's Narrative Denial," unpublished manuscript.
36. Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 158-160.
37. Paige received his opportunity to play in the major leagues from Cleveland Indians owner Bill Veeck, who had much more progressive racial attitudes than the other men who ran white baseball.
38. Salim Muwakkil, "Letting Go of the Dream," *In These Times,* November 2, 1997, 13.
39. Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 139.
40. Rampersad, 91, 96.
41. Rampersad, 223.
42. Mark Harris, "Where Have You Gone, Jackie Robinson?" *The Nation,* May 15, 1995, 674-76.
43. Ken Shropshire, *In Black and White: Race and Sports in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
44. David Theo Goldberg, "Call and Response: Sports, Talk Radio, and the Death of Democracy" in *Is Discourse Dead?* eds. Slayden and Whillock (London: Sage, forthcoming).
45. Rosenstone, 20.
46. Rosenstone, 37.