

Cultural Metaphors: Athletes and Athletics in American Films

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In many ways films about athletics are similar to films about crime, the West, war, and even sex. In the American cinema these subjects generate conflicts (contests), which force the protagonist to draw upon some admired quality - talent or virtue - that results in success (victory, happiness, et al.). These characters, because their actions on film suggest more than similar actions in actual life, are operative metaphors through which a concept of society and of members within that society is revealed. Since the American cinema has generally played to majority tastes, reinforced qualities are often shared by various characters from very different films. For examples, the character type of Jim Corbett ("Gentleman Jim," 1943) is quite similar to Tommy Rivers ("The Public Enemy," 1935) or even The Ringo Kid ("Stagecoach," 1939). Thus, to study athletic characters outside of the context of all movies is done with some risks.

This study suggests that there have been three distinct attitudes (periods) about athletics and that these periods reflect shifts in socially approved character roles and in perceptions of what society is. The three periods -the Golden Era, the Revisionist Era, and the Thrill Era - can be described briefly.

The Golden Era of sports films, which lasted roughly until World War II, saw the greatest numerical concentration of films about athletes and athletics; this first period reinforced stereotypes of socially popular success models: individualistic (within a group-structured framework), somewhat stoic (often about problems of the day -sex, alcohol, or orderly presentation), persevering, and dedicated to a particular objective.

Overwhelmingly, the numerical balance favored two sports: baseball and boxing, games whose contrasts help explain why their themes differed. Baseball, which is a team sport where individuals excel, has a built-in limitation on individualism and offers confederation among peers (leadership with checks and balances). However, boxing, which permits the single entity to confront a situation, is often shown to be corrupt, and the enclosed space, contrasts in light and dark, and negative characteristics (ignorance, brute force, master-slave organization, etc.) are attributed to the entire game. ("The Pride of the Yankees," 1942 vs. "The Crowd Roars," 1932).

The three periods - the Golden Era, the Revisionist Era, the Thrill Era - reveal less about athletes than they do about society's ideals and faults. In the first era, democratic society and the successful individual were praised; in the second era, the falacies of a competitive and commercial society were attacked; and finally in the third, the medium of the film injected into these studies a sense of the event, implying that group actions, unattended by reason and individuality, can result in mob idiocy. Ironically, the personality traits, praised in the first era as society's ideals, in the third era generate rebellion against a conforming society. The persevering individual is still the personality type preferred by Hollywood as society's ideal, and this type, with the strong exceptions of the Revisionist Era, has dominated the American sports story on film.