

# Teaching the History of Sport Through Cinema: The “Real” World vs. The “Reel” World

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The purpose of this course, which was taught at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, during the Spring Semester 1977, was to study the myths of sport in America, how they come to be believed, how they are perpetuated and how they are destroyed through the medium of motion pictures. A secondary purpose of the course was to explore the differences in reality perceived through different media and how these media contribute to the control of society as a whole.

The structure of the course was set up to approach the three predominate myths about sport in our society. For each section, The Hero, The Anti-Hero, and The Common Man, several feature-length films were seen and at least one novel (from which a film was adapted) was read. For each section each student was required to write a critical essay on at least one film. There was also a final project for the course. A choice between making a film, writing a story about sport, writing a term paper or taking a final essay examination was offered each student for the final project. Students could work alone or in groups.

The problems inherent in a course of this type are many and hard to overcome. First, in order to rent the motion pictures, a large number of students (150 minimum) is necessary to make the course affordable to each student at \$10 per person. The large number of students creates a situation that is not conducive to discussion sections (which are vital). Hence, the teacher must be willing to devote more time to classroom activities than for most courses. Second, a course of this nature does not lend itself readily to multiple choice examinations. The amount of time necessary to grade essays is, at times, overwhelming if the teacher is alone. Finally, and most important, there are serious problems in using a medium like film in ways that are unfamiliar to the students. The biggest obstacle of all is trying to overcome twenty years of passive viewing and create an atmosphere of active participation with the media.

In spite of all the pitfalls of such a course, the rewards can be earth-shaking. Without a doubt, the attentive student will be able to view sport through film in a variety of ways that help to contribute to understanding further the perception of sport in society. The course will serve further as an introduction to the major historical and philosophical issues about sport in America in an exciting alternative manner or as an addition to regular textbook teaching methods.