

The American Hero Type and Popular Sports Films

Judy Hakola

University of Maine

The connection between heroes and sports is commonly recognized. In fact, Michael Oriard, in his book *Dreaming of Heroes*, claims that sports exists to create heroes. In spite of these archetypal overtones, however, sports heroes also reflect certain specific features of their culture. Nowhere does this seem to be more true than in sports-mad America. In this paper I will first look briefly at some of the characteristics that seem to be an integral part of our national myth and try to account for them in our historical origins. Then I will review several popular films that embody some or all of these characteristics to substantiate Joseph Campbell's claim that every culture disguises the universal hero and universal themes in the clothing of its particular time and place.

Most of the typically American characteristics are rooted in our origin as a nation. We glorify youth; we admire success; we value individualism over conformity. In spite of our 200-year plus history, we still think of ourselves as the new kids on the block, so we need constant reassurance that we are number one. We admire cleverness and pragmatism, the does rather than the thinker. All of these aspects can be found illustrated in our sports-film heroes, but I will concentrate on three in this paper: America as the land of opportunity for the self-made man; individual inventiveness as a substitute for inherited wealth; and the veneration of winners/compulsion to be number one.

A common theme in the American myth is the story of the self-made man who becomes a success by virtue of hard work and innate ability rather than family wealth or social position. A film which illustrates this beautifully is *Rocky*. Rocky Balboa, the "Italian Stallion", is a nearly illiterate, undisciplined occasional boxer and an enforcer for a local gangster. Unexpectedly, he gets a chance to fight the heavyweight champion. The champ sees this as a publicity stunt, but Rocky takes the opportunity seriously and trains hard for the match. Although Rocky doesn't win, this example of the common man earns the respect and admiration of the crowd with his courage and determination.

Since the self-made man doesn't have inherited wealth or social position to fall back on, he relies on his own inventiveness to achieve success. In the film *Hoosiers*, for example, the coach of tiny Hickory High's basketball team can see that his players are intimidated by the sheer size of the auditorium where they will play a much larger city team for the state championship. He has the boys measure the height of the basket, and the distance from the baseline to the foul line. The distances are standard, of course. By this gimmick the coach gets his players' minds off the apparently intimidating environment and reminds them of what got them to the championship in the first place—their ability to play basketball.

To be a winner, to be number one, is an oft-noted aspect of the American value system. This need to be best extends to rising to the top of the sports hierarchy. No player in the minor leagues is content to be where he is—no matter how successfully he performs at that level. And the need to be a winner is equally a part of this mindset. In fact, winning the big game is so much a part of our definition of a happy ending that it's nearly impossible to imagine a sports film without a game-winning home run, a desperation jump shot at the buzzer, a knockout punch delivered with the last ounce of a boxer's strength. If these words didn't bring to your mind images of *The Natural*, *Hoosiers*, and *Rocky IV* then you just haven't been spending your time at the movies!