

POPULAR CULTURE & THE MEDIA

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Hustlers on the Sidelines: **The Coach in Recent Basketball Films**

Given the centrality of basketball in American popular culture, how has the sport been treated in film? Is there such a thing as a basketball film genre in terms of identifiable conventions and characteristic motifs? This paper grapples with these and other questions. Whereas baseball and boxing movies have been Hollywood staples for decades, and football films have surfaced every decade or so, basketball films have only emerged in the last two decades. The game was highlighted in two silent era projects during the late 1920s, but did not re-appear until the 1950s with *The Harlem Globetrotters and Go, Man, Go*. Thereafter, basketball features were few and far between until several 1970s and early 1980s “B-movies” appeared without anything approaching critical acclaim.

Basketball’s status as a film-worthy subject emerged powerfully with the successful 1986 release of *Hoosiers* that brought renewed attention to the game in American cinema. Although Ted Green (producer of the L.A. Lakers KCAL-TV pregame show) maintained that basketball “lacks the lyrical, literary quality of baseball on the screen,” and the emotion of “the moment can’t be captured [by conventional cinematic methods],” there has been a spate of credible films during the 1980s-1990s.

Collectively, such offerings assist scholars in their effort to better understand the coach as a fundamental “player” in contemporary sport history. Coaches remain, conspicuously, on the sidelines of scholarship. Sport historians might use several recent films to effectively “right” this neglected dimension of their field. To do so, they need to understand that films create a visceral world with which (most) books cannot compete. Although most historians rely on the written word as their principal window into the past, they do so at the risk of neglecting other, equally valuable sources. Films create a world with which books and printed materials cannot compete; as such, the rules to evaluate film cannot derive solely from written history. Films dramatize, emotionalize, and personalize the past and present in revealing, but often problematic, ways.

Such is the case with the burgeoning cadre of basketball films. Although all issues and problems are not raised, several movies provide insight into the world of basketball and the coach’s role in it. Among the themes that emerge in the films under

analysis are the basketball coach as father/mother to the players; the dominant, gendered views of the male coach as the preferred image of male basketball; and the moral/ethical dilemmas of coaches dealing with the problematical issues surrounding the professionalized/commercialized nature of “amateur” sport. This paper broaches these and other problematic issues.