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Bad News for Athletics

This paper (part of a summary chapter from a forthcoming book on sports in the Vietnam era) uses the 1976 film, “The Bad News Bears”, to address the effects that the period from 1960-75 had on America’s ideology of character-building through sport. Specifically, it contends that for all that the Vietnam era delivered in the way of fights for players’ rights, Olympic boycotts, stripped heavyweight titles, and intergender battles, it was this film that really revealed the extent to which America’s organized sports had been transformed. In effect, they’d passed through the looking glass, fallen down one hole and emerged through another into a new world. Using clips from the film itself, reactions

from reviewers and people in the movie industry, interviews, and primary sources dealing with issues related to values associated with sports, the paper examines the film both as a reflection of the decade just past and unsettling foreshadowing of the years ahead.

The traits that had for a century — in public perception, at least — cemented the relationship between sports and American values were under siege in the 60s. Expectations of effort, an unwritten code of manly appearance and behavior, achievement as a standard of success, and respect for authority all wavered in the winds of the era's cultural firestorm. Examples and explanations for each are recounted, and a brief discussion of the Hollywood biopic prevalent between the 1930s and 50s underscores the exaggerated degree to which those values had become bound to American athletics.

In contrast to biopics, "Bad News Bears" was likely the most subversive sports film produced theretofore, a sports version of the "world turned upside down." Its affronts to authority were bold slaps. The coach was subordinate to the players; adults were subordinate to children. The team's best player was a girl; its most inept was black. In the Bears' world, talent and luck were just as desirable as effort and achievement. Good character and delinquency were interchangeable, requiring little more than a change of uniform. While these jabs at the ideology of sport seem obvious in retrospect, in many respects there was a refusal at the time of the film's release to recognize or acknowledge that sports had undergone a bloodless coup. Though at times critiques and attacks on various aspects of character-building had brought fiery confrontation and wailings about paradise lost, more often the idea of an "athletic revolution" seemed drowned out by louder noises in American political and social spheres.

Reviewers, for example, treated the film like a slightly saucier rendition of a Disney production. "For pure nutty escapism, read one advertising blurb, "don't miss the Bad News Bears". Similarly, recent polls of critics and the public has seen the film settle far down the list of America's favorite sports films. A recent HBO film on sports on the silver screen presented "Bad News Bears" as merely an earlier version of youth sport films such as "Little Giants", "Sandlot", and "Mighty Ducks", presentations that in fact share little with the "Bears".

The undiscerning response to this film, both then and now (where it exists only in its sanitized television version) is an indication, perhaps, that the country has remained unaware of the roots of much of its disgust with the state of American sport on the cusp of the next century. I think that the issues in "Bad News Bears" are historically instructive about the ways in which some longstanding values were being deliberately lampooned; I think that the reactions to the film contribute even more to our knowledge of the ways in which we willfully ignore aspects of the past in constructing an illusory history and imagining a more comforting future.