

**BASEBALL, BOXING AND FOOTBALL IN THE MOVIES:  
THE AMERICAN CONNECTION**

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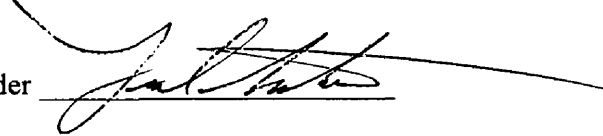
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First Reader



Second Reader



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This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Scott and my  
sons, Tyler and Dalton for all of those times I said,  
"It's just a game!"

Thankyou Dr. B.A. Rubenstein for all of your support and advice  
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Few things in life reflect American society more than sports. When looking at all aspects of sport in America, a true reflection is not hard to miss. More specifically, the sports of baseball, boxing and football cast notable and interesting shadows that are truly worth investigating because it is through these games that we can take a good look at who we are and where we have come as a society. From the players, to the fans, to the owners, these games provide us with insight into what makes our nation tick. Baseball, boxing and football involve complex issues such as racism, sexism, heroism, and loyalty. These issues can be reflected in societal views as well. Sometimes society can influence a sport, such as when women's baseball leagues formed because of war. Other times sports can influence society, as when black players entered the major leagues and immigrants became world renowned boxers.

Film is another thing that reflects American society well. Watching movies is almost as great an American pastime as baseball. The film industry, like the sports industry, is out to make money by capturing "fans" and charging them admission. People go to the show to be entertained, just like they would go to see a sporting event. Therefore, film, too, is a good indication of what society likes, dislikes, and envisions.

There certainly are many more sports that have been used for ideas in films than baseball, boxing and football, however, in the parameters of my research I found these three sports to be the most interesting to analyze. Baseball was the most obvious choice because it is considered to be the "American" sport. Americans claim baseball as their own and in doing my research I found three times as many sources and films on baseball than any other sport; therefore, it is the largest section in my work. Next, I chose boxing because of its long history in America and its immigrant connection. All of us, except Native Americans, are immigrants to this country and our values and history have a strong immigrant connection. Finally, the sport of football was selected because of the rough and tough image it portrays. The rugged football player, like the rugged American,

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and the team spirit that permeates the American mind set seemed like a natural way to connect this sport to America and its views.

The films I chose for each sport are not nearly representative of all the films that are available, yet what I tried to do was to select films that are, or were, a part of the popular culture of their time. I checked local video stores to look for films that people still watch today. I also tried to choose films for each sport that represented different eras, such as the older Babe Ruth story as compared to the more recent version. I also chose films for each sport that used humor, as well as films that depicted true life stories. I chose films such as *The Soul of The Game* and *When We Were Kings* for the purpose of looking at African Americans in sport and society. Furthermore, I chose films such as *A League of Their Own* to help research women's role in sports and society.

The influence of sport on film has a history that reaches as far back as the beginning of the motion picture industry itself. Leland Stanford bet a friend twenty-five thousand dollars that all a trotter's hooves left the ground simultaneously during its gait, and he hired a rather eccentric photographer named Eadweard Muybridge to help him with the bet. Using twenty-four cameras, Muybridge not only won the bet for Stanford but he also helped set the ground work for the motion picture industry. Muybridge continued his work with photographs of baseball pitchers, batters, wrestlers and track athletes in motion. (Boyle p. 26)

In the early years of the motion picture industry, movies were tied closely to boxing. The first commercial picture ever shown on a screen was a six-round bout between Battling Barnett and Young Griffo in May, 1895. Boxing was also responsible for the first exclusive star contract when Jim Corbett signed with the Kinetoscope Exhibition Company. Filming of boxing was also responsible for the invention of the "Latham loop", created by Enoch Rector, who attached an extra feed sprocket to the camera. (Boyle p. 27)

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In the early days of movies a lighthearted view of sport thrived. The Keystone company was owned by Adam Kessel and Charley Bauman, who really did know something about sport. They were bookmakers. Many of the early movie makers were involved in sport in one way or another. An original Western hero, Bronco Billy Anderson, was a baseball enthusiast. In 1908 he signed movie rights with the Chicago Cubs and the Detroit Tigers for the first World Series ever filmed. In his younger days, Charlie Chaplin never missed a fight at the old Vernon Arena. One of his funniest films was *The Champion*, made in 1915. It was a classic portrayal of an alarmed fighter in the ring with a sober-faced giant. Buster Keaton in *College* staged a workout between bases which climaxed with a pole vault through a second story window. (Cantwell p. 108)

For nearly forty years sports remained standard movie material. Thomas Edison put the first baseball game on film as early as 1898. *Casey at the Bat* was made the following year. *In Old Kentucky*, a melodrama filmed in 1909, features a woman heroine who replaces a crooked jockey and wins the race at the last minute. Frank "Home Run" Baker became the first famous athlete to turn to acting when he starred in *The Short Stop's Double* in 1913. As the years went on there were hundreds of others, and sport movies became a special category of film. (Cantwell p. 110)

America's interest in sports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is significant according to some scholars because of the role that sports played as a democratizing agent. Immigrants during this time period shared in the spirit and sporting experience that was becoming an institution in American tradition. (Dickerson p. 1)

At sporting contests, first or second generation Americans could identify with many of the traditional American values so greatly mirrored in American sport. The drive of hope for the future, the demand for leadership and cooperation, the worship of the individual hero, and the outpouring of the national spirit....All could be found in the ritualized organized sport of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sport, more than some areas of society, may have served as

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democratizing agent for the masses of immigrants who came to America from the 1850s to the time of World War I. (Lucas and Smith p. 145)

The same democratizing characteristics have been attributed to the medium of film by film scholars such as Garth Jowett. In his work *Film: The Democratic Art* (1976) he comments:

For the immigrant worker, the movies provided more than just a way of filling-in time, but also acted as a guide to the newcomer on the manners and customs of his new environment. (Jowett p. 36)

In Robert Sklar's work *In Movie-Made America* (1976) he argues that,

The movies were not simply gathering places where...sins were committed; they were centers of communication and cultural diffusion (Sklar p. 18)

Andrew Bergman explains that movies act as a mirror of the culture that creates them. In *We're in the Money* (1971) he points out that,

As films are not viewed in a void, neither are they created in a void. Every movie is a cultural artifact...and as such reflects the fears, values, myths and assumptions of the culture that produces it. (Bergman p. XII)

What was being communicated to immigrants and Americans alike through the silver screen were some of the same images and values of contemporary America that were being communicated through sports. Values and images such as "the American competitive spirit and sense of fair play, the virtue of hard work, the virtue of recreation and the promise of success." (Dickerson p. 3) It appears then that sports and the movies share some very fascinating and noteworthy characteristics. Scholars from diverse disciplines have noted that both sports and cinema have "assisted in enculturating the



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American people and are, in fact, instructional tools by which Americans have learned and acquired American values and culture." (Dickerson p. 3)

Putting film and sports together creates an interesting combination with which to examine our society more closely. Specifically the fans, players, coaches and owners that make up the game plus, racism and the role of women present us with insight into ourselves and the society we inhabit. It can help explain why the movies can be more than just entertainment and sports can be more than "just a game."

Chapter 1  
BASEBALL:  
DIAMONDS ON CELLULOID

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Some critics of baseball films claim that these films formed their own record in Hollywood annals as one of fiscal catastrophe. "So many bad sport movies were made that they virtually died out as a popular art form. The culmination of it all was probably *The Babe Ruth Story*. It was so awful--and such a staggering box-office failure--that most of the big movie companies shuddered at the very sight of a ball and bat." (Cantwell p. 110) Cantwell claims that there were only two baseball movies made in fourteen years. When Ted Williams retired, producer Spyros Skouras was approached with the idea of a film on Williams's career. "No, no," he said. "People wouldn't even go to see a baseball picture with Babe Ruth in it." In 1968 *Films in Review* analyzed almost a hundred old baseball pictures and commented editorially: "Baseball has been so indifferently dramatized it has practically been sabotaged." (Cantwell p. 111-112)

Conversely, Hal Erickson in *Baseball in the Movies* tries to dismantle the myth that baseball movies regularly lose money and are Hollywood flops. *Slide, Kelly, Slide* was one of MGM's biggest hits in 1927. Joe E. Brown's *Alibi Ike* put him back on the top ten list of top moneymakers in the movie business. Samuel Goldwyn's 1942 production *Pride of the Yankees* was his most profitable feature after thirty years in the business. Films such as *The Monty Stratton Story*, *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*, *Damn Yankees*, *The Bad News Bears*, *Bull Durham*, *Major League*, *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams* all ended up very comfortably in the black for movie makers. (Erickson p. 1)

If we examine the the chronology of some of these baseball films the reflection in the mirror very closely resembles American society's relationship to baseball as a sport. For example, the early Babe Ruth film starring William Bendix was made shortly after the death of Babe Ruth and was sentimental and melodramatic in form. This was at a time when society had a strong love affair with the sport of baseball. As time went on, Americans' love affair with baseball was being scrutinized. Consequently, many docu-

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drama type baseball films emerged. Films such as *Eight Men Out* (1989), *A League of Their Own* (1992), *The Soul of the Game* (1996), and a newer version of *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948) called simply *Babe* (1992), realistically tried to portray what was happening in the world of baseball.

Films such as *The Natural* (1984), *Bull Durham* (1988), and *Field of Dreams* (1989) are still reflecting reality for the most part, but they also seem to be working on another level. These films seem to try to reach Americans on an almost spiritual or supernatural level, desperately trying to show Americans the importance of the game at a time when few people were going to listen. The sport of baseball today seems like a comedy to some of the American public as reflected in films such as *Major League* (1989). Therefore, combining America's favorite pastime with America's second favorite pastime can give us some real insight into who we are as Americans. By examining the themes of some of these films more closely, the reflection in the mirror becomes a bit more clear.

One theme that reoccurred often in baseball movies was baseball's power outside of the game itself. Often times the sport of baseball became the one connection a family had. The shared love of baseball was often what brought people together. It connected parents and children and grandparents. It connected one generation to the next, especially fathers to sons.

*The Natural*, starring Robert Redford, is the story of a promising young pitcher, Roy Hobbs, whose chances at superstardom are ruined by a debilitating injury. As his life passes by he continues to look for a chance to redeem his career, despite medical warnings. This film, like many others, involves the childhood dream of becoming a famous baseball star. The film begins in a glowing field of wheat with a boy and his father playing ball. They are connected by the sport. His dad warned him that he had a gift, but if he did not develop it he would fail. His father eventually died of a heart attack while

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chopping wood near a big tree. Roy Hobbs then made a bat out of wood from the tree after it was struck by lightning. His desire to succeed not only for himself, but also for his father, echoed throughout the film. Roy is largely responsible for bringing a losing team, The Knights, into the pennant race. During the championship game The Knights are trailing, and Roy has been in a slump. The boyhood circle and the father son relationship is completed at the end of the story when Roy's childhood sweetheart revealed to him that they had a son. She did not tell him about the boy earlier because she did not want to get in the way of his success. She sent a note to the dugout to reveal that they have a son during this championship game. Roy then went on to win the pennant for The Knights with an amazing home run that hit the lights and symbolically showered fireworks all over the field. He won the game not only for himself, but for his son. The story then closed just as it began, with a boy and his father playing catch in a field of golden wheat.

Baseball, the tie that bound father and son, has come full circle.

In several films involving the sport of baseball, players were especially nervous if their fathers were in the stands to watch them. In the film *Bull Durham*, (Kevin Cosner) "Crash" Davis, a twelve year veteran ball player who has spent most of his life bumming around as a minor league catcher, was assigned to help mature a rookie pitching sensation nicknamed "Nuke". At a critical time for his team, Nuke started to lose his confidence and control. Davis came out to the pitcher's mound to find out what was wrong. Nuke informed Crash that his father was in the stands and he was very nervous.

Also, in the film *A League of Their Own*, which was about the emergence of a women's baseball league during World War II, the coach, Jimmy Duggan, yelled at the left fielder because she "didn't hit the cut-off man". The young woman began to cry. Duggan was flabbergasted. He told her that, "there is no crying in baseball" and explained that he did not cry at a game even under the worst of circumstances. The worst circumstance that

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Duggan described was getting reamed out by his manager at a ball game while his father was watching in the stands.

Another example of the importance of the game to different generations can be found in the film *Eight Men Out*. This was the story of eight players from the Chicago "Black Sox" who conspired with gamblers to throw the 1919 World Series in order to embarrass team owner Charles Comisky because his cut-throat tactics insulted their talent. Father and son again are connected by the sport, via a grandfather. "Shoeless Joe" Jackson recalled when his grandfather used to take him to ball games. He emphasized that because of the memories of his grandfather, baseball was more than just money to him, it was part of his life.

Sometimes even the absent father made his way into baseball films. Despite the fact that his father abandoned him as an "incorrigible child", George Herman Ruth was portrayed as one of the greatest baseball players ever in both *The Babe Ruth Story*, starring William Bendix, and the later version *Babe*, starring John Goodman. For Ruth, baseball became a surrogate father. It was something he looked up to and admired. In a way Ruth did have the help of a father figure in Brother Matthias of the Saint Mary's Industrial School for Boys. In both films it was Matthias who nurtured Ruth's talent for the game and got him started in baseball.

Probably one of the most prominent films to explore the relationship of fathers and sons to baseball was *Field of Dreams*. In fact, this film was as much, if not more, concerned with the relationship between a father and a son than it was a "baseball" movie. Baseball, however, played a major role in connecting this father and son combination. It was the story of an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella who was inspired by a voice that he could not ignore. The voice said, "If you build it he will come." To find out what that voice meant, Ray started by plowing under his corn field in order to build a baseball field. This ordinary corn field was then transformed into a place where dreams came true. Ball

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players, including "Shoeless Joe" Jackson and the seven other men accused in the "Black Sox Scandal", got to come forward in time to play the game that meant so much to them. The "he" that the voice was referring to was not some past player of the game but rather Ray Kinsella's father, John.

Throughout the film, the viewer slowly discovers the guilt Ray felt in regard to the distance that Ray put between himself and his father. Ray's father taught him to love baseball as he had loved it, but as a teenager Ray saw his father only as an old man who tried to live his failed dream of baseball fame through his son. Ray told his wife, "I never forgave him for getting old. By the time he was as old as I am now, he was ancient. He must have had dreams, but he never did anything about them." It was the classic generation gap problem that isolated Ray and his father. At seventeen Ray left home after he said something awful to his father. His father's all-time hero was "Shoeless Joe" Jackson, and Ray left a scar when he told his father that he "could never respect a man who had a criminal for a hero." With those words Ray left his father and never had the courage to face him again. Ray's father passed away before Ray had the chance to explain how sorry he was. Ray lived with that pain until he built the field and got a chance to fulfill his own dream of being reunited with his father. The film ends with Ray and his father playing catch. Baseball again becomes the tie that binds even after death. Ironically, Ray hands his love of the game on to the next generation as well by telling his child about the history of the game and what it meant to him. The irony is that his child is not a son, but a daughter.

This leads to another prominent theme in baseball films, which is the role of women. Their roles range from groupie type fans to sex objects to devoted wives and mothers to tough players of the game. In each instance, however, their roles reflect societal views at the time and their connection to the sport of baseball.

*Major League* is worth mentioning because of the leadership role a woman played in this film. When the Cleveland Indians' owner dies, the team is taken over by a woman named Rachel Phelps, played by Margaret Whitton. Even though a woman is put into a position of power in this film, she is one of the film's major antagonists. She puts together a losing team, on purpose, so that she can get out of the contract that is keeping the team in Cleveland. She wishes to move the team to Miami where she feels it is nice and warm and pleasant. She uses cut-throat business tactics in order to achieve her goal. Even though she dresses to flaunt her sexuality she seems to use the traits that are stereotypically associated with men, such as ego, power and greed, to get what she wants. This film is billed as a comedy, yet when a life size poster of Rachel Phelps is put in the locker room and stripped of one article of clothing for each game of the series that the Indians win, society's view of women, in this film, is put into place.

The reality of female owners can be seen, for example, in Marge Schott of Cincinnati. Margaret Unnewehr Schott, with her St. Bernard in tow, announced her purchase of the Cincinnati Reds on December 21, 1984. She called it her "Christmas gift to the people of Cincinnati," a purchase she claimed would prevent the team from leaving the area. "This marked the beginning of the strange and tumultuous reign of Marge Schott, certainly one of the most bizarre and controversial regimes in the annals of sport, one that turned to scandal when she was suspended in February 1993 for making racial and ethnic slurs." (Bass p. viii) Mike Bass, a sportswriter and columnist with *The Cincinnati Post*, described Marge as a person who would bounce from topic to topic with one off the wall response after another. He also added that "she simply has no filter between her brain and her mouth." (Bass p. viii)

According to Bass, Marge tried to control every aspect of the club, even in areas that she knew little about. "Yet the public saw the other side of her, the benevolent owner



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who would sit behind the dugout and do the wave and sign scores of autographs while schmoozing with the masses. She was one of them, a chain-smoking, trash-talking, dog-walking, blue-collar owner." (Bass p. ix) Her earthiness endeared her to fans in Cincinnati and even as her reputation was put on the line "her stock in her city remained amazingly strong, as one local poll after another indicated." (Bass p. ix) According to Bass she did make racial slurs, a few of them right in front of him, but nothing happened to her. "From a tumultuous marriage to Charles Schott, to a battle with General Motors over her late husband's car dealership, to a scandal that threatened to rid her of her beloved franchise, Marge Schott would persevere. Sometimes in spite of the odds. Sometimes in spite of herself." (Bass p. x)

Is Marge Schott just another strange personality? Maybe, but she is also a product of American society. A society that often expects women to act like men when they are part of the business world. A world that would call women like Rachel Phelps of *Major League* and Marge Schott, after whom Rachel was modeled, a "bitch", yet on the other hand would call a man who acted in a like manner a "real go getter".

*The Natural* is a film that offers us differing roles for women. On the one hand, there is the evil seductress type character. Harriet Bird was a crazed fan, so to speak. She was the seductress obsessed with "star" baseball players who lured the young Roy Hobbs to her motel room, dressed all in black, asked him if he would be the best ever, and then proceeded to shoot him with a silver bullet. A similar event happened to a baseball player named Eddie Waitkus, who played for the Philadelphia Phillies. In 1949 the Phillies lost first baseman Waitkus because he was shot in the chest by a crazed female fan. Midseason complacency and the loss of Waitkus threatened to strand the Phillies in the second division. Then, with new red-pinstripe uniforms and a recovered Eddie Waitkus, the 1950 Phillies took the pennant. Again, film and sport reflect real life.

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The manager, Bob Fischer, of Hobbs' team, The Knights, has a niece with similar temptress style qualities. She tried to seduce the older Roy Hobbs when he returned to the game later in life. She even went so far as to poison Roy so he could not play. She worked with the owners in trying to get Roy to throw the game so that the owners could take Bob Fischer's share of stock in the team and dismember it.

On the other hand, in this film, the self-sacrificing quality of women prevails when Roy Hobbs' childhood sweetheart comes back into his life. She sacrificed herself by raising their child alone so that Roy could do what he was a "natural" at doing, which was playing baseball. Her presence in the stands was almost magical as she stood up in the stands with a golden glow all around her. After she stood, Roy was able to succeed. She revealed their son's existence just at the moment she knew Roy needed that extra boost to win. At the end of the film the three of them appear united by the game and happy.

In *Bull Durham* a woman named Annie Savoy (Susan Sarandon) gives women an interesting, yet philosophical role. Annie is educated, poetic, funny, inspirational, sexual, and vulnerable all at the same time. She truly could be called the ultimate fan. When the film begins she discusses her philosophy of religion. She claimed that she belonged to "the Church of Baseball" and that it was much better than regular church because you had no guilt and the sex life was never boring. She also claimed that she made the boys feel confident and they made her feel safe and pretty. "What I give them lasts a life time. What they give me lasts one-hundred and forty-two games. Sometimes it seems like a bad trade, but bad trades are part of the game." She used her feminine philosophy to tame wild, young rookies into mature ball players, which was difficult for men such as "Crash" Davis to understand. To many people, not just women, sports are a religion. Annie epitomized this with the shrine to baseball she had in her home, complete with candles and baseball "holy relics."

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In his book, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games*, Yale professor and Commissioner of baseball, Bart Giamatti discusses the philosophical aspects of sport and also connects it to religion. In this work Giamatti explains how leisure is connected to sport and then connects sport to holiday. "Holiday', when sport occurs, is, after all, a 'holy day', a religious festival. Not all leisure participates in a festive sensibility or in the creation of such a sensibility. This is a state of inner being which is, or is like, the freedom from care and obligation and travail that is like a religious experience. Or it is an experience like what religion promises? If work is a daily negotiation with death, leisure is the occasional transcendence of death. If the former is the strenuous avoidance of inertia, the latter is the active engagement of a moment of immortality." (Giamatti p. 22)

Giamatti continues by quoting the seventeenth-century poet Henry Vaughan who assures us he saw

*...Eternity the other night*

*Like a great ring of pure and endless light,*

*All calm, as it was bright.*

"What Vaughan describes is like a moment of leisure because it is, in Christian terms, a moment of contemplation. It is an instant of insight which is the result of freedom fulfilled, a state of coherence achieved with no coercion. Contemplation is the result not of work but of an activity freely assumed whose goal is to so perfect the self that for a moment we see what lies beyond the self--not as in an abyss, dark as night, but as in a radiance, bright as life." (Giamatti p. 23)

Giamatti continues by adding that if there is a truly religious quality to sport, it lies in the "intensity of devotion brought by the true believer, or fan. And it consists second, and much more so, in the widely shared, binding nature--the creedlike quality--of American sport." (Giamatti p. 24)

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Annie Savoy is just the type of "fan" Giamatti was discussing. She was a team groupie who ended up "enlightening" both the new, young rookie "Nuke" (Tim Robbins) and his aging tutor, "Crash" Davis, about the game of baseball and the game of life.

Finally, the role of women in film comes full circle in the film called *A League of Their Own*. This film was about the formation of a Women's Baseball League during World War II. In this film, a man named Harvey wanted to make money for the major leagues while the boys were away at war. He put a man named Ira Lowenstein in charge. Harvey's concern was not for the women or even the game of baseball, but to make money. In order to draw crowds and escape critics the women had to fit the stereotyped model of a "lady". The owners wanted only pretty women to play. Their uniforms were short skirts. The reaction of one of the players after she saw the uniform said it all--"are we ball players or ballerinas?" The women had to go to charm school to learn to act like real "ladies". Critics of the time said they were a disgusting example of sexual confusion. The owners did everything in their power to make sure the women fit into the mold of femininity and still make a profit. News footage showed the women serving tea to the umpires, sewing in the dugout, and putting on make-up between bases.

In this film the players had real talent and many were great athletes. They were power hitters, fast base runners, good fielders and pitchers. They tried hard to shake off these stereotyped images but the crowds did not come. These women soon realized that to get into the "game" that they loved, they had to play the "game". They put on the "show" that everyone wanted to see, but to them it was worth it because it was the only way society would let them play.

The owners had no interest in the women's teams once the war was over. Yet Lowenstein tried to convince the owners otherwise -- something that an audience in 1992, when the film first came out, would appeal to more than an audience from the actual time

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period in which the film is set. He felt that it was unfair to tell women that it was their "patriotic duty" to get out of the kitchen and into the factories just to turn around and tell them to get back into the kitchen once the war was over. He felt the same way about women's baseball. By the end of the film he and the players had owners and others convinced that a Women's League could last. Therefore, many of the roles that women played in baseball films also reflected their roles in society.

*A League of Their Own* is one of the films that realistically reflected how society reacted to women in the sport of baseball. In fact, while researching women's baseball, several publicity photos were found that closely matched scenes from the film and many of the team names and player personalities were based on real accounts of the teams and women involved in the sport. The film's historical accuracy is well recreated.

Philip Wrigley, owner of the Chicago Cubs, was the creator of the All-American Girls Baseball League. The office of War Information had informed Wrigley and other owners that it might be necessary to cancel the 1943 major-league baseball season because of war. Even the minor league farm teams were wiped out because of the draft, and half of the players for the big-league teams had joined the war effort. Wrigley was worried about player quality and that fans would lose interest. Wrigley, along with Branch Rickey who was the Brooklyn Dodgers general manager, and others decided to create a women's professional ball league to help them through this crisis. (Johnson p. xix)

During the years of the war, women were encouraged to do all things normally reserved for men. It was considered patriotic and they went to work in factories, offices or joined the services, so why not put them to work in the ball fields as well?

Players were property of the League and not the individual teams. "The League recruited, trained and signed the players, then evaluated and assigned them to various teams according to their abilities with the purpose of creating teams of equal strength at

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the beginning of each season. Players signed contracts with the League itself. At the end of each season, they decided whether to continue with the League and then were available for assignment to the same team or another team. This allocation rule, while sensible for the league as a whole, created havoc for the players and their loyalties." (Johnson p. xx)

Organizers believed that the fans would only be attracted to women's baseball if the players, who were expected to play like men, looked and acted like women. The reasoning was clearly proclaimed in a manual put out by the League:

Every effort is made to select girls of ability, real or potential, and to develop that ability to its fullest power. But no less emphasis is placed on femininity, for the reason that it is more dramatic to see a feminine-type girl throw, run and bat than to see a man or boy or a masculine-type girl do the same things. *The more feminine the appearance of the performer, the more dramatic her performance.* (emphasis in the original) (Johnson p. xxi)

The women's uniforms were designed to attract fans to the ballpark and to remind them that they were watching women. Their skirts were short and the women were required to let their hair show under their caps and they also had to wear make up.

Despite the fact that the women were required to look dainty and feminine, their skills on the ball diamond were spectacular. They led former major leaguer and Hall of Famer Max Carey, a League President for five years and manager of two All-American teams, to comment on the 1946 championship series between the Rockford Peaches and the Racine Belles. He remarked that the fourteen inning game was "Barring none, even in the majors, the best game I've ever seen." (Johnson p. xxii)

The women's league did enjoy success for a short time, but by 1954 attendance was diminishing. Several factors led to the end of this league. First, people were now not so interested in local entertainment because of the availability of television. Unlike the men's leagues which used television to work for them, the women's league had no one to go to bat for them, so to speak. Second, league management was falling apart. In the

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1951 season the clubs began to acquire ownership of their teams and began to neglect the league as they looked out for their own interests. Consequently, promotion suffered and the league never established a farm system. As a result, fewer women were available to play. Also, the social ideals at the time strongly worked to get women out of the factories and off the ball fields once the war was over. The All-American Girls Baseball League ended with the 1954 season. (Johnson p. xxiv) Therefore, in the film, as well as in real life, society seems to have used these women as a temporary form of entertainment and overlooked their real talent and skill. Nor was there anyone willing to work at developing a women's team for future young women to become involved.

One group that has been discriminated against even more than women in the history of our society would have to be black Americans. This, too, is reflected in films about baseball. One film in particular, *The Soul of The Game*, dealt with just that issue. This film portrayed the lives of Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige and Jackie Robinson and their trials and tribulations, as only one of them would go down in history as the first black player in the major leagues. Throughout the film black players are trod upon as inferior and worthless -- something that was, and sometimes still is, reflected in American society. Each man struggles, in his own way, to deal with the fact that despite their talent, the color of their skin is what keeps them from being equal.

Gibson, named "The Black Babe Ruth" by the media, was a colorful and powerful player. His frustration with the unequal treatment he received because of his skin color was evident. Mentally he had trouble dealing with it, and in frustration he turned to alcohol to ease the pain. At one point in the film he exclaims, "I can't deal with it! My life is nothing but dreaming. Too many 'mays' and 'mights'". The one time he may have been able to release some of this frustration, turned into a tragedy as well. The Negro League all-stars were to play a game against the Major League all-stars. To many, including Gibson, this was more than just a game. It was a chance for these talented, black athletes

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to finally win over whites. Tragically, the game gets rained out and Gibson never recovers. His frustration is echoed throughout history.

Paige, in the film, was portrayed as an aging, yet extremely talented, pitcher. He viewed this as his last chance to make it big. He, too, is frustrated by the treatment he is given but seemed more in tune with how to capture respect from white owners and managers. He knew how to put on a "show". Just like the women in *A League of Their Own*, Paige knew that in order to play the game he loved, he had to play the "game". Unfortunately for Paige, he would not go down in the history books as the "first" because the white league owners were not looking for just talent; they wanted "image".

This is where the young, talented, and educated Robinson came into play. In the film Robinson, a young rookie, is both admired and feared by Paige. Robinson, because he is talented, educated, clean cut and not a big name, is just the image the owners wanted. The white owners did not want a big name player because they wanted someone strong enough not to fight back when they received abuse from fans and other teams. Robinson seemed not to understand why he should be the "first". He was portrayed humbly when he tells Paige and Gibson that "if it weren't for you guys keeping it going, I wouldn't be."

Jackie Robinson's true story is told in MGM's film version of *Jackie Robinson* (1950). Similar to the way Babe Ruth's habits were toned down in the early film version of his story, Robinson's story is also toned down in terms of the severity of racism.

The *Jackie Robinson* film starts with narration that describes that this is not just any story of a boy and his dream, but an American boy in a dream that is truly American. Robinson is a star on the track field in junior college and ends up getting a scholarship to UCLA to play football. Since he is one of the first blacks to get a scholarship to play



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college ball, a few of his teammates and other players from opponent teams treat him roughly. The film does not go into great detail about the abuse and racism, but glosses over it and briefly mentions the fact that most people have a great deal of respect for Jackie on the football field.

Later in the film, Jackie has a difficult time trying to stay in college. He is frustrated that a college education will do him no good because of the limited opportunities for African Americans. His brother Mack received a college degree and the best job he could get was as a street sweeper. Jackie's brother tries to convince him to stay through baseball season. Jackie does not see what good it will do because they will never let him into professional baseball, his best sport, because of his color.

Jackie then tries desperately to get a job coaching. He is a very talented man who excelled in several sports, including track, football, basketball and baseball, yet every application he sent in was turned down. The only "acceptance letter" he does get is from the army.

Upon his return from the army, Jackie gets a baseball job with a Negro League team called the Black Panthers. Jackie does quite well with this team and eventually a scout working for Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers asks to speak with Jackie. The other players are skeptical and do not think that anything will come of this white team's promises. Jackie ignores the scout, but then realizes he is serious; therefore, Jackie goes to meet Branch Rickey.

Branch wants Jackie to start on one of his farm club teams in Montreal. Branch tells Jackie, "This is more than just playing. We want to make a start in the right direction. If we fail no one will try it again for twenty years, but we're dealing with rights here. The right of any American to play the American game." Branch also informs Jackie that it is not going to be easy to be the only black player in an all white league. "They will shout at you and throw to your head. I want a ball player with enough guts not to fight back."

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That is exactly whom Branch Rickey got in Jackie Robinson -- a man who was treated badly but refused to fight back. Actually, Jackie did fight back to a certain extent, for in the film he did so well that the American people grew to love him and he became the only black player on the Dodger's team.

At the end of the film the Dodgers win the pennant race, with a great deal of help from Jackie, and he finally gets his own locker in the club house. The final scene of the film shows Jackie getting an invitation to go to Washington to speak to President Harry S. Truman about his accomplishments. Branch Rickey tells him, "Now you can fight back."

The issue of racism in society and baseball meld together once again, briefly, in a short scene from *A League of Their Own*. In this scene the women are out on the field to get warmed up for a game and a ball gets loose and rolled over to a black woman who stood near by. She reached down, picked up the ball and threw it to the team's star player, Dottie, with great strength and talent. The women nodded at each other in approval. The film seemed to suggest that they were connected as women, but the world was barely ready for women players let alone black women players.

Yet another theme that was echoed by these baseball films was that of the hero. In exploring this theme it is interesting to compare *Babe* starring John Goodman with *The Babe Ruth Story* which starred William Bendix on the same topic made several decades earlier.

The later version, starring John Goodman, is very reflective of what society sees in heroes today. This is a much more realistic point of view. Heroes may do great things, but they are also human. Even though "The Babe" was portrayed as a hero in this film his less than admirable private life was brought to the forefront of the story. Babe, in one scene, was invited to speak at an upper-class social event in his honor. He started with the old "pull my finger" routine which disgusted the guests. The film plunged into his private

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life and dwelled on the dirt it found. It focused on his drinking binges, extramarital affairs, egotistical manner, and his failed dream of becoming a manager. The film did show sympathy in showing that these were the personal problems of an unwanted child who had difficulty dealing with superstardom. It did portray him as a heroic player, who even in his later years would amaze fans with home runs just when they were needed. He was portrayed as a crude, yet caring, man who was unbelievably generous with children and had the capacity to work miracles with sick children. The focus upon his less than perfect private life, however, was what drew the audiences of the 1990s to such a film. Today Americans seem to thrive on such realism. It seems as if we are more interested in the mistakes our heroes make instead of their accomplishments.

The early version of this film, which starred Bendix, obviously played to a much different audience. This was a time when journalists and the media would cover up a hero's private life and gloss over mistakes. A much kinder, gentler Babe appears on the screen in this version. Babe even claimed that it was not his father's fault that he could not get along and keep his nose clean. He said that because his mom was gone his father never recovered. Throughout the film, Babe is seen as a playful, colorful, yet not self-destructive, character. His drinking is chalked up as just "good old boy" fun. His first wife and extramarital affairs are not alluded to at all. He is seen as a generous and courageous man who could do no wrong. He was a god and no one dared tarnish that image. Even on his death bed, Babe was shown to sacrifice his own life for the good of medical science because it might help other people someday.

This was the type of hero people wanted to see at that time. A hero whom people today may consider to be too perfect and fake. People today seem to identify more closely with a hero who has flaws because that is "real" than with the nearly perfect hero portrayed by Bendix.

The fans in these baseball films must also be discussed because they are largely responsible for the creation of these heroes in the first place. In almost every film discussed, the fans have one thing in common. They are very fair-weather fans. This says a great deal about the loyalty of fans to the game of baseball as well as their loyalty in general.

People want to be entertained and if they are not they just do not show up. It would be nice if that did not matter, but sports is business and players need the fans to play the games they love. This becomes very clear in *A League of Their Own* when, in order to fill the stands with fans, the women put on a "show" of sex appeal and stunts despite their real feelings. It happens again in the film *The Soul of The Game* when Paige and other black players put on a comedy show to draw fans.

They know they have talent that would humiliate many white teams, yet because of their place in society at that time, they sacrifice their dignity to play the game that they love.

*Bingo Long's Traveling All Stars and Motor Kings* (1997) was a film that explored just that issue. Billy Dee Williams portrays Bingo Long and James Earl Jones plays his friend Leon Carter. Bingo is tired of the abuse and mistreatment in the Negro Leagues and therefore starts a team of his own.

The struggle to keep his team going is tremendous. They endure all kinds of hardships and racism. Even the Negro League tries to thwart their efforts because Long had taken all the best players and poses a threat to their league.

In order for Long's All Stars to survive, fans expect them to put on a show and Leon Carter struggles with that. He wants people to take them seriously, but he also realizes that in order to survive they must make some sacrifices. Charlie, (Richard Pryor) on the other hand, will sacrifice his identity no matter what in order to be accepted. Comically ironic, Charlie learns to speak Spanish because he has discovered that the white teams are signing Mexican and Puerto Rican players. He also dresses up like a Native

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American -- a sad commentary which reveals the extent to which these leagues would go to keep the African American players out.

Long refuses to give up hope for his team even when the Dodgers want to come and steal his rookie sensation. Leon tells Long, "The white man is moving in. They say it's the end of Negro ball. They won't pay to see us when they can see young guys on the white team." Long's response: "You and me Leon, we can't never lose--NEVER!"

The fans never showed up for losing teams and always showed up for winning teams. Many of the films featured great team comebacks. When the teams were down and out, the fans showed no support. The comedy of *Major League* presents this fickle fan syndrome beautifully. When they were losers the stands were empty, except for three die-hard fans dressed up like stereotypical "Indians" complete with tom-toms. As the Indians began to win games, the three die-hard fans began to get company.

Soon, as the pennant became an object that was closer to reality than a dream, as the die-hard fans were lost in a sea of the fickle ones. Americans like winners in baseball and in society.

Another common element in these baseball films was that to be admired by children was one of the ultimate pleasures of the hero. Duggan, the down and out manager in *A League of Their Own*, finds his confidence restored when young fans ask him to sign their ball. In both Babe Ruth films Babe was seen wallowing in the presence of children that he adored. He would go out of his way to help sick children feel better. He would show up late for games if it meant he could help a child. The admiration and innocence of young children meant a lot to the players in these films which may have something to do with the fact that sports such as baseball bring us back to the pleasant times of our childhood.

Baseball can also help us cope with unpleasant experiences in childhood. *Angels In The Outfield* (1994) is a baseball film that includes a great deal of slap-stick comedy,

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yet it has a serious side. Like *Field of Dreams*, *Angels In The Outfield* includes a fantasy role or the "spirit" of baseball. The classic tale of the underdog rising to the top by spiritual means is retold in this film.

A young boy named Roger is abandoned by his widowed father. When Roger asks if they will ever be a family again, his father replies: "If the Angels win the pennant." This seems to be a near impossibility because the Angels are one of the worst teams in the nation at that time. Roger then makes a wish that the Angels win the pennant so he can have a family again.

Soon after his wish, strange things begin to happen. Roger actually sees angels helping the team, but no one else can see them. The team's manager, George Knox (Danny Glover) is down on his luck without much faith or hope in anything or anyone. Knox does not believe in his team The Angels or the angels Roger claims to have seen, yet he feels that something strange is happening. He keeps Roger around for good luck and sure enough, this down and out team begins to win games.

Slowly, Knox's cold heart begins to melt as his relationship with Roger becomes stronger. With the help of a washed up pitcher, Mel Clark (Tony Danza), the Angels make it to the championship. In the final game Clark is pitching in the last inning and has two strikes and three balls on the batter. He has run out of steam and, as far as Roger can tell, he has no "angels" to help him. Roger tells Knox that all Clark has to do is believe. Just before Clark throws his game deciding pitch, Knox goes to the mound. He relays the message from Roger and the whole crowd begins to wave their arms like angel's wings. This gives Clark the courage to go on and he delivers his final pitch. The ball is hit, and Clark makes a spectacular diving catch to win his team the pennant. The underdogs have won and Roger's wish has come true. His real father does not come back, but Knox invites Roger and his friend J.P. to become a part of his family.

Growing up and coming of age is part of childhood. Another theme that occurred frequently in these baseball films was the growth of a rookie. The wild, untamed, undisciplined rookie was often mentored by a smart, more mature, yet aging player. Being "green" was just part of the game, just like it is part of life. Many times in our lives we live the life of a "rookie", including our first day of school, our first day of high school, our first day on the job, and many more.

*Major League* is one film that demonstrates this theme. Jake Taylor, played by Tom Beranger, was an aging pitcher who took the new, young, and wild pitcher Ricky Vaughn under his wing. For instance, after tryouts the manager would place a red tag in your locker if you did not make the team, rather than speak to the players personally. As a joke, cocky veteran Roger Dera put a red tag in Vaughn's locker because he liked to tease the rookies. Vaughn was extremely upset when he saw the red tag. Jake Taylor helped Vaughn out by telling him the truth, which was that he had made the team.

*The Soul Of The Game* presented yet another rookie and mentor pair. The young rookie Jackie Robinson was taken in under the wing of Satchel Paige in this film. At first Satchel was not very fond of the young Robinson. Jackie was talented and college educated. He thought Jackie was arrogant and idealistic. Eventually, Satchel and Jackie came to understand one another better and Satchel's experience in dealing with broken white promises helped Jackie to see the truth and Jackie's idealism helped Satchel to remember his goals and dreams.

Of these films, *Bull Durham* is a classic example of the maturation of a young rookie. "Crash" Davis, an aging veteran player in the minor leagues was assigned to mature a young pitching dynamo named "Nuke". "Crash" did not like the idea because he knew the owners were just using him. He decided to quit. He walked about three steps

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outside of the manager's office, turned around, and came back. He loved baseball, and if he wanted to stay in the game this was his only choice. Humorously, "Crash" tries to tame "Nuke". At one point when "Nuke" tried to shake off "Crash"'s signals, "Crash" proceeded to teach the egotistical young lad a lesson by telling the batter exactly what pitch to expect. "Crash" worked to teach him how to deal with stardom as well. Once, in the locker room, "Crash" disciplined "Nuke" because "Nuke" had fungus on his shower sandals: "Later people will think this is colorful, now it's just sloppy." "Crash" tried to get "Nuke" to respect the game: "You don't respect the game. You've got talent. That's a gift, but the only thing you think of is money or a Porsche." "Crash" knew from experience that ball players' careers were short lived. With "Crash" and "Nuke's" other mentor, Annie Savoy, "Nuke" made it to "the show".

The importance of the game to these players was displayed throughout each of these films. From the disappointed Babe Ruth who never reached his dream of becoming a major league manager to "Crash" Davis who was released from the minors after "Nuke" made it to "the show" to Shoeless Joe Jackson who was banned from baseball for life, it was more than just a game.

In *Field of Dreams* Ray Kinsella discussed the importance of baseball when he described the famous 1960s author Terence Mann. Ray said that Terence had done everything. He had been on the cover of *Newsweek*. He had been an accomplished writer and Pulitzer Prize winner. He had traveled the world and fought for great causes. Terence even hung out with the Beatles. Yet, in an interview, Terence explained his one true dream was to play at Ebbet's Field with Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers. It never happened because the Dodgers were moved and they tore down Ebbet's Field. Ray's point in this scene was that despite the fact that Terence's life was as exceptional as most people could only imagine, his dream was still something as simple as baseball.



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To conclude, when watching movies we have to be aware that the "suspension of disbelief" comes into play. These films may or may not be historically accurate. They may be realistic or fantasy. In any event they do reflect, to a certain extent, what the public wants and likes. Therefore, the themes that permeate these films can be considered reflective of the general society. Our vision of sports, women, heroes, children and racism as portrayed in these films can change over time and place. Taking a good look at the sport of baseball and its role in film can give us valuable insight into our society. There is something almost magical about the game of baseball. It has a connective energy that links us together as a group of Americans. Maybe it is the fact that we consider it to be such a patriotic game. There could be several reasons for its magic, yet the value of looking at it from a sociological perspective is endless. Even though it may seem sentimental, Terence Mann in the film *Field of Dreams*, tried to explain the appeal that the sport of baseball creates:

The one constant through all these years has been baseball.

America has rolled by like an array of steam rollers, erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. Baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our history, Ray.

It reminds us of all that was once good and it could be again.

Chapter 2  
BOXING FILMS:  
THE INDEPENDENT AMERICAN

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The sport of boxing, like many other pre-Civil War sports, had its origins in England. In the 1820s and 1830s a small group of gamblers and saloon owners established an informal organization to bring Irish and English boxers to the United States. The bouts were hyped to appeal to ethnic and national rivalries.

By the 1840s, even though boxing had been banned in most states because of its brutality, illegal bouts had surpassed boat racing and horse racing as the most popular sport. Without question, this bare knuckle fighting was extremely savage and, on occasion, even deadly. Boxers did not need scientific skills, just stamina, to withstand the physical punishment inflicted on them while trying to pound an opponent. There was no time limit to a round in these days and the fight ended when one was knocked down or thrown out of the ring. A lure of boxing was that it was banned violence, which caused Americans to view it with romantic appeal. Mostly this appeal concerned the working classes, but it spread to all classes.

In 1853, John Morrissey, a brutal Irish street brawler from New York City, became the working class, ethnic example of the American success story when he defeated Yankee Sullivan for the unofficial heavyweight boxing championship. He won two thousand dollars in that fight and with it he built a gambling parlor in New York City. Within five years, he owned the majority interest in five other gambling halls and was the largest stock holder in a one million dollar lottery business. He accomplished all of this before the Civil War. He also financed the construction of the first horse racing track and combination restaurant and gambling casino in Saratoga, New York, turning that city into the nation's most elegant resort. Morrissey also served two terms in Congress.

(Rubenstein 5/12/97)

All of that came to this Irish street brawler because he won one fight and used his winnings to become a successful business man. To an immigrant, this is the American Dream success story.

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After Morrissey retired from the ring in 1857, John C. Heenan assumed the championship. In 1860, Heenan, the new American Champion met Tom Sayers, the British champ. This bout was held outside of London and was a blood bath. The fight lasted for over two hours. In the seventh round, Sayers pulled an arm muscle, but would not quit. Both men were exhausted, and the crowd was getting ugly. The police were about to enter the ring when the referee stopped the match and declared it a draw. Patriotic fervor in the United States caused a media frenzy. On the eve of southern states leaving the Union, newspapers did not deal with a potential Civil War but rather the fight, stating: "Our Pride Is At Stake". The fight caused sectional problems that could tear the country apart to become second page news.

No sport exceeded boxing as a mirror of pre-Civil War America. Boxing reflected ethnic turmoil in the working classes as they struggled for jobs and political influence. Groups like the Irish Catholic, old stock Protestant Yankees, and others entered the ring to represent their heritage for religious and ethnic superiority.

Prize fighting mocked the prevailing Victorian social mores. Yelling, screaming, drinking and betting were deemed acceptable. Victorian ideals of self denial and working hard to obtain success were exchanged by fighters for physical prowess and luck. "Good" people would save their money, but boxers would spend and invest in gambling casinos and other recreation.

In addition, boxing conflicted with the Victorian view of masculinity. They were to be prim, proper, self-restrained, even effeminate, but boxers were rugged, muscular, strong and decisive. The American cowboy image of the tough Westerner was based on the boxers of the Civil war era. Boxers helped create the image of the tough American as compared to "sissy" Europeans. Americans found themselves no longer measuring themselves to Europeans, but rather making fun of them. This attitude was

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reflected from sports, demonstrating the power it had to shape society. (Rubenstein 5/12/97)

In his book *American Scenario*, Joseph Reed explains, "Immigrant is a significant part of the American Scenario--every Immigrant Picture doesn't touch every base, but each uses some part of that great narrative arc, beginning with hardship in the Old Country, struggle to break free, escape, passage, arrival, fight to begin in the States, bringing the others over, escaping ethnic bounds, ending up established in America. *Gentleman Jim* (1942) surely represents a sophisticated instance of the Irish Immigrant Picture, with an almost Hitchcockian comment on class. *Gentleman Jim* triumphs by character: the character of an insufferable egotistical unself-conscious Irish braggart of immense charm." (Reed p. 65)

Raoul Walsh's *Gentleman Jim* is the life of Jim Corbett (Errol Flynn), the heavyweight boxer who defeated John L. Sullivan (Ward Bond). *Gentleman Jim* begins with a freeze frame postcard. Corbett starts off with a pushy proposition to an upper-class girl (Alexis Smith) who comes to the bank in which he is an assistant teller. He works his way into her father's club and viewers witness Corbett struggle in a hostile and exclusionist world because he is Irish. This also creates his love/hate relationship with the girl. Corbett's ambition to climb the social ladder is just as strong as his ambition as a boxer, resulting in his challenge to "the Great John L. Himself." Corbett wins the club match, and this helps the audience to overlook his bad manners.

Then the big champion rides through town like he is in a parade and eats that huge meal that has gone down in the history books. "John L. has become a public event: his performance in a wood-chopping marathon, a theatrical 'vehicle' arranged for him, finally converts all this into a pageant-allegory." (Reed p. 67)

Corbett meets Sullivan before their match, which makes the big fight almost anticlimactic because "we now know how to root for an impossible (but eminently

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American) guy." (Reed p. 67) The party after the fight expresses the real climax when Alexis Smith's character gives Corbett an enormous hat to fit his swelled head. Sullivan's humbling is part of the rise and fall myth and his decline is the start of Corbett's rise. "Jim Corbett: he is not the conventional Irish swaggerer by any means, but a very original and rather gentle Irish-American blowhard. We are brought to cheer for someone we never expected to like." (Reed p. 68)

Reed's immigrant scenario explanation aligns quite well with the Ron Howard film *Far and Away* (1992). Set in Ireland, Joseph Donnelley (Tom Cruise), a poor tenant farmer, is determined to bring justice to an oppressive landlord. Instead, he finds himself accompanying the landlord's daughter, Shannon (Nicole Kidman), to America in a quest for land. In the excitement of the Oklahoma land rush, they realize their dreams of land and life together.

The story starts in Western Ireland in 1892 at a time when tenant farmers, after years of oppression and poverty, have begun to rebel. Joseph has two brothers and when their father dies accidentally in a rebel uprising, he leaves Joseph and his brothers still deeply in debt. This film is not really about the sport of boxing as much as it is the story of the immigrant's American Dream. On his deathbed, Joseph's dad appears to have come back from death for just a few minutes to tell Joseph of his dream to work his own land one day. "Land is a man's soul; without land a man is nothing." Joseph's father dies, and Joseph then seeks revenge by trying to kill the landlord, Daniel Christy. Joseph bungles the assassination and finally ends up escorting the landlord's daughter, Shannon, to America.

It is in America that the film portrays quite a realistic picture of the hardships new immigrants had to face. Shannon gets taken by a con artist, and she and Joseph are forced to face the hardships of the streets. They get jobs plucking chickens. She is

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subjected to the cruelties of the foreman, and they are both subjected to ethnic hostility. Joseph eventually discovers that prize fighting is the fastest way they can make money to get to Oklahoma. The sport of boxing was helping people rise from poverty and make it on their own. While all of this is going on, the class struggle between Joseph and Shannon begins to break down.

Mr. Boach takes over as a type of manager for Joseph, telling Joseph that he wants him to fight a "goddamn Italian and I want you to split his block." Joseph is tired of fighting and replies: "You boys don't own me, I box for myself, alone." One of Mr. Boach's men tells Joseph that if he does not fight, he will not be able to live anywhere or be able to make it on his own, so Joseph must reluctantly agree to fight. He tries to make Shannon see that the managers respect him, but she responds by telling him: "You're money in their pockets and nothing more," proving that America is the land of opportunity, but not for everyone, Joseph now finds himself a slave to the boxing managers, just as he had found himself a slave as a tenant farmer in Ireland.

Money and its connection to power can be seen when the managers dump Joseph out into the streets because he loses the big fight. They take all of his money and beat him. When the police try to help, Mr. Boach tells them to beat it; they acknowledge him and leave Joseph to be beaten.

Eight months later, after a series of mishaps and a separation from Shannon, Joseph decides to head to the Ozark mountains to be a part of the land rush in the Oklahoma Territory. He and Shannon work together and finally sink their flag into a piece of land they can claim as their own.

Although this film does not put boxing at its core, it is important as a boxing film for several reasons. This film demonstrates the immigrant influence on the sport of boxing and on its history in a realistic fashion. It also shows the beginnings of managerial influence and the difficulty a boxer had if he was alone with no managers to help him get

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the fights that would make money. On the other hand, managers could be greedy, and as Shannon reminded Joseph, "you're money in their pockets and nothing more."

*Far and Away* was released in 1992 by MCA Universal and seemed to appeal to modern American audiences for more than one reason. The actors were popular and the prize fighting made the film an action/adventure. It was also a love story, but more than anything else it was a story of independence, which is why it appealed to the American audience. The film gives people a sense of history as well as a feeling of hope and pride in watching someone come up from nothing and make something of himself. It is the great American success story set in early America.

*Raging Bull* (1980), set in the 1940s, tells of a different kind of success story. This film is considered by many critics to be one of the best films of the 1980s. It is a gritty docu-drama about the hard-headed prize fighter Jake LaMotta. The film seems like splices of his home movies. The film won eight Academy Award nominations including best picture, best actor and best director. It won the award with Robert DeNiro as best actor.

The story starts in New York City in 1967 and then flashes back to 1941. Undefeated, LaMotta explains that you have to bite, kick, or do whatever you have to do to win. Then in the tenth round of a fight in 1941 he lost his first fight, but at least he lasted until the tenth round. LaMotta had big dreams and plans and was never happy as a middleweight boxer. "I'll never fight Joe Louis because I've got small hands," he said as he contemplated his future as a prize fighter. The film demonstrates LaMotta's drive and determination but also reveals his character flaw in the constant fights both physical and mental that he has with his wife, played by Cathy Moriarty and his brother, played by Joe Pesci.

LaMotta battles undefeated Sugar Ray Robinson for the second time in 1943. It was the first time anyone had ever knocked down Sugar Ray, and LaMotta won



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the fight. Three weeks later, in Detroit, LaMotta again knocked Sugar Ray down, but he lost the fight. LaMotta contemplated his loss. "Maybe I'm bad and it's all coming back to me," he confessed to his brother after the fight. LaMotta, however then went on to fight a series of successful bouts.

LaMotta's brother later tries to get him to work with an agent, but he insists that he wants to make it on his own. He feels the pressure and realizes that maybe he cannot get to the big show on his own. In 1947 he was asked to take a dive for a fight against Fox. Fox won the fight and the board suspended LaMotta. This only helps LaMotta to reaffirm the fact that he wants to make it on his own as an independent boxer. On June 15, 1949 LaMotta proved his worth by winning the Middleweight Championship against Cerdan.

Again, the film is filled with images of his abusive behavior toward his wife, family, and his brother. He began to let himself go but then miraculously he made a great comeback and kept his title in 1950 only to lose it to Sugar Ray a few years later.

The story then takes us to Miami in 1956 when LaMotta announces his retirement and plans to buy a nightclub. LaMotta now appears very out of shape and washed up. Then he is brought up on vice charges brought by a fourteen year old girl in Dade County Florida. By 1958 he is asking the same question over and over again: "Why? Why? Why?"

This story reveals that it does take a person with strength of mind and body to succeed, especially as an independent fighter. LaMotta's determination to succeed is what helped him win that belt, but it was also the personality that caused pain to his family and eventually to himself. Americans should applaud his hard work to remain independent, but also should learn that there is a steep price to pay for trying to accomplish such a

goal. His abusive personality worked well in the ring, but not in his personal life, and his difficulty came in not being able to separate the two.

This film's message was very similar to the film *Champion* starring Kirk Douglas and Arthur Kennedy. This is the story of an unscrupulous boxer who fights his way to the top, but eventually alienates all of the people who helped him on the way up. His greed for glory becomes the cause of his inevitable downfall. This film, based on a story by Ring Lardner, received six Academy Award nominations, including Kirk Douglas for best actor, and won the award for best film editing.

*Champion* begins similarly to *Raging Bull* in its flashback opening scene. The film begins with the narrator's voice: "This is a story only told in the fight game. About a boy's rise from poverty to become champ of the world." Then we discover that Midge (Kirk Douglas), unable to really keep a good and stable job, has invested all of his money in a restaurant business in California that he has neither seen nor carefully researched. When he and his brother Connie (Arthur Kennedy) go to California, they soon discover that they have been the victims of a con-artist and no business awaits them. The restaurant owner gives Midge a job and then the age old case of being at the right place at the right time presents itself. Midge accidentally breaks some bottles of pop while he is delivering them to a boxing club. Johnny Dumme is supposed to fight, but he has a bad cut over his eye and cannot go through with the scheduled bout. The manager, Charlie, tells Midge he will give him thirty-five dollars if he can last four rounds with Ziggy Mendoza. Midge is so desperate for money at this time that he agrees to the fight. Midge gets quite a pounding, yet he lasts the whole fight.

After the fight he says hello to a beautiful woman named Grace, played by Marilyn Maxwell. She completely shuns him. Shortly afterwards, a big boxing promoter named Tommy Haley (Paul Stewart) notices Midge and tells him that he has guts and courage and asks him if he wants to fight again. Midge brushes it off and says, "Boxing

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is not for me." He pushes away Haley's offer to look him up at Brady's gym and tries to collect his thirty-five dollars from Charlie. He only gets ten. Charley takes twenty dollars for a manager's fee, and five dollars for a dressing room fee. Midge promptly sucker punches Charley, clearly demonstrating his short fuse and bad temper.

Later in the film the restaurant owner forces Midge to marry his daughter Emma (Ruth Roman). One day, on the beach with Emma, Midge gives a glimpse into what will later become his motivation. Emma asks him why he is not happy. He replies, "It's hard to be happy when you're poor. I've been poor all my life, real poor. My dad ran away when I was four years old and my mom couldn't keep both boys so I went to an orphanage until I was old enough to work. When I was in that ring all I thought about was to beat my dad's head off."

Later, Midge tells his brother Connie that he is leaving Emma. "It's every man for himself and nice guys don't make money," Midge explains. "I'm gonna get somewhere, not be 'hey you' all my life. I want people to call me 'mister'. I'm gonna make something of myself." Connie tries to stop him, but Midge heads off to Brady's Gym.

At the gym, Tommy Haley does some philosophizing on the subject of boxing. "I'm outta the fight business! It stinks. And it's not sweat. It's no good. The human body wasn't made for the sole benefit of the fight game. You get hit in the head, scramble your brains. And for what? To win bets for somebody you don't even know. What does it prove? Is that a way to make a living? This is the only sport in the world that two guys would be arrested for if they got drunk and did it for nothing."

It is interesting to note that during the gilded age of sport in the early 1900s, close to the setting of this film, much of American society centered around what is called a cult of masculinity. This was held together by a loose combination of rough friendships, story telling which included lying about how great you are, and a great deal of

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sexual boasting, all of which was held together by excessive drinking. At this time, the cult of masculinity logically extended into sports and the accompanying physical violence of sport. In the Gilded Age, sport was a microcosm of life. For most people, during this age, the way to the top was virtually impossible to attain and the few who made it found the climb torturous. Fierce competition to keep your job and feed your family was a way of life, and it was brutal. Therefore, the brutality of sport appealed to many young men. By defending yourself through domination of others in sports it was possible to vent the hostility and frustration that built up everyday. Boxing, quite naturally, came to the forefront as this form of release. (Rubenstein May 21, 1997)

Midge then asks Haley why he sticks around if he hates it so much. Haley replies: "With some guys it's the bottle--me, I like to watch a couple of good guys in action." So, Haley does not quit because there is something in the lure of the sport that keeps him there, regardless of the sport's negative side effects.

The next part of the film reminded me of the *Rocky* films in that it included that hard workout scene where Midge goes from a zero to a hero in a montage of different workouts. It is after his first major victory that we begin to see the real motivation for Midge. His brother, Connie, urges him to quit now that he has proven his point. Midge does not want to stop now. Connie tells his brother that he did not really know him in the ring because he looked like he wanted to kill his opponent. Midge wonders why Connie thinks that is a bad thing. "I kept thinking, you weren't just hitting that guy in the ring, you were hitting a lot of guys; all the guys that ever hurt you. For the first time people were cheering for me. I got my foot on the ladder. We're not hitchhiking anymore, we're riding."

Midge's vengeful attitude ends up winning him several fights. Midge enjoys his new found wealth, but he suffers because he is independent. Midge is slated to fight for the number one spot but the "boys downtown" want Midge to throw the fight.

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Connie tries to get Midge to see the power that these owners have, but Midge is defiant, yelling: "Oh no! No one's rubbing dirt in my face now. For three years I've worked like a slave, lived like a monk, and got my brains beat out and the fat bellies with big cigars tell me I'm still a tramp." Midge decides not to throw the fight, and, as a result, the gamblers beat up Connie and his manager, Haley. Midge does not seem to worry that his actions are affecting other people as he scrambles his way to the top -- a trait that many American business people still admire. Often, however, there is a price to pay.

Jerry Harris is a big time manager who uses his wife to seduce Midge and convince him to join Jerry. Midge dumps his old friend and manager, Tommy Haley. Connie tries to convince him that he is making a mistake, but Midge just excuses it away. "I made him money and who's been taking the punches? Me or him?" Connie thinks that boxing is a rotten business and Midge explains that it is just like any other business, only here the blood shows.

Midge keeps on winning and even gains recognition as athlete of the year. His ego and his disrespect for those who have supported him soar. His brother Connie comes out and tells him, "you stink from corruption." Midge beats up his crippled brother and throws his cane at him. Midge finally has gone too far. His last fight in the ring is a tough one. He wins, but loses his life in the fight because of a brain hemorrhage. Connie tells the press that Midge was a real champion and credit to the profession of boxing.

The story of Midge Kelly is similar to the great American success story. The idea that a person can rise from nothing and become a champion is an idea to which Americans love to cling. This story was told with a twist, however, in that it shows what can happen if a person steps on too many people on the climb to the top.

*The Champ* (1979) is yet another film that deals with an individual's rise from riches to rags. Billy Flynn (Jon Voight) is an ex-champion who has gambled and drunk away most of his fortune. He works for a horse ranch and takes care of his young son,

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T.J. (Ricky Schroeder). One night, while drinking heavily, Flynn confesses to his son that he lost his title, but that he does not care. "People don't know nothing", Flynn explains. "They wasn't in there taking the punches."

Later Flynn steals money from T.J.'s piggy bank so he can place a bet. He wins and buys T.J. his own race horse. The horse gets hurt in a race and T.J. shows his love for the animal by saying that he will love it and keep it, even if the horse cannot run anymore. The strong analogy between the washed up horse and his washed up, ex-champion father is clearly evident.

Soon Flynn's ex-wife Annie (Faye Dunaway) comes into the picture. She wants, after seven years, to see her son T.J. again. Annie is now re-married and very wealthy. Flynn then goes through a great deal of inner turmoil and soul searching to try to do the right thing for his son, but he goes about it in the wrong way. He feels that money is his answer and ends up losing T.J.'s horse because of it. He gets into a fight over the horse and ends up in jail. T.J. visits his dad in jail and his dad refuses to let T.J. call him "Champ" any more: "Don't call me champ. A champ only uses his fists in the ring. I'm a bum."

Finally, Flynn is released from jail and, after talking to Annie, decides to get back into the ring after a seven year break. He gets back into the ring for T.J. because, as he told Annie: "I want T.J. to have a good home and go to a good school. I can't make that kind of money walking horses." Flynn then goes through the comeback stage, similar to the scene in other boxing films, which is the montage of strenuous workout drills.

The night of the big fight arrives. Flynn takes quite a beating but wins the fight. He is badly injured, and with his last breath tells his son: "The Champ always comes through."

*The Champ* is a film that centers more upon the integrity of an individual than it does the sport of boxing. Boxing lends itself well to the ideals of an individual attaining goals and keeping them, and this film demonstrates that theme.

At the turn of the century boxing as a sport had risen in the eyes of the public, yet still retained its sordid side. Perhaps of all the evils associated with boxing at the turn of the century, racism was foremost. Its principal victim was Jack Johnson the center of the film *The Great White Hope* (1970). This film depicts Jack Johnson's life. In the film they call him Jack Jefferson and his role is played by James Earl Jones.

Boxing has been said to represent the ultimate test of skill, courage, intelligence, and, most of all, manhood. Boxing champions traditionally have been made symbols of both national and racial superiority. Black challengers to white champions became symbolic threats to white racial superiority. John L. Sullivan, Bob Fitzsimmons and even Jim Corbett and James J. Jeffries refused to defend their title against a black challenger. In doing so they fostered the idea of retaining white supremacy. It works when you have big stars, but when Jeffries retired in 1905, the heavyweight division had no white stars. So in an elimination series a boring fighter named Marvin Hart won. Seven months later he lost the title to an even more boring fighter named Tommy Burns. While this was going on Jack Johnson, who was denied entrance into the elimination tournaments, was defeating every opponent who would step into the ring.

White supremacists hated Jack because after each knockout he would stand over his white opponent. He would also go out on the town with two or three white women, and this really angered some people. This power in the ring, and implied sexual superiority, inflamed racial hatred. (Rubenstein 6/11/97)

In 1909 he entered the ring with Stanley Ketchell, and this was important because it was being filmed. Jack promised the filmmakers that he would make Ketchell look good. Movie makers loved it and he really did do what he said he would. In the twelfth

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round , however, Ketchell made a mistake and knocked Johnson down. This angered Johnson so badly that he sprang to his feet and with a single punch, knocked Ketchell out for five minutes and left three of his teeth in his glove. After the Ketchell bout, where you could see the "animal fury" of Johnson, whites demanded Jeffries return to the ring as their "great white hope".

George "Tex" Rickard, a famous promoter, scheduled this fight in Reno, Nevada on July 4, 1910. He played up the patriotism and racial aspect of the fight for all it was worth. This really implied that a Jefferies victory would not only reaffirm the inferiority of blacks, but could actually constitute a major step in the elimination of the black race in the United States. (Rubenstein, 6/11/97)

This is where the film *The Great White Hope* begins. In the film Jack (Jefferson) is convinced by his manager, Goldie, to accept the fight. Goldie calls it the fight of the century. Jack replies, "So I could win and be the fighter of the century, or lose and be the nigger of the minute." Jack then begins training for the fight with his white girlfriend, Eleanor Backman (Jane Alexander), by his side.

The film is quite accurate in its depiction of the deep seeded racism that existed and the fear if their "white hope" was unsuccessful. Jack is yelled at and shown in effigy with a yellow streak down his back. The press abuse him and so do some blacks. They accuse him of being "white" because of his girlfriend and his money.

Jack wins the bout and angers even more people. He enjoys his wealth and flaunts it with the opening of his own hotel and his marriage to his white girlfriend, Eleanor. On their honeymoon Jack is arrested for violation of the Mann Act, which was twisted to fit prosecutors' needs when Jack could be defeated in no other capacity. Jack fled the country to avoid jail time and does not have much luck abroad.



Jack finally ends up in Mexico and prosecutors try to force his hand by having him throw a fight so a white man can win. They promise him a reduced sentence back in the States. Jack refuses to give up his integrity even in his poverty. His wife tries to persuade him to do what they want because she claims, "They've got you anyway because you're dying here." He treats her badly after that and forces her to leave him. She then commits suicide by throwing herself down a well. Upon the discovery of her body, Jack tells the agents he will throw the fight as they have asked.

The final battle of the film is in Mexico. Jack does go down in the ring, but his anger forces him up again. It appears he does not want to give in, but at the end of the film, in round twelve, Jack gives up and goes down for good.

In real life, in Havana, Cuba, Jack Johnson went down in the twenty-sixth round and Jess Willard became the champ. Later, Jack claimed he had thrown the fight in return for the Federal government dropping all charges. If his story was true, United States government officials betrayed him. They claimed no such deal was made. In 1920, in desperation, Jack Johnson came back to the United States and served his sentence. More than any other sports figure, big Jack Johnson symbolized the glory and tragedy of sports in the early twentieth century.

*When We Were Kings* (1996) tells a much different story. This film is documentary in style and is deeply political, centering around the famous bout between Mohammed Ali (Cassius Clay) and George Foreman in Africa. At the same time, the film focuses upon Ali, his life, and his political views. The film opens with this statement from Ali: "Damn Americans and what they think. Yeah, I live in America, but I was born in Africa [although in reality he was born in Kentucky] and Africa is the home of the black man. And I was a slave four-hundred years ago and I'm going home to fight amongst my brothers." Spike Lee also comments on the fact that the media has made us think that Africa was bad.

On his twentieth birthday Ali stated that some people said he was too cocky and talked too much. His reply was that anything he said he could back up. His ego was amazingly large, yet superbly productive. In 1973 George Foreman beat Joe Frazier, which placed Ali in a match with Frazier for the heavyweight championship. Sportscaster Howard Cosell, in an interview with Ali, said, that he did not believe Ali could beat Foreman. Ali replied: "All I need is the right prayer. Not only George Foreman will fall, but mountains will fall." Cosell replied with: "Yes, but you are not the man you were ten years ago." Without missing a beat, Ali's humor came alive when he rebutted Cosell by saying, "Your wife said you are not the same man you were two years ago."

The film then flashes back to cover various pieces of Ali's life and career as a boxer. After his victory over Sonny Liston in 1965 Ali (Cassius Clay at the time) was in trouble for violating Selective Service Laws by refusing to be inducted. He was sentenced to five years and ten-thousand dollars. He claimed that being a black Muslim minister exempted him from the draft.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ali was unpopular with mainstream Americans. He joined the Nation of Islam which at the time was seen as a radical black separatist group. Foreman, an Olympic gold medalist, represented America to both mainstream Americans and Africans. Foreman deeply offended the Africans right away when he brought his German Shepard with him on the trip to Africa because Shepards were used by Belgians as police dogs. The fight was, however, a big show. Don King, Ali's manager, set it up so both Ali and Foreman would receive five million dollars for the fight. The President of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko, put up the purse. He did it for publicity and to help put Zaire on the map. Celebrities such as James Brown, B.B. King, and the Spinners were in attendance. It was a huge assembly of Black Americans and Africans and was billed as the "Rumble in the Jungle."

After a six week delay, because Foreman cut his eye while practicing, the fight was on. On October 30, 1974 the fight took place at 4:00 AM so that it could be broadcast at a reasonable hour in the United States. Mobutu did not attend for fear of an assassination attempt. Ali claimed that the fight was not for him but for black people who did not have knowledge of themselves. It was the age and wisdom of Ali against the youth and power of Foreman. The atmosphere was tense. Ali stayed in the ropes for most of rounds one through five. By round five, Foreman was tired and Ali finally triumphed.

Just as the fight finished, the monsoons started. There were three inches of water in the locker rooms after the fight. George Foreman then battled with two years of depression. Ali, however, had a message to African Americans: "Afro Americans in America are spoiled. You are better in your poverty, unspoiled--keep that." His separatist ideals were not very popular with the American audience of that time. It is interesting that twenty-three years after that fight, Americans would laud Ali as one of the greatest Americans ever when he lit the torch at the Olympic Games in 1997, once again proving that in time the power of sports far outweighs even political passions.

A twenty year span can also do a great deal with the themes in boxing films if you consider the path of the *Rocky* movies. If you look for themes throughout the five films in the *Rocky* series you can almost map popular American sentiment. The original *Rocky* came out in 1976 and was considered a huge success. It gave Americans a more realistic look at the world of boxing as a sport as well as the classic story of an individual's rise from obscurity to fame that they seem to love.

In *Rocky*, the big fight came between African American Apollo Creed, played by Carl Weathers, and an Italian American, Rocky Balboa, played by Sylvester Stallone. It is also a fight for Rocky to build the strength he needs to fight and the strength he needs

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to make it on his own. This is the similar, "I can make it on my own" theme that is seen in several other boxing films.

Apollo is the big showman. He gets all the publicity and spends money to get everyone's attention. All Rocky wants to do is "go the distance" in a humble fashion. By watching Rocky train, America got an honest look at the real life of a boxer and a taste of what the boxing world is all about. The fight ends in a split decision, which Rocky considers a victory.

In 1979, *Rocky II* emerged. In this film, Rocky is a bit disenchanted and down on his luck. Through the encouragement of his friends and manager, played by Burgess Meredith, Rocky agrees to a rematch against the champ Apollo Creed. Again they pit the African American against the Italian American, and this time the Italian wins.

Three years later in 1982 *Rocky III* was released. Now the battle is not so much a racial issue but a battle with new found wealth. If you think about American sentiment in the early 1980s, it is interesting. This was Reagan's America. Racial issues were not as prevalent as they were in the 1970s, and people were really beginning to look at the issues surrounding class and wealth. Rocky's lifestyle of wealth and idleness causes him to become overconfident. This time Rocky is the one putting on the show while his challenger, "Mr. T", trains in an old gym and gets a real workout. The idea that money does not always buy happiness was a large theme pushed into the American public.

Rocky learns his lesson by getting knocked out in the second round. Mickey, Rocky's trainer, still played by Burgess Meredith, dies and Apollo Creed takes over as Rocky's trainer. Rocky has now realized that the money and the show he has put on will do him no good unless he works for himself. Again, the prevalent boxing theme of individualism emerges. Creed tells Rocky: "Stuff can be replaced. You can't fight for guilt, money, Mickey, but for you alone." Then, without media coverage or fancy

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overhead, Mr. T. and Rocky fight again in street brawling fashion. Rocky has learned his lesson and he wins the fight by getting back to the basics and the roots of the hunger he had as a young champion rising up from the streets. This reminds Americans to rediscover their simple beginnings and to think about the growing materialism in the world.

By 1985 when *Rocky IV* hits the screen, Americans are still battling stereotypes, but now it is with the Russians and the Age of Technology. Consequently, this time Rocky's big battle is against a young Russian who had been training by means of the latest technological advances and who was also aided by performance enhancing drugs.

The political overtones in this film are strong. The "us" against "them" motif emerges strongly with lines such as "at least we don't keep our people behind walls with guns," a theme which popular culture in the mid-eighties would adhere to readily.

Still, Americans want to be on top and their egos get a boost again at the end when Rocky wins the fight. Rocky then gives a speech citing that it is better to fight it out in the ring where just two guys can fight each other instead of twenty million guys. He says that if he can change the Russians can change too. The film ends with all of the politicians and government officials from both sides cheering. It is a moving scene, yet again American arrogance is bolstered. There is something uniquely American in thinking that "it is our way or the highway", starting with the Native Americans in America's infancy to spreading democracy and capitalism in this century.

In summation, no sport exceeded boxing as a mirror of pre-civil war America. They fought for ethnic, religious and political causes. Films such as *Far and Away*, *Raging Bull* and even the *Rocky* films reflected those causes as well. Cowboys and rugged tough, strong Westerners were based on the boxers of the Civil War era. Our attitude was clearly reflective of sports. Boxing was a mirror of American values and reflected America's changing social values and national identity.

During the Gilded age of sports in the early 1900s, much of American Society centered around a cult of masculinity which was held together by a loose combination of rough friendships, story telling, and sexual boasting, all held together by excessive drinking. Fierce competition to keep you job, feed your family and climb to the top was brutal and torturous. By defending yourself through the domination of others in sports it was possible to vent the hostility and frustration that built up everyday in the factory or the sweatshop. Boxing quite naturally came to the forefront as this form. Boxing films such as *Raging Bull* and *Champion* clearly follow that pattern. In the age of social Darwinism and the ideals of the "Survival of the Fittest", boxing became American's true picture of what those ideals actually represented. (Rubenstein 5/12/97)

The sport of boxing had risen in the eyes of the public from Sullivan to Corbett yet it still seems to retain a sorted side that is reflective of American sports. Of all the social ills associated with boxing at the turn of the century, racism was foremost. Boxing has been said to represent the ultimate test of skill, courage, intelligence and most of all manhood. Also, boxing champions traditionally have been made symbols of both nation and racial superiority. Yet, Sullivan, Corbett, Fitzsimmons, and James J. Jeffries would not defend the title against a black challenger. Society was still trying to retain its view of white supremacy. (Rubenstein 6/9/97) This problem was made highly visible in the *Rocky*, *Rocky 11* and *When We Were Kings* films.

The depth of racism in boxing could really be seen in the early 1930s. When Joe Louis knocked out Max Baer in September of 1935 the sports writers had a field day. They nicknamed Joe Louis everything from "The Brown Bomber" to "Mahogany Maimer" to the "Coffee Colored King". To make matters even worse, Louis was defeated by Max Schmeling, who was German and a favorite of Adolph Hitler. White boxing fans were thrilled that Louis lost and when the fight results were announced Congress cheered. This, all in 1935, shows the depth of racism in America at that time. Several years later in

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1938, Louis got a rematch with Schmeling. This time Americans used the boxer to suit their purpose. Since the Nazi atrocities were more widely known, Schmeling began to be associated with those atrocities even though he was not a member of the Nazi Party. Now Joe Louis became the champion of Democracy and Freedom. Joe Louis always maintained his dignity and pride. His life truly served as an inspiration to people of all races who were struggling to overcome economic and social hardships. (Rubenstein 6/18/97) Boxing and these boxing films truly do reflect American society and its social history; a mirror worth looking into more often.

Chapter 3  
FOOTBALL: THE REEL GOAL



Compared to baseball and boxing, football is a relatively young sport. The game has its roots in the English games of soccer and rugby. It starts in 1827 in the United States as an initiation rite for Harvard freshmen, and by 1840 it also had become an initiation rite on the first Monday of the school year at Brown and Yale. These games were between incoming freshmen and sophomores, and they were brutal. After the blood bath a party was held, and, amid drunken singing, the freshmen were admitted by upper classmen into university life.

Football pretty much stayed an intramural sport until 1869, at which time it joined baseball, track and field and crew as an intercollegiate sport when Rutgers played Princeton. Seven years later, in 1876, Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Columbia formalized a set of basic rules for competition. Included were fifteen man teams, two forty-minute halves and emphasis on kicking the ball. In fact, the soccer influence was deemed so important that a kicked score was the equivalent of four scores running the ball.

Intercollegiate football's growth in the late nineteenth century was due primarily to the efforts of Walter Camp. A medical student, volunteer coach for thirty years and author of twenty books on sports, he became known as the "Father of American Football."

Camp was a student of the game. He believed football fostered intelligence and leadership qualities that would later bring young men success in the highly competitive world of corporate America. Also, Camp was responsible for many new rules and innovations that made the game more organized, including, eleven man teams instead of fifteen, cutting the length of the field from one hundred sixty-three yards to one hundred and ten yards, and the "down" system. ( Previously a team held the ball until it scored or fumbled). Camp also created the line of scrimmage where the ball would be snapped and teams faced each other. He suggested painting the yard line across the field which made it look like a "gridiron". He felt that players should be able to tackle below the waist

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He also invented the tackling dummy used in practices, introduced filming practice to discover mistakes, and devised the coding of signals to confuse the other team.

Camp's ideas turned Yale into a powerhouse. From 1883 to 1891 Yale outscored its opponents 466 to 92. College football became so popular that by the 1890s, university presidents grudgingly realized that a good football team meant more in alumni support than teaching or scholastic programs. (Rubenstein 6/9/97)

Collegiate football entered the 1940s as a target of criticism. President Robert Hutchings of the University of Chicago announced the findings of a study which showed that fifty percent of football players in the Big Ten were physical education majors. It went on to state that it was obvious that collegiate football, and football in general, had become a major handicap to education in the United States. To show his outrage, President Hutchings abolished football at the University of Chicago. Media critics claimed he did it out of pity more than intellectual outrage because in 1939 his team lost every game.

However, Hutchings' move did nothing to slow the growth of collegiate football in the Mid-West and actually helped the growth of football in California. The University of Chicago's head coach, Clark Shaughnessy was immediately hired by Stanford University. He took a terrible team and turned it around to an eleven and zero record in 1940. There was no more dominate ideological force in collegiate and professional football, in the 1940s than Clark Shaughnessy.

While at the University of Chicago, Shaughnessy served as assistant coach to George Halas, owner and head coach of the Chicago Bears. As an assistant coach, he devised tactics that revolutionized football; however, Halas took all the credit for the innovations.

Shaughnessy started studying football after WWI, analyzing it in terms of military strategy. He looked at football as it was played with a single wing formation and found it to be slow, ponderous and "mindless." Shaughnessy said that watching football was the equivalent of trench warfare in WWI. To him it made sense to compare football to war. Football had always been using war terminology such as "down in the trenches" and the quarterbacks were referred to as "field generals"; and the long pass was called a "bomb". Football had two armies of equal size; eleven men each fighting over territory one hundred yards long and fifty three and three tenths yards wide. The two front lines moved each other back and forth like soldiers until one side planted its flag (ball) in the area the other side was trying to protect (end zone).

Shaughnessy got his inspiration of how to change football by reading German General Henry Guderian's book on tank warfare. His book said that infantry in front slows down tanks, Shaughnessy therefore deduced that the backfield was slowed down by the line going back to protect him. Just like Guderian's tanks, a football team should limit its attack to a single point of weakness and exploit that weakness. Then to maximize the effectiveness of the attack use deception like the military does; fake to the left, but run right. Clark moved the quarterback right up under the center and moved the running backs (two half-backs and a full back) in a straight line four yards behind the quarterback. This created the first innovative change; the "T" formation. At the snap, instead of the ball going back, the runner came forward to the ball, thereby gaining momentum.

Bears' head coach George Halas, one of the founders of the National Football League, was conservative and cheap. Halas' success was based on muscle. He loved players who liked to hurt people and not demand much money for doing it. In short, he loved players with no brains who loved to play the game of football.

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Yet he accepted Shaughnessy's innovations, and the Chicago Bears became a winning football team.

In later years Shaughnessy was asked if he was upset that he did not get the credit that he deserved. Clark claimed that he down-played his role because in 1940 and 1941 he did not think it was not a good idea to admit his innovations were based on ideas of a Nazi tank commander. (Rubenstein 6/23/97)

Different areas of the country are drawn to different sports. Football especially is a sport that is affected by this regionalism. Some of the toughest players come from Western Pennsylvania. Players such as Joe Namath would have to get out or become coal miners. Pennsylvania football is reflective of a tough life; life was tough, so you played tough. In the South football is religion--tough and spirited and played as a code of chivalry. If you win you are a credit to your state. If you lose you sit and anguish, especially if you lose to a Northern team. Football in the Midwest has the "Big Ten" mentality -- disciplined, orderly, rugged and business like. Midwest football does not empathize with shifty runners and rifle-armed quarterbacks; it believes in rugged linebackers and power runners. In the Southwest, football is played just like the landscape of the area -- wide open, with the combined speed of the South and the power of the Midwest. In the California area football is the glorification of beautiful bodies. Every player views game day as "show time." In the Ivy League, athletes are a step down on the social ladder. Ivy Leaguers want losing teams, in certain respects, so as to not ruin their academic reputations. Thus, football can be a true reflection of where it is played. (Rubenstein 5/7/97)

In most of the films observed, football is a sport considered to be more than just a game. Showing importance of the last minute of a game, a fumbled football is at the center of *The Best of Times* (1986). In this film a former "could have been" attempts to show what his life would have been like if he had not fumbled the ball during a critical

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game in high school. He arranges to play on the team once more in a game against the same rival.

Robin Williams plays Jack, who just cannot let go of the memory of a fumble he made that cost his team a very important win against their biggest rival, Bakersfield. He watches the game film, and his fumble, over and over again, even though it happened nearly twenty years ago. People in the town do not let him forget either. His father-in-law, a southerner who wears a cowboy hat and likes southern style football, still teases him and calls him butterfingers.

Jack's wife does not understand why dropping that ball was such a big deal. Jack tries to explain to her that it is the meaning of life, and that he had a future until he dropped the ball. That fumble is how he is remembered. The importance of the game is clearly symbolized.

Finally Jack convinces the Caribou Lodge to replay that fateful Bakersfield game with the same team from years earlier. The classic underdog story begins. The poor side of town versus the rich side is told again and again. Bakersfield has everything, including big strong players who have barely aged, new uniforms, and a wealth of fans. Jack's team has very little. The players are old and out of shape; they have no uniforms, and, as his friend tells him, "half these people came to watch you drop this ball, and half have come to watch you catch it."

The game is a carbon copy of the original. With five seconds left in the game Jack is thrown the long pass, only this time he catches it. It is the story Americans love to see—the little underdog becoming a hero. Everyone likes to live in the spot light for one moment of glory.

*Necessary Roughness* (1991) is a film that starts by looking at the abuses of the game at the collegiate level. At the University of Texas the team is in trouble. There have been violations including illegal pay, substance abuse, recruiting, and grade tampering, all

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of which reflect real abuses that infect the sport. The coaches are fired and all of the players are expelled.

Coach Ed Gamero (Hector Elezondo) is then hired to build a team out of the actual student body, which proves to be a seemingly impossible task. He finally tries to recruit thirty-four year old Paul Blake (Scott Bacula). He could have been a great college player, but his father died and he had to return home to take care of the family farm. Coach Ed finally convinces Scott to play for the team. Scott feels like an outsider because of his age, but he soon adjusts and helps the team. Meanwhile, Dean Ellias (Larry Miller) tries to do everything in his power to destroy the team because football, as he calls it, "is a mind numbing sport full of corruption.

Despite the fact that they are not the world's best team, Dean Ellias is after them, and they try to play Iron-Man football and not to give up. They recruit a professor named Andre (Sinbad) who still had one year of eligibility left and find a female soccer player (Kathy Ireland). to be their kicker.

The last game of the season is against the number one team in Texas. The classic underdog story is told once again. The University of Texas barely squeaks out a win and the team players are heroes. Scott, like Jack from *The Best of Times*, has found his moment of glory through participation in sports, which leads him to get a better handle on the true meaning of life.

Other than a brief appearance by Kathy Ireland as a kicker in the movie *Necessary Roughness*, gender lines in football films are rarely crossed until *Wildcats* (1986). Football is primarily considered a man's game in films, but *Wildcats* looks at things differently. In this film a petite teacher, played by Goldie Hawn, whose father was a coach, gets a chance to follow in his footsteps when she is put in charge of an unruly, inner-city high school football team.

The film begins with a sexist statement by Varsity football coach Dan Darwell (James Keach) when Ms. McGrath (Goldie Hawn) asks to be considered for the position of Junior Varsity coach. Dan replies, "Girls can't coach boy's football." After this she proceeds to beat him at a game of racquetball. Dan does not accept defeat well and hires the male home economics teacher, who knows nothing about football, for the job. They finally do offer her a job but it is at a tough, inner city school.

At this school Ms. McGrath is treated poorly by the players. They tease her, make sexist comments, and even trash her office and break her father's old stop-watch. The boys confess that they are trying to make her quit so that they can have a real coach. She challenges them to see who can outlast her in a run around the track. She makes a bet that if she wins, she gets to call the shots. None of the boys think she can beat them, so they accept her challenge. It starts to rain, but she keeps running. The boys drop off one by one. She ends up outlasting them all. After she proves her strength as an athlete, they are more ready to accept her as their coach.

Throughout the film, Coach McGrath struggles in the way that many women of today struggle, trying to juggle a career and a family. Coach McGrath's ex-husband accuses her of neglecting their children because she is so involved with the football team. He wants to send their girls to a fancy preparatory school and get them away from the inner city crowd.

Coach McGrath never gives up, and the team makes it to the playoffs against Dan Darwell's team. Again the classic underdog story returns, with a struggle between the big, rich upper class team and the small, poverty stricken, lower class team. In the end, the underdogs survive, and Mr. McGrath has a change of heart and drops his custody suit.

*First and Ten* (1985) is another film that places a woman at the helm, yet this time the woman is the owner of a professional football team, the California Bulls. Diane

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Barrow, played by Delta Burke, seeks revenge after she catches her husband in bed with another man. She takes the thing he loves the most, his California Bulls football team.

Barrow struggles as she tries to gain the respect of the players and the media. No one believes she will succeed, and her ex-husband constantly tries to sabotage her efforts. Barrow tries as hard as she can to control every aspect of her team. She manages to keep her organization clean by running out the Arcola family, who have control of 5,000 of their stadium's seats for scalping. Barrow also does what she can to help players on her team from a quarterback whom critics claim is too old to play to a superstar with a cocaine

addiction. *First and Ten* is considered to be a comedy, yet Diane Barrow struggles with some very real situations. She struggles to keep her franchise alive despite the fact that very few people have faith in her because she is a woman. The problems she faces are also very real, including team players who fight for major salary increases and picket lines in front of the California Bulls' stadium.

The sport of football has taught Coach McGrath and Diane Barrow a valuable lesson about never giving up, and it is a lesson their teams learned as well. These films, because they were made in the mid-1980s, were not afraid to take a look at the female role in the field of sports. They dared to show that women are just as capable as men in the field of athletics and coaching. In general, men are still more valued in these positions by our society, but it is beginning to see women emerge into coaching, administration, and broadcasting that was normally reserved for men.

Just as in real life, in films sometimes being a professional sports super-hero can cause a person problems. Athletes are very vulnerable people. The pressure put upon them to succeed in their sports by fans and teammates can be extremely demanding. A man named Crew (Burt Reynolds) has to deal with the price of that pressure in *The Longest Yard* (1974).



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This film begins with a classic stereotypical statement from a woman with whom Crew has apparently gotten drunk and spent the night. She argues with him for watching television instead of paying attention to her. "Anyone who would watch two football games in a row is a moron!" she screams. Crew is extremely angered by this. He hits the woman, grabs her keys, and speeds off in her car. She apparently calls the police, because soon after he leaves he is trailed by police officers. He tries to outrun them and ends up at a crossing gate where a bridge is going up. He jumps from her car, and lets it sink into a lake. Soon afterward he is apprehended by police at a bar.

Crew is sent to a prison where conditions are less than favorable. While at the prison, Crew quickly discovers that the Warden (Eddie Albert) wants something from him. The Warden is nuts about football and wants his team to win the national title. He explains to Crew that if he plays and delivers that title, his stay at the prison will be very agreeable. Crew explains that he just wants to do his time and get out. Crew soon discovers that his life may be very difficult in prison if he does not cooperate.

While the prisoners are digging trenches, viewers discover some of the problems that Crew has had that have led him to this point in his life. A cook on the scene tries to put Crew in his place. "Big deal--look at him now. Most of these guys started with nothing. You had it all and got caught with your hand in the cookie jar--shaving points. You could have robbed banks, sold dope, or stole our grandmother's pension checks and none of us would have minded, but shaving points off a football game; that's un-American."

Crew is abused at the prison by guards and inmates alike. The Warden wants to see him again. The Warden owns a semi-professional team, and he wants a scrimmage with the convicts with Crew as their quarterback. The Warden makes it obvious that if Crew refuses to play he will never get out of prison.

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Crew tries to organize a team, but some of the best players refuse to work with him. They tell him that if he sold out his teammates once, he would do it again. Crew's team is not looking promising. Crew tells the Warden that this game is important to the men because it will give them a sense of pride and dignity. "My men don't have a chance in hell to win that game. You know it and I know it. I just don't want them to know it," he adds. Slowly as Crew builds his team, his ego subsides and his compassion for others returns. As in other football films, athletic competition has become more than just a game. It has taught people valuable lessons about the lives they lead.

Once more the underdog story comes to the surface. The underdogs happen to be a bit different this time, however, because they are prisoners. Prisoners are not usually considered to be heroes in society, but the cruel treatment dished out to them by the guards and the warden help to evoke sympathy because most Americans value the human characteristics of pride and dignity and want to see the little guy win over abuses of power.

The convict team is good, so the warden tells Crew that he wants a twenty-one point spread in the game or Crew is stuck there forever. Crew starts to shave the points, but then realizes that his men's pride and dignity are more important than his freedom. The convicts win the game and some pride. Crew walks across the field and the warden thinks he is trying to escape. The warden orders his man to shoot Crew, but in a dramatic ending, just before the officer is going to shoot, Crew bends over to pick up the game ball and brings it to the warden.

Another football film, *North Dallas Forty* (1979), takes a look at the side of professional sports that is not so glamorous and glorious. This story comes from former football star Peter Gent's best selling novel about labor abuse in the National Football League.

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This film takes a very realistic look at the pain that goes on behind the scenes in professional sports. At the start of the film Philip Elliot (Nick Nolte), a professional football player is seen waking up. His aches and pains make it very difficult to get out of his bed. His pillow is blood stained. He pops several pills, appears to be suffering a great deal, and has mental flashbacks about a dropped football. The picture is not pretty.

Elliot's friend, Maxwell (Mac Davis), tries to help him out. "You'd better learn to play the game--not just football. Hell, we're just whores. Try to be one of the good ones."

The film realistically examines the way some professional sports are managed. Players are treated as if they were a dime a dozen. In team meetings they are made to feel insignificant. "No one of you is better than the computer," one of the coaches says to them.

Elliot is concerned about the fact that he is getting older and his injuries are slowing him down. He has been on the bench, and he is worried because he loves football and it is the only thing he knows. He abuses his body with drugs before games so that he cannot feel the pain. A young player on the team refuses to use the drugs because of his fear that he will permanently hurt himself. The young player is afraid he will be cut if he does not perform well, and Elliot convinces him to take the needle. The young player is badly injured in the game and Elliot begins to realize that his dignity is more important than playing for people who treat them so terribly. One of Elliot's statements sums up the abuse by the management perfectly: "We're not the team, they're the team. We are the equipment." Elliot sadly realizes that the politics behind the game are too much for him. At the end of the film he quits the game.

Another film that takes a realistic look behind the scenes of professional football is *Brian's Song* (1971), the true story of the friendship between Chicago Bears football players Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo. Gale Sayers (Billy Dee Williams) is a quiet, shy

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African American who is new to the Chicago Bears' team. Brian Piccolo (James Caan) is a fun-loving, joke-playing, somewhat egotistical white veteran player. It does not seem likely that these two men will become friends. The setting for the story is in the mid-1960s. They have different personalities, are of different races and have different goals in mind.

Slowly their friendship grows. Some of the rough and tumble stereotypes of football players are broken down in this film. These men are shown to be compassionate and caring. Also the racial barriers are broken down. Sayers and Piccolo room together on the road which was a first in Chicago Bears' history. Despite their differences, it was the love of the sport of football that brought these two friends together. Sadly their friendship was cut short when Brian Piccolo died of cancer at the age of twenty-six.

These football films had several things in common. The love of the sport and competition led many people to learn valuable lessons about who they were and where they were headed. Most of the stories pitted the small, weak, less fortunate underdog against corporate powers. Americans like this theme because it is our story. America started out as a small weak nation and has slowly struggled toward the top. That may be one of the reasons we enjoy the spirit of competition so much.

Conclusion

"IT'S NOT OVER 'TIL THE  
FAT LADY SINGS"

Sports and films that contain sports as subject matter help give us an accurate reflection of who we are and where we have come from as Americans. Baseball, boxing, football, and other sports beyond the scope of this thesis have become an institution in American society from which we can learn a great deal.

Baseball is the sport Americans like to claim as their own, and even though its popularity has declined over the years, we still look to it as a reflection of our past. Even though the game may not have been created in the United States, its formalization was organized here. Theodore Roosevelt and the Mills Commission did everything in their power to claim it as an American sport and remove all British influence from the game. Regardless of its origins, claiming baseball as our own helped Americans form their own identity when they needed it most and also helped create some of America's greatest heroes.

No sport has ever exceeded boxing as a mirror of America, especially pre-Civil War America. It, too, gave Americans a chance to define themselves. They were the rough, rugged Westerners. Boxing helped create a break with the European definition of masculinity and gave Americans a different set of standards by which to measure themselves. The history of boxing creates a true reflection of ethnic division in the working class as they struggled for political, ethnic and religious superiority.

Football, a more modern game by comparison to boxing and baseball, also is reflective of American society. The father of American football, Walter Camp, believed that the sport fostered intelligence and leadership qualities need to compete in the highly competitive world of corporate America. Clark Shaughnessy, the father of football as we know it today, compared it to trench warfare in WWI. To him it made sense to compare football to war. Either way, both ideals reflected the type of America we were and have become.

These sports, and many others, have given us our modern day heroes and role models as well. Americans used to find its heroes in the military ranks or in the ranks of politics. In the past thirty years or so, however, we seem to be in a hero vacuum. In Viet Nam there were no heroes. After Watergate the nation lost faith in politicians. Naturally, whether we wish to accept it or not, we have turned to athletes as our heroes and role models. Therefore, sports forms a bigger impression upon our society than we may think.

Many people consider sports, and film for that matter, to be nothing more than pure entertainment, yet if critically analyzed there is a great deal we can learn about ourselves from each. They both truly are a mirror of our society and contain a great deal of symbolism. They are a reflection of the best and the worst in people. Many critics look at the United States and see it as a violent nation, but most Americans know how to handle and control violence. Americans like vicarious violence and they often get it through sports. Most people who criticize sports, do not understand or enjoy sports. They think sport is idle amusement for the unintelligent. Evaluated carefully, however, sport can be instructive. It teaches character from defeat, sacrificing yourself for the good of others, and constructive competition. Sport can reflect the highest product of civilization--honesty and excellence. The rules are demanding, freedom is given form, and if you break the rules there is a penalty. (Rubenstein 5/5/97)

Sport is a human unifier. The love of sport will cause people to temporarily put aside their hate just to cheer their team on or to play a friendly game. Excitement, statistics, greed, wining, losing, self gratification, love, pride, sacrifice, and competition, for fans and players alike, make sports a mirror of our society. You cannot understand American culture if you do not look at the fixation of sports. Its reflection teaches so much about who we are and where we have been. If we examine that reflection carefully enough, we can also use it as a window to the future.

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