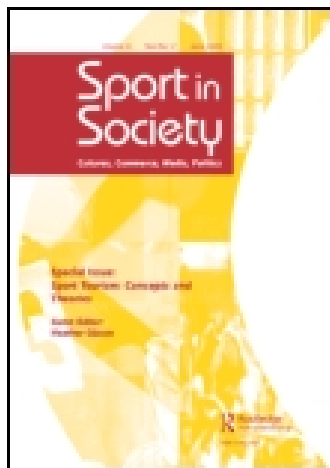


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Winning and losing respect: narratives of identity in sport films

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This essay examines sport films in terms of respect, identity and individualism. It suggests that a common narrative structure in films featuring sport based stories involves the winning, or sometimes losing, of respect. Success in narrative terms is not so much associated with sporting victory as in winning the respect of others. Through these narrative structures, issues of identity are explored. In particular, the narratives trace the ways in which characters respond to challenges by changing. In this sense these films are rooted in an ideology of competitive individualism which is a distinct product of capitalism as it developed in the United States of America. So while women, Jews, Afro-Americans and British Asian girls all find fulfilment through the narrative journey of these films, it tends to be within the terms of the competitive individualist ideology. Only where the concept of respect and its association with sport performance is challenged or questioned do sport films tend to raise more profound questions about the individual in society.

His whole life was a 100 to 1 shot.¹

This essay is concerned with the concept of respect in relation to identity and individualism. One significant narrative theme in films about sport is the process of winning respect. In *Cool Runnings* (1993) for example, the very idea of a Jamaican bobsleigh team is presented as absurd. The team have no chance of winning, but in the course of the film they win respect from their peers and their compatriots. In *A League of Their Own* (1992), the baseball establishment, epitomized by a hard-boiled coach, regards the concept of a girls' baseball team as laughable, but in the course of the film the women's team prove they can compete and win respect. In *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), the central female character has to prove to her parents that football is a valid pursuit for a girl and one in which she can excel. The boxer Rocky Balboa, in *Rocky* (1976), does not, in the first film, win the world title, but he wins respect for his determination, and regains his self-respect, for going the distance and gaining a split decision.

The lack of self-respect is a significant narrative trigger. Rocky Balboa, in *Rocky* (1976) does not believe he is worth anything very much and only aspires to go the distance with Apollo Creed, the reigning heavyweight World Champion, not to beat him. Creed is shown displaying his wealth, surrounded by minders and flunkies, whilst Rocky Balboa is seen to be scuffling a living and inhabiting shabby streets, homes and bars. The baseball players in *Eight Men Out* (1988) suffer from a lack of self-worth triggered by the poor pay and bonuses from the management, which leads to their involvement in the match-fixing scheme. The ice hockey players in *Slap Shot* (1977) are in a poor team, losing, abused by their own supporters and playing in a shabby stadium, which gives them nothing to be proud of.

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What is going on in the narrative journeys that these characters take; by what discursive means are their journeys explained, and what ideological meanings are implicated in the suturing of identity and respect? It is possible to clarify this issue further by examining those films in which respect is lost. In *Eight Men Out* the players who accept bribes to throw baseball's World Series lose the respect of the public, epitomized in the famous plaintive cry of a small boy to his idol, Shoeless Joe Jackson, 'Say it ain't so, Joe'. In *Jerry Maguire*, (1996) Maguire (Tom Cruise) bemoans the fact that he has become 'a shark in a suit' and lost the respect of his colleagues. In *Slap Shot*, the whole game of ice hockey is reduced to absurdity. In *North Dallas Forty* (1979), the central character loves the act of playing but comes to despise and reject the corporate culture and mechanistic disciplines of American Football.² In *The Harder They Fall* (1956), the hack journalist turned PR man, played by Humphrey Bogart, eventually loses all respect for boxing and writes an article calling for it to be banned. A contrast is suggested in which respect is won by individuals and lost by institutions. He regains his self-respect only by condemning the whole institution of a sport.

Yet sport, in cinema, is for the most part a depoliticized world. Even where the exploitative processes of sporting institutions are portrayed, as in *North Dallas Forty*, *Slap Shot*, *A League of Their Own*, and *The Harder They Fall*, there is rarely any concerted response, discussion or possibility of collective action. The canny character in *Slap Shot*, played by Paul Newman, manages to pursue the owner of the club to locate the new owner, but only to ascertain her intentions. Only rarely are the conventionalized structures for representing sport unsettled and disrupted. The Australian bio-pic, *Dawn!* (1979), tells the story of Olympic swimmer Dawn Fraser. An austere film, it is made in the style of the New German Cinema of Fassbinder, characterized by a slowness of pace, black and white cinematography, a flatness of dialogue coupled with intense emotional undercurrents, a tendency to use minimal music and background sound, and naturalistic episodic sequences rather than strongly structured narrative arcs.

The film portrays Dawn Fraser (Bronwyn Mackay-Payne) as a swimmer through whom a whole set of tensions about class, gender, sexuality and patriotism are worked. She wins gold but respect is more problematic and she and the institutions of sport and the media never find a comfortable way of relating. It succeeds in asking a whole range of questions that cosier mythologizing of the road to self-improvement in many other sport films never broaches. In a very different manner, the Iranian film *Offside* (2006) also functions to disturb and disrupt some dominant ideological assumptions of the society within which it is set. It features the attempts of a young female football fan to sneak into the all-male domain of the stadium to see a crucial World Cup qualifying game which Iran eventually win. Apprehended by young male soldiers, she is placed in a pen with other young girls who similarly tried to gain admittance. It becomes plain that the soldiers do not really understand why the girls can not be let in, but have difficulty even in entering into rational discussion of it. Concluding with euphoric scenes of celebration in which, all too briefly, the girls are able to participate, it holds out the possibility of a different and more open world. In this essay I will discuss the concept of respect and situate it in relation to conceptions of competitive individualism, before turning to more detailed consideration of some key films. First, however, it is necessary to clarify the category of the sport film.

What is a 'sport film' anyway?

Is the 'sport film' even a coherent category?³ Sport films do not constitute a genre – they do not have a consistent set of themes, images or tropes. They do not share a

characteristic style or *mise-en-scène*. Sport films do not lend themselves to being understood through concepts of 'auteur'. While some highly regarded directors (Martin Scorsese, John Sayles, George Roy Hill, for example) have directed sport films (*Raging Bull*, *Eight Men Out*, *Slap Shot*, respectively) no significant director, with the arguable exception of Sylvester Stallone, has made a career largely or mainly around sport films. Note that John G. Avildsen directed the first *Rocky* (1976) and *Rocky V* (1990) whilst Stallone took over for *Rocky II* (1979) *Rocky III* (1982) *Rocky IV* (1985) and *Rocky Balboa* (2006). With this exception, it would be hard to find any coherent instance of a set of sport films that could be coherently examined through the concept of auteurism. The 'sport film' then, is not a genre or a style of cinema, nor the product of 'auteurs', but simply a topic, which links a set of otherwise diverse texts.

Films about sport present a promotional problem for the industry. Sport as a cultural practice demarcates the genders. Whilst many women do follow and play sport, and many men do not, the dominant construction of sport is that of a male oriented and dominated cultural practice in which masculinity is confirmed and conferred. So men who do not like sport can be made to feel emasculated, incomplete or marginal, whereas it is women who are keen on sport who are made to feel aberrant.⁴ Consequently a film with sport as its topic may well tend to struggle to find an audience. Some men will opt for it, many women will reject it and the all important target audience, the heterosexual couple, will not be readily recruited to it. It is rare for a sport film to achieve significant success at the box office. Only the *Rocky* cycle has contributed to the mainstream iconography of cinema, producing an emblematic character, who, to this day, is the subject of parody and imitation. *Slap Shot* (1977), a minor success, has since become a cult classic. *Chariots of Fire* (1981) succeeded as a beautifully made period piece, a costume drama, which offered the images of Britain the rest of the world responds to with enthusiasm, whilst also addressing concepts of national identity in an Olympic context. *True Blue* (1996), the story of an Oxford Cambridge Boat Race, despite being based on a compelling book⁵ was a rather predictable flop. The totally unpredicted success of *Bend it Like Beckham* was partly due to its original pretext – a British Asian girl who strives to become a football star, partly due to its potential appeal to both men and women, and partly due to the huge market of 'soccer mums' and their daughters in the USA. It is noteworthy that the film version of Nick Hornby's book *Fever Pitch* (1997) foregrounded a romance that barely existed in the book, and used the tension between love of football and love of the woman as the focal point of promotion. The video version of the film even had a reversible cover – one side foregrounding the football and one the romance.

Not only do sport films not constitute a coherent filmic category, but in addition, then, they are hard to promote to an audience. However, despite this, it is clear that sport itself has a special relation to narrative, which lends itself to filmic narrativisation. Sport is rooted in an implicit narrative structure – it is a form of rule-governed contest which results in a winner. The appeal of sport is explicated by theories of narrative developed by Roland Barthes⁶ in which he elaborates a set of five narrative codes, of which the most relevant for our purposes is the hermeneutic code. A sport event poses the question, 'who will win?', and promises an answer to that question. This means sport has, always, an implicit narrative structure and is thus readily available for narrativising, a facet that television has used to great effect.⁷ It does not mean that sport is a narrative – it is founded on a genuine uncertainty rather than a structured uncertainty. In sport itself, there is no convention that dictates that there should be a happy ending or that the good guy should defeat the bad guy. It is, however, this potential narrativity that gives sport its appeal both as actuality and as fiction. The structures of sporting competition can be utilized to provide

a formal structure and a narrative impetus for fictional narrative. The major event, the resolution of the enigma, provides a 'naturalised' concluding moment. Indeed the concept of a showdown, a titanic struggle between two competing individuals underpins the boxing film, by far the most prevalent choice of subject by film-makers. If there is anything that unites the otherwise diverse films featuring sport, it grows out of the inherent narrativity of the sporting contest.

The sport theme also enables a way of situating plots around discourses of gender, masculinity, sexuality, national identity, success, failure and respect. It facilitates the establishment and development of narrative tensions around the striving for success and the potential costs of that striving.⁸ While there are no intrinsic reasons why sport as a topic should make for effective filmic drama, there are, equally, no intrinsic handicaps in the subject matter to the production of such drama. It is however this inherent narrativity that most closely links sport to the ideological structures of a capitalist society. Both are competitive, both reward winners, and in both the majority are losers. Ideological elements develop in order to mask this harsh reality. Sport as a topic then, is markedly well structured in terms of offering a metaphor for lived experience under capitalism, providing the terrain on which the ideological elements of competitive individualism can be worked through.

Individualism, capitalism and sporting ideologies

From the time of the Pilgrim Fathers in the seventeenth century, the emergent North American culture fostered first by colonists has been a seed-bed for conceptions of individualism that have grown, mutated and articulated with other discourses, and become a key ideological element in late capitalist ideology. The early pilgrims fled from oppression, as did subsequent waves of immigrants during the nineteenth century. The frontier ethos, posing man against a wild nature (the indigenous peoples were part of the 'wild' nature that had to be tamed, or slaughtered) gradually became a romanticized mythology, in which the pioneering spirit had to be protected from the interference of state intervention with excessive rules and regulations. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the spirit of republicanism and egalitarianism developing in Paris began to spread to America. The War of Independence established USA as a republic with a Constitution and a Bill of Rights designed to protect the individual against the dangerous potential of a centralized state. To mark the links between the French Revolution and the American War of Independence, the French gave USA the Statue of Liberty in 1886. Subsequently, the statue was adorned with a poem by Emma Lazarus, including the much quoted line, 'Give me your tired, your poor huddled masses, yearning to be free'. The founding mythologies of this new nation, then, concerned the romance of conquering the obstacles of a wild untamed nature, and the central importance of freedom and individualism.

Waves of immigrants arrived during the nineteenth century, driven from Europe by poverty and persecution, drawn to America by images of new opportunity in a new found land. The potato famine in Ireland, the Highland clearances, and religious and political persecution of subordinate minorities, all contributed to the westward migration. Pull factors included the frontier myth, the availability of cheap land, and the California Gold Rush of 1849. The phrase: 'Go west young man, and grow up with the country', often attributed to Horace Greeley, was first used by newspaper editor John B.L. Soule in the *Terre Haute Express* in 1851, and subsequently utilized to mythologize the 'land of opportunity'.⁹ In the novels of Horatio Alger in the second half of the nineteenth century, his 'rags to riches' narratives celebrated 'courage, faith and hard honest work'. His heroes

were 'moral, brave, generous, kind diligent, industrious and persevering' and were characterized by 'self-reliance, self discipline, decency and honesty'. They proclaimed that everyone, if they did their best, could succeed.¹⁰

This ideology of individual opportunity became linked to two other ideological elements, namely the Protestant work ethic and social Darwinism. Whilst there are debates about the relationship of religion to the rise of capitalism,¹¹ it is generally accepted that a set of social values that emphasized hard work, thrift, saving and investment, more associated with protestant and non-conformist variants of Christianity rather than Catholicism, accompanied the growth of capitalism. In the nineteenth century, the work of Darwin on the theory of evolution, which appeared to stress the hard and brutal realities of adaptation or extinction, became extended by some to conceptions of social life, in which success or failure is a matter of willingness to adapt to circumstances and social life, just as nature is characterized by the survival of the fittest. The theories of Malthus, who predated Darwin, Herbert Spencer and the eugenicists, were all subsequently dubbed social Darwinist.

The combination of a pioneering individualist ethic, a non-interventionist state, and a 'land of opportunity' were at the heart of a culture of enterprise that, by the end of the century, had produced a wealthy elite class. Hard work and a sober and thrifty life may have been the code by which the people as a whole were supposed to live, but elements of the rich elite were adopting modes of displaying their wealth which became known as conspicuous consumption.¹² Succeeding in life, an opportunity available to all, became known as 'The American Dream', a phrase first used in *The Epic Of America* (1931) by the historian James Truslow Adams.¹³ It embodied notions of 'rags to riches', the possibility that anyone, in an egalitarian land of free individuals, could progress from log cabin to presidential White House. It celebrated the lives of those who arrived with nothing and became rich, successful and/or powerful – epitomized by figures as diverse as Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller and Irving Berlin.

As with sport, however, for every winner, there are many losers. America has always featured a substantial degree of social mobility, precisely framed in terms of pioneering individualism, the land of opportunity, and the myth of classless egalitarianism. There developed sets of rootless, rambling and dispossessed people – well represented in the writing of John Steinbeck and Nelson Algren. These were not landowners, not pioneers, but were those who had not been able to capitalize on opportunity. They forged ever westward, long after the pioneers, in search of a hope just gone, and then washed back east, north, south, in search of the 'American Dream'. They were the ancestors of the present day dispossessed, dubbed 'trailer trash'. The North American myth of classlessness is somewhat hollow from such a perspective. Indeed class and class privilege are certainly present in USA, if better masked. Boston Brahmins, the Ivy League, fraternity club culture, the old school tie, clubbishness, racism and anti-Semitism, are all elements in the path to privileged existence. Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*,¹⁴ has wealth but can never become accepted into the world of Daisy and Tom, who share a disdain for his new money and its obscure and possibly illegitimate sources, along with hints of anti-Semitism. The more sceptical perspective on competitive individualism is certainly not absent from American literature, and it could not be said that a critical view is masked, as evidenced by the writing of figures such as John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Arthur Miller.

Individualism was not, of course, uncontested. Concepts of community, of team work and of collectivism have always existed in tension with individualism. Collectivism became associated in liberal ideology with the totalitarian enemy, authoritarian states, with little distinction made between communism and fascism. Concepts of community, by

contrast, developed in tandem with civic responsibility, citizenship, neighbourliness, cooperation and, arguably reached their hegemonic peak with the triumph of the Labour Party in the UK in 1945 and the establishment of the Welfare State. In terms of sport, team games were enshrined at the heart of the cultures of athleticism in the mid-nineteenth-century public schools of the UK, where the codification of football first took place. The 'Muscular Christian' ethos that framed such developments stressed character building, the acquisition of moral qualities and the emphasis on fair play, the insistence that the important thing was 'not the winning but the taking part', and what mattered, as later encapsulated in the words of Grantland Rice, was 'not that you won or lost...'.¹⁵ But teams were not in any sense collectivist or proto-socialist. On the contrary, it was vital that they had captains, leaders and, later, managers and coaches. The team concept related to the needs of the military (officers and men; the need for discipline and sacrifice), the emergent Civil Service (the need for cadres of clerks organized by office managers) and of enterprise (the need for ordered, disciplined and directed labour power). So team work has always been an ideologically compromised concept.

By the 1950s the flaws in competitive individualism were being managed in terms of a corporate culture in which, while not everyone can be a CEO or MD, the corporation will look after you, managing your career from recruitment to retirement. A new alternative individualism emerged in the shape of the new hip cool beatnik dissenters of the 1950s, portrayed in Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road*, but this was not the work-ethic, but rather a culture of hedonistic pleasure seeking, articulated together with an existentialist concern with the meanings or lack of meanings in life. The economic boom that followed the end of the Second World War produced, by the 1960s, a counter culture that rejected and objected to the 'materialist society'. An underground culture emerged around psychedelic drugs, utopian communitarianism and hedonism. The Anti-Vietnam War campaign became the focal point of mass dissent. The repressed issue of racism burst through into the political agenda, firstly with the Civil Rights movement and then with black pride, black power and a more militant and confrontational spirit. The massive inequities of wealth and poverty, and the contrast between private affluence and public squalor characterized by Galbraith in *The Affluent Society*, began to spawn anger.¹⁶ A renascent feminism emerged in the form of the Women's Movement. In retrospect, it is a considerable irony that these movements, which all began by stressing forms of collective solidarity – cooperation, collectivity, communitarianism and sisterhood – had by the 1980s begun to mutate into a new individualism which began as identity politics, but into the 1990s had begun to take the form of a more self-oriented 'me-too ism'.

A major reason was the massive success of the neo-liberal revival labelled respectively 'Thatcherism' and 'Reaganomics'. The generation of a successful enterprise culture fostered a re-emergence of the validation of possessive individualism, and competitive individualism. Social Darwinism was back, greed was good, there was no such thing as society, and lunch was for wimps. The 1980s produced a new culture of consumption, identity and style that formed the basis of affluent middle-class leisure at the start of the 1990s.¹⁷ To this was added the emergence of a celebrity culture in which sharp divisions of private and public were eroded, panoptical surveillance became a part of popular entertainment with *Big Brother*, and where once, as feminists insisted, the personal was political, now politics was personal. During the 1950s, under a corporate statist ideology, the image was that the state or the corporation would take care of losers as well as winners. The UK had the safety net of the Welfare State, the USA offered corporate benevolence. In a long running British television children's quiz show, *Crackerjack* (BBC), no one ever went home without a *Crackerjack* pencil and pen set. The British education system

introduced comprehensivisation during the 1960s in an effort to combat the entrenched privilege of the wealthy. By the 1980s, this egalitarianism was under assault from the new Thatcherite right and, more recently, the ethos was derided by British journalist Melanie Philips, who drew on an episode in *Alice in Wonderland* in which all contestants in a race were given prizes, for her sardonic book title, *All Must Have Prizes*.¹⁸

A new, more ruthless, style of game shows based on elimination began to emerge in Britain from the 1980s onwards. *15 to 1* was one of the first, and *The Weakest Link*, the most successful, being based, like *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, *The Apprentice*, *I'm A Celebrity, Get me Out of Here*, and the others, on the gradual public humiliation and elimination of the contestants. These programmes show team-work as in the end a sham, because only one contestant wins. Individualism, then, is a complex yet resilient ideological element that, now more than ever, is a core element in the ideological field of capitalist societies. The emergence of neo-liberalism consisted of an articulation of present day analyses and older ideological elements. One such element that re-appeared was an oft-quoted passage by American President Calvin Coolidge from the 1920s:

Press on. Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

This was recycled as a poster during the 1970s and, according to Hunter S. Thompson, it was used as an advertisement for McDonald's in 1972.¹⁹ In the years since it has been widely cited in the context of management training, motivation, recruitment, sport psychology and neo-liberal ideology generally. It constitutes a distillation of the protestant work ethic, the land of opportunity, and the life skills deemed necessary for survival in the enterprise culture of neo-liberalism. It also provides a neat encapsulation of the ideology of competitive sport that resurfaces in various forms, in many sport films.

So winning is the focus of massive cultural attention, both in sport and in society. Celebration of winning, of success of achievement and of fame occupies a significant place in western cultures. To a degree this has always been the case, but in the present mediated celebrity-focused culture this is true to an even greater degree. There is a huge cultural machinery dedicated to the secondary circulation of star image in the celebrity culture. But despite this ideology, lived experience constantly tells us that most people do not succeed, that the gap between winning and losing is significant, and that it is not a level playing field. In sport the vast majority are losers rather than winners. Of all those who aspire to leave the ghetto by sporting success, very few become professional sports performers, of those very few make the grade, and of those who make the grade very few win. Of course this would not matter if losers also had reasonably dignified lives; but in the neo-liberal, capitalist world, for many, losing means permanent entrapment in poorly paid jobs, often casualised and de-unionized, with few rights and no security of employment. Often two or more jobs are necessary to cover the basic necessities. As much as any other country, USA is a world of sharp extremes of wealth and poverty. The mythology of individual success based on hard work serves to mask this cruel exploitation. In life too, the focus on star individuals and elite success sets up unrealistic expectations that are rarely met. One impact of celebrity culture has been the desire to reach an abstract fame, separate from talent and hard work – reality television is seen as a route to stardom.

So there are ideological tensions that have to be managed. Team-work has to be valued in symbolic form, as in managerial speak in 'team-building' and 'away-days'. Alternative forms of achievement and accomplishment have to be established as in the ethos of

'Do your best', 'Work hard' and 'Fulfil your potential'. All the individualized psychobabble of new age self-directed individualism is in part a provision of individualized solutions to socially generated problems. Complain about stress and management offer strategies for coping rather than addressing the causes. Criticism, complaining and struggling for change have come to be regarded as mere negativity. If you are not successful it must be because you lack a positive attitude. I would suggest that the concept of 'respect' grows out of the need to manage the ideological tension between winning and losing. You cannot necessarily or plausibly win, but you can win respect. The makers of the first *Rocky* film were most astute in realizing that for the ordinary guy, Rocky Balboa, to win the title challenge fight would have been stretching credibility to breaking point. So the film ends with his failure to win, but he has won respect and regained self-respect with a split decision. An examination of how respect is won and lost, then, provides valuable clues to the ideological structures underlying sport films.

Respect and the ideological discourses of sport

So the construction and narration of respect, and the processes involved in winning and losing it, provide clues to the underlying ideological structures of sport films. Ideological tensions around aspiration and achievement, success and failure, individual and team, cooperation and competition have to be managed, and magical resolutions found. The three films on which I focus – *Cool Runnings* (1994); *A League of Their Own* (1992); *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) – all offer outsiders seeking acceptance and admission to a world seemingly barred to them. They all feature teams and present images of people working together. In all three, winning respect is at least as important as winning, and for all three self-respect is part of this process. All offer magical resolutions, utopian outcomes in which contradictions seem to be healed, tensions erased. Indeed it is precisely within the dominant convention of the happy ending that their liberal optimism resides. Barriers can be broken down, and obstacles overcome, but in the process, awkward and unmanageable tensions, such as those associated with sexualities, are often rendered marginal, invisible or irrelevant.

Cool Runnings

At the start of *Cool Runnings* no-one believes a Jamaican bobsleigh team can be taken seriously. The film is loosely based on real life events in which Jamaica, in 1988, entered a bobsleigh team for the Winter Olympics for the first time. Images of Jamaica in mainstream media representations have constantly drawn on concepts of devil may care, happy go lucky, easy come easy go, no hurry, better to party than work, and this is how *Cool Runnings* begins.²⁰ We meet Sanka Coffie (Doug E. Doug) who, it is established, is an ace pushcart driver (he claims to be the best on the island) but the pushcart race is portrayed as a chaotic and anarchic piece of carnival slapstick rather than a serious competition. Derice Bannock (Leon) is a rather more dedicated sportsman, who is seen in methodical training, albeit with basic equipment. But his Olympic dreams are ruined when a collision in the crucial Olympic trial knocks over, not only Derice, but two other competitors, the mean-looking shaven-headed Yul Brenner (Malik Yoba), and the perpetrator of the collision, the slight and studious looking Junior Bevil (Rawle D. Lewis).

The determination of Derice Bannock to find a way to the Olympic Games leads to his discovery that former bobsleigh gold medallist, Irving Blitzer (John Candy), is living on the island, presented now as a sad fat slob, embittered (although the audience do not yet know) because his cheating led him to be stripped of his medals. Derice's battle to get to the Games provides the means for Blitzer to regain his self-respect. It is worth noting that

as with *A League of Their Own* in which the coach has become an alcoholic who believes coaching girls is demeaning, the apparent central protagonists, the girls of the baseball team, the black Jamaicans of the bobsleigh team, in fact provide the means of regaining respect for a white man. The narrative enigma is established around the concept of the need to weld contrasting individuals into a team. Four versions of blackness are brought together in the bobsleigh – Derice the committed sports competitor, Sanka the happy-go-lucky clown, Junior the dutiful middle-class son, and Yul Brenner's street savvy tough black pride. But the work of transforming these individuals into a team is performed by the white coach, Blitzer, who provides the elements that blackness, in this narrative, cannot provide – experience, discipline, leadership and cohesion. Blitzer's Germanic background here underlines the implicit racism embedded in the apparent need for white organization to discipline black chaos.

However, it becomes clear that Blitzer is ostracized by the bobsled elite, and the story of his cheating is revealed. Blitzer's disgrace comes to constitute one more obstacle in the path to success. Meanwhile, Bevil Senior finds out about his son's involvement and insists that he give up the sport. Junior Bevil is unable to stand up to his father, to the undisguised contempt of Yul Brenner. Yul Brenner eventually coaches Junior in how to stand up for himself. Treated as a laughing stock when they arrive at the Olympics, the four individuals gradually become a team. Their persistence, achievement of a fast time, and final collapse due not to their performance but to the dilapidated state of their borrowed sled, eventually wins respect, and the first signs of a thaw in the cold shoulder presented by the Olympics world to Blitzer. A key moment, though, is when the team, having attempted cold professionalism and found their performance still lacking, revert somewhat to 'doing it the Jamaican way', which means loosening up, and putting a spirit of fun into their approach to the competition. So, on the face of it, Jamaica proves, against the grain of the happy-go-lucky stereotype, that they can conform to discipline and work hard to gain success. It is, however, the shaping work of the coach that has provided the means of transformation.²¹

A League of Their Own

When the USA joined the Second World War, the departure of male baseball players to join the forces led to the establishment of a women's baseball league, called the All American Girls Baseball League (AAGBL), which began in 1943 and continued until 1954. These events provided the basis for *A League of Their Own*, in which the two plot lines both involve the regaining of self-respect. The first features two sisters, Dottie Hinson (Geena Davis) and Kit Keller (Lori Petty). It emerges that while they are very competitive, Dottie has always been the winner – faster, more athletic, better at baseball; Kit feels she has grown up in Dottie's shadow. Traded to another team, Racine, just before the crucial final game, Kit is racing to score the winning run when she crashes into her sister Dottie. Dottie drops the ball, possibly deliberately, and Kit becomes the heroine of the moment. The second plot line involves the coach, Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks) who believes it is demeaning to have been sent to coach a girls' team, but eventually comes to recover his confidence and self-respect. So the film operates across the tensions between the dominant male cultures of the world of sport, the 'intrusion' of femininity, and the challenge to this world of women with sporting ability.²² The baseball league managers seek to present the teams in terms of a sexualized glamour, to the anger of the women in the teams. The crowd initially treat the whole league as a novelty and an opportunity for whistling and derogatory humour. Gradually, though, the commitment and ability of the women wins the crowd over and they become as committed to success as the team.

The de-centring of the women in the narrative structure of *A League of their Own* is interesting – it is in the end the coach who wins back his respect in the film. He is the one with the career in jeopardy, he is the one who, at the end, is able to recover enough respect to resume his career. Some of the women are going to return home and the shelf life of the women's league is, it is made clear, limited. But the women are not seen as necessarily completed by a man – it is success in baseball that wins respect. Indeed the key narrative of sibling rivalry suggests the older sister allows her younger one to experience triumph after rejection. This moment displaces the narrative theme of striving for success – at the climax of the film, the team we have been following fail to win, victory being attained by a team of which we no little and with which we do not identify. This narrative device enables Kit to gain self-respect, whilst for the ultra competitive Dottie, it is the moment in which family ties come to mean more than sporting competition. Implicitly here, male values of ruthless competition are eclipsed by female ones of empathy, nurturing and family ties. The 'appropriate' femininity of the older sister is made whole again, enabling her to return home to domesticity. The afterpiece – a brief reunion scene in which the women reminisce, are inducted into the Hall of Fame, and celebrate their shared experience – imparts a rather more self-consciously feminist inflection on the film.

Bend it Like Beckham

In *Bend it Like Beckham* the footballing aspirations of a British Asian girl will not be accepted by her parents. Jesminder, (Parminder Nagra) the daughter of a Sikh family, loves football and idolizes David Beckham. She is in rebellion against the intention of her mother to turn her into a young feminine woman, who can cook a 'full Indian supper' and who would make a desirable bride. With the encouragement of her white friend, Jules (Keira Knightley), she begins playing for a team without telling her parents, but is found out. Her parents tell her she must stop but she keeps devising strategies to carry on. Jules gets encouragement from her father, but her devotion to football causes deep unease for Jules' mother, who at one point comments, in despair, 'There's a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one of them without a fella. That's all I'm saying.' Just as Jesminder's mother regards football as un-feminine, Jules's mother comes to believe that her daughter and Jesminder (Jess) are in a lesbian relationship, and her fixation with this idea persists almost to the end of the film.²³

Despite the film's apparent liberalism, however, the possibility, indeed arguably the probability, of lesbian relationships in the context of the women's football team is denied – the players are all seemingly heterosexual. In contrast, one of Jess' friends, the distinctly unsporting Tony, reveals his own sexual preferences to Jess, by confessing that he 'really likes' Beckham, making clear that this is to do with desire rather than identification. Misread by Jules's mother, the row between Jules and Jess is actually due to their mutual desire for the coach, Joe (Jonathon Rhys Meyers). The coach functions in the narrative as a 'helper', supporting Jess's football aspirations, intervening with her family, and boosting her chances of catching the eye of American scouts. He also provides a means of highlighting racism. When talking about her own experiences Jess says, 'You don't know what it's like'. Joe responds, 'Jess, I'm Irish – of course I know what it's like'. It is notable that the two characters most able to relate to Jess' struggles are two other 'outsiders', the Irish Joe and the gay Tony.

For Jess, things come to a head when, with an alibi concocted in collusion with her sister, she goes on a team trip to Germany. The ruse is discovered and her parents confront her on her return, banning her from playing again. The final game of the season coincides with her

sister's wedding and Jess gives up all hope of playing. At this point in the narrative two male characters attempt to intervene on her behalf. The male coach Joe visits Jess' father to plead her case. The father listens with courtesy and then apparently dismisses the coach. The father, contemplating his own bitter withdrawal from cricket after a racist rebuff some years earlier, eventually relents, and Jess is allowed to depart swiftly from the wedding ceremony to take part in the second half. She scores the key goal and after the match an American scout offers Jess and her friend Jules football scholarships to play in the USA. Jess returns to the wedding celebrations convinced that the family will not allow her to go.

During the wedding celebrations, though, Tony then attempts to resolve Jess's dilemma by announcing that he and Jess are engaged, but that he will only marry her if she is allowed to go off to the college of her choice (which will enable her to accept the offer of a sport scholarship and play for a top American women's team). Tony's well-meaning lies prompt Jess to tell her family the truth, producing in return a speech from her father, who recounts his own withdrawal from cricket after a racist snub. Determined that his daughter should not be condemned to the bitter legacy he endured, he gives permission for her to go.

Bend it Like Beckham is about the hybrid identities of British Indians. Partly this revolves around the tensions between a parent culture which is retaining the attachment to tradition, value and ritual from the country of origin, and a youth culture which has absorbed aspects of, and is attracted to, British popular culture, in this case football. This is rendered more complex by the adopted British style of the father, his attachment to cricket, but his not having been absorbed into or accepted by mainstream British culture. Further complexities are provided by gender and sexuality. Sport is not regarded by the parents as appropriate feminine behaviour, or a good career move. The identity conflicts this establishes in Jess can only be finally resolved when her father is won over and gives her his blessing. In this narrative, which commences with Jess resisting her mother's attempts to teach her to cook an Indian banquet, and ends with her parents waving her off at the airport as she heads for the USA women's football league, the process of a parent culture adjusting to social change is revealed. Jess does not become male, or white, and does not reject her cultural background, but is the embodiment of a new hybridity.

Inside/outside/offside?

In all three films I have discussed, the outsiders win acceptance. It is worth contrasting this with another sport film, in which the inside/outside distinction is rendered with greater ambiguity. *Chariots of Fire* (1981) sets up two British athletes, Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell, with aspirations to win Olympic gold. They seem destined to be rivals, but Liddell's Christian faith and refusal to run on the Sunday Sabbath means that they run in separate events. Both win. On the surface, at least, this is a homage to British triumph over adversity, and links to the real life gold medals of Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett, won at the Moscow Olympics of 1980, just one year before the release of *Chariots of Fire*.²⁴

Yet, there is also here a narrative tension about insider/outsider relations. The Jewish Abrahams is marked as an outsider at Oxford University. At the start of the film the Olympic team are shown playing informal cricket, indoors. Abrahams objects vehemently to a decision, showing that his competitiveness outstrips adherence to the conventions of the game, especially in such an informal setting. The porter remarks on his arrival, 'Well, with a name like Abrahams, he won't be singing in the chapel choir'. The Warden regards his use of a coach, who is both professional and foreign, as a breach of the amateur spirit, and later comments to his colleague, 'There goes your Semite. A different God, Hugh,

a different mountain top.' Yet, as a middle-class Englishman, Abrahams is far closer to the very establishment that he is amidst than his rival. The Scottish Liddell is an active Christian lay preacher and this mission is seen as conflicting with the time his running demands, a view forcibly expressed by his sister. Liddell's own reconciliation of the two draws explicitly on his religion as he remarks, 'When I run I can feel His power'. In both cases the obstacles are the English establishment. Abrahams encounters the anti-Semitism of the Oxbridge elite; Liddell refuses to run on a Sunday and has to confront pressure from the British Olympic Committee (including the Prince of Wales and various Lords). At the end, it is not so much that they are welcomed inside – Liddell goes off to become a missionary, although this is not shown in the film; Abrahams becomes a sports administrator and in the words of one of the characters, 'runs them off their feet' – but rather that they have triumphed over the obstacles. Yet in the moment of triumph, Abrahams remains an isolated figure, retreating into a daze, then celebrating in a maudlin drunkenness with his coach, in the course of which it is clear that this is more an individual achievement than a patriotic one. Unlike the ending of the three films I have discussed above, in *Chariots of Fire*, the outsider status is not fully dissolved in a magical resolution or a utopian glow.²⁵

In these filmic explorations of sporting culture there is a discourse of inclusiveness in which it becomes alright to be a woman and play baseball, to be a Jamaican team entering the Winter Olympics, to be a British Asian girl and become a professional footballer. So what remains outside the boundaries, and which taboos are reaffirmed rather than challenged? Above all, it is in the area of sexuality and, specifically, lesbian and gay sexualities that the cultures of sport appear immutable. Gay and lesbian sexuality are conspicuous by their absence, even in those female sporting cultural settings where it would be reasonable to expect some manifestations. Allusions to homosexuality are largely absent, with one striking exception being the scene in *Bend it Like Beckham* in which the protagonist's male friend confesses that he too 'likes' Beckham. Parental fears of lesbian relations in girls' sport has to be 'handled' by way of a misinterpretation by the mother of the relationship of her daughter and best friend – she is reassured to discover that they both covet the same boy.

Otherwise, same sex attraction is generally absent from the frame of sport films. The most prominent exception in mainstream cinema is the film *Personal Best* (1982) in which two athletes have a lesbian relationship until, predictably, one of them falls for her male coach.²⁶ Otherwise explicit lesbian and gay sexualities in a sporting context are largely confined to low budget independent cinema. There are of course moments of homo-eroticism in mainstream sporting films – typically dismissed as the events of a wild party, as in *North Dallas Forty*, or played for laughs. In *North Dallas Forty*, there is a strong homo-social bond between Phil Elliott (Nick Nolte) and the quarterback, Seth Maxwell (Mac Davis), which especially in the filmic management of the regime of looks, appears to underscore an element of homo-erotic attraction lurking beneath the surface. In particular, the moment when the quarterback admits that, 'No, I ain't never been in love' and turns to gaze thoughtfully at Elliott. The moment, though, is never picked up, or alluded to in the narrative, and in the rest of the film it is clear that Elliott and Maxwell are resolutely heterosexual. It is indeed another factor that marks the exceptionalism of *Dawn!*, in that it sketches the possibilities of a lesbian relationship for its main character, clearly predominantly heterosexual, without being merely censorious or, in right-on independent cinema fashion, celebratory. It is merely one of the possibilities of life, like so many others that Dawn Fraser flirts with without always clearly grasping.²⁷

Conclusion

It is inherent in the structure of sport that it is about clarity rather than ambiguity. Indeed it is heavily rooted in empirical, if not empiricist, detail. Events have to be won and lost (that is why we have tie breaks, penalty shoot outs, play-offs, and the almost incomprehensible regulations governing bad weather in one-day cricket). Everything is timed, measured, quantified or judged. Elaborate statistical tables are kept, detailing victories, defeats, goals, runs, points, assists, scoring chances, mistakes, wickets, goal averages, batting averages, best performances and world records.²⁸ Sport does not tolerate ambiguity readily. All the doubts and uncertainties (was it a goal, a foul, a wicket, a run-out, a home run?) have to be resolved, and we now have a battery of cameras and technological devices to aid the elimination of doubt. Only England's disputed 1966 'goal' that enabled them to win the World Cup seems strangely immune from this process of resolution (at least in England!).

By contrast, art, including cinematic art, is often, at its best, largely about ambiguities, elusivities, slippages, allusions, shades of grey and indeterminacies. This is as true of those films based on real stories and characters as it is of complete fictions. *Chariots of Fire* and *Dawn!* are both based on the lives of successful sport performers. At the conclusion of *Chariots of Fire* and of *Dawn!*, we know what Harold Abrahams and Dawn Fraser respectively, have achieved, but we are not quite sure what they are thinking, or what we are supposed to be thinking, which is precisely why these films provoke thought and reflection. They have eschewed overly simple comfortable and confirmative resolutions. The challenge for a good sport film then, would seem to be to find ways of working across this tension between uncertainty and certainty, clarity and ambiguity, and the challenge for the culture of sport is to enable us to perceive, hold onto and value those aspects of sport not easily compressed into statistics: the struggle, the performance and the rare moments of *jouissance*. In this context, 'respect' is unlike a sport contest, something simply won or lost, but something that has endlessly to be sought and is never simply secured. It is a process and not a state, and cannot be delivered by a sporting triumph alone.

Notes

- ¹ Tagline to the original Rocky film in 1976, and still in wide secondary circulation – I acquired it on a Rocky T-shirt, purchased in Philadelphia, 2007.
- ² Whannel, 'No Room for Uncertainty', 200–11.
- ³ For a sense of the sheer range of sport films, see Bergan, *Sports in the Movies*.
- ⁴ Whannel, *Media Sport Stars*.
- ⁵ Topolski and Robinson, *True Blue: The Oxford Boat Race Mutiny*.
- ⁶ Barthes, *S/Z*.
- ⁷ Whannel, *Fields in Vision*.
- ⁸ For further discussion of sport and film see Baker and Boyd, *Out of Bounds*; and Baker, *Contesting Identities*.
- ⁹ http://www.gold-eagle.com/editorials_04/chuhran020204.html, accessed 12 September 2007.
- ¹⁰ The Horatio Alger Society, <http://www.horatioalger.com>, accessed 12 September 2007.
- ¹¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*; Tawney, *Religion and The Rise of Capitalism*.
- ¹² Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.
- ¹³ Adams, *The Epic of America*.
- ¹⁴ Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*.
- ¹⁵ Last two lines of Alumnus Football, written by Grantland Rice in 1908 and included in *Only the Brave and Other Poems* (1941: 144).
- ¹⁶ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*.
- ¹⁷ Tomlinson, *Consumption, Identity and Style*.
- ¹⁸ Phillips, *All Must Have Prizes*.
- ¹⁹ Thompson, *Fear and Loathing*.

- ²⁰ See Crabbe and Wagg, 'A Carnival of Cricket?', 70–88.
- ²¹ See Blount and Cunningham, *Representing Black Men*; and Cole and King 'Representing Black Masculinity', 49–86, for discussion of ways in which black men are represented.
- ²² See Berlage, 'Women's Professional Baseball'.
- ²³ See Treagus, 'Not Bent At All'.
- ²⁴ Whannel, 'Narrative and Television Sport'.
- ²⁵ However, for some contrasting readings, see Hollands, 'Why I Liked Chariots of Fire'; Jarvie, 'Chariots of Fire'; Johnston, 'Charioteers and Ploughmen'; Neale, 'Chariots of Fire: Images of Men'; Tomlinson, 'Situating Chariots of Fire'.
- ²⁶ See Baker, *Contesting Identities*.
- ²⁷ See Miller, 'The Dawn of an Imagined Community'.
- ²⁸ For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Brohm, *Sport – A Prison of Measured Time*.

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