

How Baseball Ruined the Baseball Movie

by Brandon Kruse

When it comes to sports movies, baseball is king. No other sport has come close to matching the quantity or quality of the films contributed by baseball to the sports movie genre. Don't believe me? Here's what the other major sports bring to the table:

Basketball: Filmmakers didn't even care about basketball until 1977; that's strike number one right there. (The fact that the first basketball movie ever was *One on One*, a chick flick disguised as a sports movie, is strike number two. And check out that movie's tagline: "There comes a time when love stops being a ball and starts being a woman." Are you serious?? There's a literal interpretation there that brings to mind a movie about an adolescent boy transitioning from borderline deviant sexual behavior to something much more appropriate, and that might have been interesting, or even funny in the vein of *American Pie*, but that's not what the producers were going for. No, they were clearly going for figurative and clever, and our only consolation is the hope that everyone involved with that tagline was fired then jailed, and possibly forced to watch *One on One* on an endless loop.)

In terms of classics, basketball has give us two: *Hoosiers* and *Hoop Dreams*. (I personally also like to argue on behalf of *Teen Wolf*, but I realize not everyone shares my deep affection for that particular film.) The fact that those two are among the best sports movies ever made is certainly a feather in basketball's cap, but not enough to turn that cap into a crown.

Boxing: If any sport other than baseball has a claim to the title, it's boxing. Boxing has given us some spectacular films, starting with the first four *Rocky* movies. The original is probably the only true classic, but for movie fans of a certain age, I think the three sequels retain a quotability factor and enough memorable moments to keep them in high regard (god bless you, Clubber Lang and Ivan Drago).

However, there are just as many other boxing movies where the sport is treated as a metaphor, or as a springboard to a higher purpose. I'm thinking of movies like *On the Waterfront*, *Raging Bull* and *Million-Dollar Baby*. All excellent, but does anyone really think of them as "sports movies"? I think not. (And if they do, well, we'll have no choice but to have them jailed and then forced to watch *One on One* on an endless loop.)

Football: Here's the thing about football. It tends to specialize in delivering a lot of good-but-not-pantheon-material movies, like *North Dallas Forty*, *Any Given Sunday*, or *Remember the Titans*. And while it has classics, but they all come with some baggage. *Brian's Story* was a huge success and is generally held up as the model for the "emotionally moving" sports movie, but it

was a TV-movie, and as such, it faces the fate of all TV-movies: it's relegated to the back seat of these kind of discussions. I didn't start the anti-TV-movie backlash, and I don't have the clout to fight against it; the makers of *Brian's Story* made their choice, and they'll just have to live with it.

Jerry Maguire is great, and was also a huge success, but while it's about football, it's not really *about* football. It's about integrity, respect, love, gettin' paid, and being a cute, precocious kid (and I'm referring to Jonathan Lipnicki there, not Tom Cruise). The football stuff in the movie isn't really about the aspects of the game that make people love it. I can't imagine football fans wanting to gear up for a new season by watching *Jerry Maguire*, and isn't that what a sports movie classic should do: generate enthusiasm by perfectly capturing the elements of the sport that make you love it?

Then there's *Rudy*. It's certainly about football, and has that passion for the game that you want in a classic. But is it really the kind of movie you want to take into battle, to throw out in the middle of a bar argument about sports movies? "Oh yeah, what about *Rudy*?" (The room falls into an awkward silence, and the speaker immediately flashes a look of regret. He quietly slinks away, and is never heard from again.) Don't let this happen to you.

(Frankly, I thought the original version of *The Longest Yard* had the potential to be a classic, but then they went and did a remake of it, which pretty much automatically negates its classic status, because you just don't remake classics. Well, unless you're Gus Van Sant and you're under the spell of syphilis or perhaps you owe a lot of money to some really bad people and you decide to do a shot-for-shot remake of *Psycho*, and we all saw how well that went.)

Golf: Golf has *Caddyshack* and *Happy Gilmore*, and golf should feel damn lucky to have them, because the laughs created by those two movies have generated a tremendous amount of goodwill for the sport, and I suspect that keeps those of us who find televised golf to be an abuse of network airtime on par with the 1996-97 UPN sitcom *Homeboys in Outer Space* from rising up en masse to destroy it.

Hockey: Hockey has *Slap Shot* and *Miracle*, which give you, respectively, a humorous take on the sport, and the amazing story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team. And that's it, folks. I promise you, there is nothing left to say about hockey. I mean, come on, does any sport have a filmography as embarrassing as hockey? Three *Mighty Ducks* films? *MVP: Most Valuable Primate*? A direct-to-video sequel to *Slap Shot*? (I'd say shame on you, Stephen Baldwin, but the man once recorded a dance track entitled "My 18-Inch Biceps," has a tattoo of the initials H.M. for Hannah Montana on his shoulder, and has appeared on *Celebrity Mole*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, and *Ty Murray's Celebrity Bull Riding Challenge*. Clearly the man has no shame.)

And finally, there's baseball. To start with, baseball has its

Holy Trinity: *Bull Durham*, *Field of Dreams*, and *The Natural*. These are generally regarded to be the best baseball movies ever made, and some of the best sports movies ever made. In 2005, ESPN did a poll on the 25 Best Sports Movies from the last 25 years (1979-2004), and turned in lists from an expert panel and from ESPN.com SportsNation users. Those three movies finished in the Top 7 of both lists.

But baseball didn't stop there, oh no. Baseball also gave us three additional classics in *Eight Men Out* (which I personally prefer to *Bull Durham*), *Major League* (which actually ranked 5th on the SportsNation list, surpassing *Bull Durham* and *The Natural*), and *A League of Their Own*. All three of these films surpass the quality of many of the classics in other sports.

And we haven't even mentioned *The Pride of the Yankees*, the 1942 movie about Lou Gehrig, which gets dismissed because it's, well, old. But it has aged remarkably well, and in June 2008, the American Film Institute named it the #3 sports movie of all-time, behind *Raging Bull* and *Rocky*.

Best of all, these movies are all undeniably about baseball, they practically ooze it from every pore, even when exploring other issues and themes. You can watch *Field of Dreams* or *The Natural* in the dead of winter and feel like spring training is right around the corner.

But here's the thing about those six (not counting *The Pride of the Yankees*) classic baseball movies: they were all released between 1984 and 1992, a nine-year period that I like to refer to as The Baseball Movie Renaissance. (This period also included the release of *Brewster's Millions*, which, while far from a classic, is a fun guilty pleasure, and contains a Rick Moranis appearance that compresses two hours worth of laughs into two minutes.) It's a little freaky to see so many great baseball films sandwiched into such a very short period of time – can you think of any other film genre where the cream of the crop were all made and released within a 10-year period? I can't.

Another thing that struck me about the Baseball Movie Renaissance was the timing – it was sandwiched right between the two worst labor disputes in the history of Major League Baseball, both of which shut down the game for an extended period. The players went on strike for seven weeks in the middle of the 1981 season, and in 1994, they went on strike on August 12th and didn't come back until April 25th of the following year, causing the World Series to be cancelled, making Major League Baseball the first professional sport to lose its entire postseason due to a labor dispute. (As PoopReading.com contributor Joe Mulder likes to say, "They cancelled the World Series; not even Hitler managed to do that.")

Both strikes produced a lot of fan anger and resentment, and certainly neither was a climate conducive to making and releasing a movie about baseball. And sure enough, there

were no baseball movies released in 1981 or 1982. (Keeping in mind that making a movie, from script to finished product, is a lengthy process, and so a strike in mid-1981 would have affected the end of that year and the bulk of the next.) Likewise, there were no baseball movies released in 1995.

Go back to the Pittsburgh Drug Trials of September 1985, when 13 major league players were caught up in a cocaine scandal that led to the conviction of several drug dealers. There was only one baseball movie released in 1986, a TV-movie called *A Winner Never Quits*, a biopic about one-armed player Pete Gray, who played half a season with the St. Louis Browns in 1945 because many of the regular MLB players had gone off to fight in World War Two. (And I can't help wondering if it may have originally been intended for theatrical release, only to get pushed to TV in the wake of the trials.)

Then in March 2005, we had the Congressional inquiry into steroids in baseball that featured a stonewalling Mark McGwire and a lying Rafael Palmeiro. And in December 2007, the Mitchell Report was released. Since 2006, there have been seven baseball movies released: two documentaries about the past (*American Pastime* and *Signs of the Time*), two comedies that used baseball and softball only as a backdrop (*The Benchwarmers* and *Beer League*), a direct-to-video second sequel to *The Sandlot*, a taken-from-real-life movie about a high school baseball team (*The Final Season*), and an animated film set in the era of Babe Ruth (*Everybody's Hero*).

There haven't been any movies about modern-day professional baseball players since 2004's *Mr. 3000* and 2005's *Fever Pitch*, and I can't imagine one being received very well right now, so long as performance-enhancing drugs keep grabbing the headlines (and they almost certainly will).

And what have we had since the 1994-95 strike? Two made-for-TV narratives about moments from baseball history: *Soul of the Game*, about the Negro Leagues, and *61**, about Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris's pursuit of Babe Ruth's single-season home run record in 1961. A documentary about baseball's first Jewish superstar, *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*. And the 2002 biopic about 35-year-old teacher turned baseball pitcher Jim Morris, *The Rookie*. All were good, but none were good enough to be classics.

What hope is there for the future? The career of Kevin Costner, star of two baseball movie classics, is just about dead (if *Swing Vote* didn't kill it, I don't know what will). Ron Shelton, writer-director of *Bull Durham* and six other sports-based movies of varying quality, is currently filming an adaptation of *Game of Shadows*, the recent non-fiction book about Barry Bonds and the BALCO scandal (not helping, Ron!).

One item of intrigue is that there is an adaptation of

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Moneyball in the works. *Moneyball*, for those who are unfamiliar with it, was a 2003 book written by Michael Lewis that looked at the success of the Oakland A's, and how they, led by general manager Billy Beane, used statistical analysis to exploit inefficiencies in the baseball market to stay competitive despite one of the game's lowest payrolls (that may sound boring, but it's not, it's absolutely riveting). It was a big success, and has become a lightning rod in the ongoing battle between statistical analysis and more traditional methods of player evaluation, like scouting (which is ridiculous, because the best approach is a mix of both).

Right now, Steven Zaillian, who won an Oscar for *Schindler's List* and was nominated for *Awakenings* and *Gangs of New York* is attached to write the script, Steven Soderbergh is attached to direct, and Brad Pitt is attached to play Billy Beane (which is not as crazy as it may sound – Beane is 36, fairly handsome, and an ex-ballplayer).

It's only in the "announced" stage right now, which means anything can happen. It could just as easily fall apart as get made at this point. Still, in the hands of those three guys, there's a lot of potential for greatness. (Which is good, because I've long feared that any adaptation of *Moneyball* would turn out lame and cheesy, like the 1996 HBO movie adaptation of the awesome book *The Late Shift*, which was about the battle over *The Tonight Show* between Jay Leno and David Letterman.)

Baseball needs this movie to be good. Kingdoms don't always last forever, and this is one that's starting to look a little long in the tooth. If we're not careful, NASCAR will make a play for the throne. And who the hell wants that?
