

Wilson: Bull Durham still tops the best sports movies all-time list



Jason Wilson
Sporting Life

While sports have certainly played a part in my development and have remained an integral part of my being, movies are truly my first love. Doug Dickinson has the weekly film writing locked away, however, refusing to share, so it is up to me to force a bit of a crossover.

Sports movies. Ah, the bad ones are more clichéd than your typical post-game interview, while the best ones can inspire swells of emotion and bring tears to the eyes of your most hardened of individuals. And each sport has its own champion. I'll try to come up with a couple per sport, and if I missed anything, by all means let us know.

Basketball is a tricky genre, and while I was initially going to ignore documentaries, I can't. *Hoop Dreams* may well be the best movie about sports ever made. The 1994 Steve James film – he recently directed *Life Itself* about film critic Roger Ebert – was directed over five years, following two young hopefuls pursuing high school basketball fame in Chicago. William Gates and Arthur Agee are excellent and tragic subjects as the film doesn't shy away from the despair nor does it project any kind of false hope. James' film is detached but it has a lot of raw, real feeling to it. It's long, however, at three hours, so it is a time commitment. It was initially supposed to be a thirty-minute short, but there was so much material, they continued the project until it was finally released in 1994.

Other than that, *Hoosiers* may be the next best thing. You've got salty Gene Hackman coaching a group of misfits in high school hoops. It's also one of the better-known basketball movies and has served as a template for a wide selection of movies since like *Coach Carter* and *Glory Road*, neither of which are even close to as good. If you want a basketball movie a little more off the beaten path, Spike Lee's masterpiece *He Got Game* may do the trick. It's more of a father-son drama than a sports movie, but real-life NBA players



Kevin Costner, right, and Tim Robbins in my pick for best sports movie of all time. PHOTO: METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER STUDIOS INC.

perform in the movie, and the game is at the core of the Shuttleworth's relationship (Denzel Washington and Ray Allen).

There is really only one film about hockey that absolutely needs to be mentioned. And while I know *The Mighty Ducks* franchise has its supporters, nothing touches *Slap Shot* with Paul Newman. It's gritty and hilarious. It kind of follows the structure of the slob-versus-snobs movies – more on that when we get to golf – but it also carries a distinct love for the game of hockey with it. It also works as a great look at real problems facing a small mining town as a mill is on the verge of closing.

Another that is mostly forgotten is *Mystery, Alaska*. It's the improbable story of a small-town band of hockey players who get the opportunity to play the New York Rangers ... in their outdoor rink. Like *Slap Shot*, it's funny and it mercifully doesn't bow to your narrative expectations. More recently, *Goon* came and went, but everyone I've talked to who has seen it has loved

it. It's also more comedy than drama, which seems to be a pattern. Hockey movies excel at being a little snarkier and sarcastic, while basketball films seem to reach more for the inspirational tone.

I've been negligent when it comes to football movies. American football. I've never seen *Rudy*, *Remember the Titans*, or *Friday Night Lights*, so my default is Oliver Stone's last good movie, *Any Given Sunday* from 1999. The football sequences are very well put together, and the story is a lot less polished than your garden-variety sports movie. It focuses on the seedier, behind-the-scenes elements. Comedy option: *Ace Ventura, Pet Detective*.

Soccer features one of my favourite sports movies of the last 10 years, *The Damned United*. Tom Hooper (*The King's Speech*, *Les Misérables*) directs a story of a new, arrogant coach of Leeds United's football/soccer club. He's brash and in over his head and gets humbled fairly quickly. It's a movie about obsessions and being knocked

back down by them. Hooper has made movies that have made bigger splashes since, but he hasn't made one as tightly told or as fascinating as this. Michael Sheen is in top form as well.

Boxing and fight sports have a ready-made structure in place. *Rocky* is the quintessential underdog story, and *Warrior* from a couple years back has a wonderful dramatic hook pitting two brothers against each other in an MMA tournament. Only one can win. But, bar none, the best boxing-related movie ever made is *Raging Bull*. Martin Scorsese's film about Jake LaMotta is elegant and brutal in equal measure. The opening credits, shot in serene black and white like the rest of the movie, shows a hooded LaMotta bouncing in the middle of the boxing ring. It's a beautiful sequence perfectly capturing the duality of the sport. It's fierce but it carries a certain poise and class that is often difficult to define. The fight scenes, even without colour, will test viewers' capacities for violence and how real it comes across. This

is juxtaposed perfectly with his home life, where LaMotta was an animal with his wife and brother. Sometimes the living room was more dangerous than the boxing ring.

It's almost a toss-up with golf. *Caddyshack* and *Happy Gilmore* are pretty high watermarks. I give the edge to the former, not because of its plot but because of the wonderful riffing by Chevy Chase, Bill Murray, Ted Knight and Rodney Dangerfield. The story is threadbare and almost entirely abandoned partway through to focus on laughs, which was a good choice. It shows its age, but it's still a charming piece of comedy.

Finally, baseball. No other sport has had the track record in cinema that baseball does. Kevin Costner owes his acting career to the sport. While I love *Major League* and I hate *The Natural* – though it has its following – it will always be *Bull Durham* and *Field of Dreams* atop my heart. *Bull Durham* is perfect. It avoids the saccharine "dreams will come true" idiocy that often gets shoehorned into sports movies. But it's also not cynical about it. It's as real as they come. *Field of Dreams* is more fantasy film than anything, but it's fantasy based around a grown man having a catch with his dead father. It may not resonate for everyone, but it works for me. *For Love of the Game* isn't quite in the same league as his others, but the later Costner baseball vehicle has some choice moments as he reaches for a perfect game as his career hits the finish line.

Let us know if I left off your favourite sports movie. If I haven't seen it, I will. If I have seen it ... maybe I'll re-assess. Here's a top ten:

- Bull Durham*
- Field of Dreams*
- Hoop Dreams*
- Raging Bull*
- He Got Game*
- The Damned United*
- Slap Shot*
- Caddyshack*
- Major League*
- Moneyball*

Jason Wilson
Freelance reporter, school teacher and Woodstock native who writes a regular sports column dealing with fantasy drafts and other sports topics of interest.



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