2007

Winning It All: The Cinematic Construction of the Athletic American Dream

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CHAPTER SEVEN

WINNING IT ALL:
THE CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION
OF THE ATHLETIC AMERICAN DREAM

ANDREW MILLER

PROMOTER
“Rocky, do you believe that America is the land of opportunity?

ROCKY
Yeah.

PROMOTER
Apollo Creed does, and he’s going to prove it to the whole world by giving an
unknown a shot at the title…and that unknown is you. He picked you, Rocky.
Rocky, it’s the chance of a lifetime. You can’t pass it by. What do you say?

In 1976, the United States of America was a country still reeling from years
of civil and political instability. The rancor created by Vietnam, Watergate, and
the civil rights movement was still very much in the public consciousness, and
this unrest was reflected and represented in the popular culture of the period.
And yet, 1976 was also a moment of patriotic fervor as the American
bicentennial was planned and commemorated, and all over the country U.S.
citizens looked forward to the chance to celebrate their shared heritage. Within
this context, it is no surprise to find the uplifting Rocky alongside the nihilistic
Taxi Driver in the Oscar nominations for the year’s best picture. But it is Rocky
that wins the award, and reminds audiences everywhere of the power of the
Athletic American Dream; a dream constructed, supported and propagated by
the motion picture industry and the popular culture business that surrounds it.

Powered by a philosophy of self-determination and an ideology of a level
playing field, the Athletic American Dream has become firmly entrenched in
American culture. Following narrative patterns influenced by both newspaper
sports sections and juvenile sports fiction, it coalesces around underdog-to-
Chapter Seven

As sporting culture grew throughout the nineteenth century its connection to the American Dream was, for the most part, neither strong nor well developed. There are a variety of reasons for this disconnect, but there are two main factors that fundamentally affect this relationship. First of all, as one might surmise, one must be able to earn money or achieve a significant rise in class, in order for the idea of a sporting career to gain traction in the popular imagination. And for most of the nineteenth century American sports were dominated by amateur gentlemen who could already afford to “play for the love of the game.”
Secondly and just as importantly, the successful construction of an Athletic American Dream is dependent upon the development of a master narrative or mythos and its dissemination via mass media. It is not until the 1800s come to a close that the Athletic American Dream begins to take root in popular culture.

Broadly speaking, American sporting culture forms the latticework of social practices that shape and are shaped by the physical diversions, the recreational games, and the athletic activities of the American people. It is not static, but a process that grows and changes over time and takes specific form during specific moments in history:

Sport is an umbrella term that we now take to denote a large number of social practices involving the competitive performance of rule-prescribed tasks requiring physical skill. But the term was historically formed.¹

In the early part of the century, sporting events were almost entirely local and community oriented, but by the 1820’s some competitions were beginning to receive national attention. During this time a number of North/South thoroughbred grudge matches became “America’s first nationwide sports spectacles.”² In addition to horse racing, “rowing matches, cockfighting, and animal baiting, were the major spectator events” during the first half of the 19th century, and sporting culture still remained overwhelmingly provincial.³

As America approached the mid-century mark of the 1800s, sporting culture had arrived at a pivotal moment in its development:

In the eighteenth century it referred predominantly to aristocratic field pursuits—hunting, shooting and fishing—the leisure activities of the sporting gentleman. By the mid nineteenth century a different meaning had formed around the concept of the amateur gentleman, the ideology of fair play and male team sports.⁴

Urban reform spurred “(the American fitness movement [which] began in the 1840s,” and national figures like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Thomas Wentworth Higginson espoused their convictions that physical fitness was essential to a healthy and moral life.⁵ At around the same time, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) traveled from England to the United States and began to preach its own brand of “muscular Christianity” interested in promoting respectable sports such as baseball, and rowing, and a culture of physical fitness more generally.⁶ This reform movement was stalled by the Civil War, but these hostilities paradoxically brought together large groups of men with sufficient amounts of “leisure” time between battles, so the war-between-the-states actually boosted the development of a national sporting culture.⁷

By the end of the nineteenth century sports had grown into a secular, mass-mediated and bureaucratized cultural phenomenon circulating within a
framework of ever-increasing levels of quantification. Before the nineteenth century, changes in sporting culture were minimal and often short-lived. But as the world began to modernize, urbanize and corporatize, changes in sports came fast and furious and they placed increasing importance on sporting regulations and record keeping. By the late 1880's, for example, thoroughbred racing had become a mass spectator sport attracting an estimated $200 million per year, bicycling was a $100 million business, and baseball, a sport that was barely over ten years-old, was already a $10 million enterprise. "(B)y the late 1890s, the structural and ideological framework for the national sporting culture was firmly ensconced in American society." 

Throughout the nineteenth century, the development of sporting media occurs alongside the incredible growth of athletic participation and spectatorship, and the coverage of sports increased dramatically as the century comes to a close. In addition to the growth of weekly magazines such as The New York Clipper, The Sporting News, and The International Police Gazette, the first daily newspaper sports department is established at the New York World in 1883 and William Randolph Hearst introduced the first distinct sports section in the New York Journal in 1895. In and around these early examples of mass mediated sports, the published sports stories found in newspapers often represented the sphere of the "sporting gentlemen" best exemplified by horseracing and blood sports such as ratting, bear baiting, and bare-knuckle boxing. This realm of "sporting gentlemen" was the part of sporting culture that had always been attached to the concept of economic gain. Gambling was expected and athletes were paid for their labors, but until the rise of the mass media these athletes toiled in obscurity, and even successful fighters often struggled to make ends meet.

The first sports figure to truly exploit the power of America's new sporting mass media was John L. Sullivan, arguably America's first athletic superstar. Springing from a decidedly lower-class background, the Irish-American boxer rises to prominence with a series of fights in the early 1880s and becomes world champion by defeating Paddy Ryan in 1882. The "Boston Strong Boy," as he was called, reigned as world champion for ten years helping to move boxing from outlawed bare-knuckle brawling to a more respectable and more closely regulated sport. But more significantly, Sullivan is the first great example of the mass media's role in the production and construction of athletic success. His mediated rise to prominence begins to offer evidence of the possibility of an Athletic American Dream:

Under Sullivan's reign, then, boxing borrowed promotional techniques and organizational structure from show business...In this sense, the ring was leaving its folk roots behind and entering the modern realm of mass-produced, repeatable spectacles...In a word, Sullivan had become a professional entertainer, a
celebrity, a man whose livelihood depended on constant public adulation. Perhaps more than any American before him, Sullivan lived in the public spotlight...Sullivan's giddy rise seemed to offer a model for success for self assertive men. 

Although Sullivan's success was certainly attached to an idea of an Athletic American Dream in that it appeared to offer the opportunity for class ascension, professional prize-fighting was still not viewed as an acceptable profession by much of American society as it was still attached to the unseemly blood sport tradition of athletic culture. In other words, although "The Great John L." achieved fame and fortune, he did not yet represent a model to be followed by respectable families. The Athletic American Dream was not yet fully formed in American consciousness.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, factors from both the top and the bottom of American society pushed sporting culture, even in its most violent guise, toward respectability. First of all, providing an upper class authoritarian voice, the influential and voluble Teddy Roosevelt supported an athletic regime that specifically noted the value of participating in violent athletic endeavors like college football (which caused several deaths each year in the 1890s and early 1900s) and sparring (boxing while wearing gloves):

Theodore Roosevelt, promoted the strenuous life in myriad ways, but granted football a conspicuously important role; several of his essays in the 1890s placed football at the heart of a young man's training for life...Roosevelt elaborated on this idea in...Harper's Weekly where he responded directly to the outcries against football's violence... 'The sports especially dear to a vigorous and manly nation are always those in which there is a certain slight element of risk. Every effort should be made to minimize this risk, but it is unmanly folly to try to do away with the sport because the risk exists."

Secondly, from the realm of popular culture, the rise of the dime novel was also instrumental in pushing sporting pursuits into the American mainstream. In particular, the sports fiction stories written by Gilbert Patten (using his nom-de-plume Burt Standish) were an overnight success in 1896, and more than two hundred of these sports stories were published between 1896 and 1924. These stories emphasized the value of teamwork as they typically detailed the adventures of the upright and heroic student athlete Frank Merriwell as he ran, jumped, tackled and boxed his way through high school and college. Although these dime novels were filled with frequent and often violent sporting conflicts, the hero always fought with an unyielding sense of fair play that helped to fashion a new and improved masculine ideal, an ideal that was both athletic and respectable:
By the end of the Victorian Era, the college athletic hero and what he represented provided an important role-model for children and adolescents. The genre of juvenile pulp fiction portrayed young athletic heroes as manly individuals who had achieved prowess in sports, yet maintained a proper balance between mind and body. These idols were of sound character and befriended and protected those who were less gifted...Standish’s readers were taught that if they participated in athletics with sportsmanship and led a righteous life just like Frank Merriwell, they would develop all the best traits of manliness and their future success was assured.\(^\text{13}\)

Although Frank Merriwell was a genuine sports hero, the sporting culture represented by Roosevelt and Standish was still firmly attached to a sensibility in which sports was purely an amateur pursuit. It was an important avenue through which to train and refine American masculinity, but it was not the means to economic success. The Athletic American Dream was still not fully realized.

And yet these juvenile sport stories can also be seen as closely related to the earlier dime novels of Horatio Alger who’s rags-to-riches stories serve as the foundation of the American Dream myth. At the same time, the economic and popular success of some real-world athletes (as represented by John L. Sullivan) begins to suggest the class ascension potential of professional sports. In other words, as the nineteenth century comes to a close, the field has been lined and made ready for the Athletic American Dream, a dream that reaches fruition in the influential mass medium of the cinema.

**Learning the Rules: Early Cinema and the Athletic American Dream**

Sports films have been an ever-present part of American motion pictures. In fact, going back to the equine motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge (which are first published in 1872), one might even say that sports have been a part of motion pictures from their very conception:

> It is often forgotten that Muybridge’s famous search for proof that a horse’s legs did all leave the ground at one point was inspired by a request from the racing fraternity—strictly speaking, the trotting fraternity...They led, as we know, to true motion pictures; they were also the foundation of the sports film.\(^\text{14}\)

The Athletic American Dream, however, does not find full expression in motion pictures with the mere invention of the cinema or with the simple attachment of sports to celluloid. Rather it is the development of the American sports film genre that promotes the growth of the Athletic American Dream.
Moving forward from Muybridge, during the liminal years of early cinema the intersection of sports and movies occurs in a wide variety of formats and styles. During this era, non-fiction sports films far outnumber their counterparts and they showcase sports both major and minor. *Hockey Match on the Ice* (1898), for example, briefly shows men in team uniforms moving back and forth chasing a puck, *Cambridge Boat Race* (1900) depicts a crew match with a series of three long shots of the boats on the water, and *Princeton/Yale Football Game* (1903) offers up images of this college contest beginning with views that pan around the stadium and then cuts to shots of players warming up and several actual plays all shot from the same sideline position.

These motion pictures are typical examples of the sporting actualities that are produced during this period, and offer “straightforward” documentation of athletic activities. Many historians have associated them with the idea of a “cinema of attractions,” a useful concept to employ when thinking about the appeal of early cinema:

> By reference to the curiosity-arousing devices of the fairground, the term [cinema of attractions] denoted early cinema’s fascination with the novelty and its foregrounding of the act of display... We could list a number of inherently ‘attractive’ themes in early cinema: a fascination with visual experiences ... (colors, forms of motions—the very phenomenon of motion itself in cinema’s earliest projections); an interest in novelty (ranging from actual current events to physical freaks and oddities)...A peculiarly modern obsession with violent and aggressive sensations (such as speed)... Rather than a development which links the past with the present in such a way as to define a specific anticipation of the future (as an unfolding narrative does), the attraction seems limited to a sudden burst of presence... less concerned with *how* an event will develop than with *when* an event will occur.15

It is easy to see how films that depict sporting activity would fit into the description above and represent fine examples of this cinema of attractions. At their most fundamental level, these images embody an interest in speed, motion and violence. But there are other sports films in which this categorization proves to be more problematic.

During the earliest years of cinema (as is true of the years that follow) frequent use is made of famous athletes, and one sport in particular makes this happen with regularity. With the hundreds of recording of actual prizefights, recreations and exhibitions, boxing “dominates the early years, playing a central part in the emergence of cinema before a wider audience forced it to the margins.”16 Films such as *Leonard-Cushing Fight* (1894), *Corbett and Courtney before the Kinetograph* (1894), and *Corbett-Fitzsimmons Fight* (1897) bring to audiences recognizable athletes who are part of well-known, well-reported stories that they carry with them almost regardless of the specific film in which
they are pictured. Even though these motion pictures still retain the visceral appeal that comes from displaying moving bodies in violent confrontation, they are also a visual representation of an ongoing narrative of sporting achievement attached to the individual fighters and to sports more generally.

Despite the presence of celebrity athletes, the Athletic American Dream has not yet fully matured and as the twentieth century begins there still isn’t a clear sense of a unique sports film genre. Actualities still dominate the sports film production landscape, and in the realm of fiction Hollywood tends to offer films that include brief moments of athletic performance or genre hybrids like The Cowboy Pugilist (1911) or The Ball Player and the Bandit (1912).\textsuperscript{17} It is not until the second decade of the twentieth century that, helped along by the Sims Act of 1912 (that forbade the transport of interracial nonfiction prizefight films across state lines), feature length narrative sports films become a regular part of Hollywood production. As the 1920s approach films like The Pinch Hitter (1917), The Half Back (1917), and The Busher (1919) reflect both the overall industrial push toward longer narratives and the combination of stories and spectacle that were becoming specific to the American sports film. Examining these films from this period illuminates the connection between this new cinematic genre and the Athletic American Dream.

The Pinch Hitter, for example, contains many of the generic elements that are central to the new genre. The film recounts the story of Joel Parker, a motherless young man who lacks the respect of his father and arrives at Williamson College fresh off the farm. In this typical boob to hero trajectory, Joel begins his college career as a friendless, talentless hick who wears ill-fitting out-of-style clothes and is teased and rejected by his fellow classmates. After meeting a baseball-loving girl at the local malt shop, Joel attempts to join the Williamson baseball team, but alas, his poor fashion sense is matched by his athletic ineptitude, and he only succeeds in becoming the team’s “mascot.”\textsuperscript{18} At the conclusion of the film, circumstances contrive to have Joel at the plate with two outs in the ninth and his team behind: “working up a good lot of suspense, he wallops the ball for a homer and wins the approval of his dad and the girl.”\textsuperscript{19} The final image of the film features the newly formed happy loving couple embracing under the approving gaze of Joel’s father.

It is not college, but prep school that is the setting for The Half Back, but it too ends with our hero winning the big game. This movie is a Merriwell influenced yarn that appropriately begins with the intertitle, “A Story of School Life,” and revolves around the adventures of new scholarship-boy from the backwoods of Maine, Joel March.\textsuperscript{20} Joel becomes the new halfback on the school team, much to the chagrin of the wealthy and selfish Bartlett Cloud, and together with all-around good guy and football captain, Wesley Blair, he propels the team to a succession of victories. A resentful Cloud frames Joel for a crime
he didn’t commit, which causes our hero to be put on probation and miss the big game. At the film’s conclusion Wesley purposefully underperforms on his final exams so that Joel can win the “Goodwin” scholarship and stay in school, and Joel, after being reinstated to the team, runs for a touchdown to win the big game in front of his visiting family in the stands. The final image of the film is of Joel and Wesley, the new best friends, standing together.

In the baseball movie, The Busher, our hero still wins the big game, but in this case the sport is professional rather than amateur. Ben Harding, Brownville’s resident star pitcher, has the good fortune to play in a pick-up game with members of the professional St. Paul Pink Sox when their train breaks down as they pass through his small town. Ignorant of their professional status, Ben plays magnificently and is offered a contract to play in their league. Ben grabs the brass ring and heads for the big city leaving behind his small town ideals and the girl that he loves, Mazie. As a professional, Ben forgets that it was hard work and humility that made him a good pitcher, and his assumption of arrogance leads to his downfall. He is soon washed out of the professional ranks. Returning home in disgrace, he avoids his old friends (and especially his old girl), until he is convinced to come out of his semi-retirement to help the town team defeat their local rivals. In so doing, Ben wins back Mazie from her new beau Jim, the banker’s son who, unbeknownst to Mazie, is working with gamblers to fix the big game. As a final coda, a professional baseball team rediscovers Ben, but this time he will not continue his baseball career by himself. Mazie and Ben, together again, will meet their athletic future collectively.

These three films, The Pinch Hitter, The Half Back, and The Busher, and others like them suggest that a recognizable sports film genre was emerging during this second decade of the twentieth century, and it is a genre that contains consistent semantic and syntactic elements. For semantics, the films include the requisite images of practice fields, sporting arenas, and athletic activity that one would expect from a genre founded on sporting culture. As regards to syntax, these movies present, with the expected variations, stories that move through sporting seasons to culminate in the final climactic “big game,” and it comes to no surprise that our heroes win the day almost every time. Of more importance, however, is the manner in which they achieve victory. In the Pinch Hitter the college freshman perseveres and stays on the baseball team despite his initial poor play and he is rewarded for his commitment. Similarly, in The Halfback hard work and determination win out over wealth and privilege. The new high school student plays honestly and by the rules, and in return he is able to score the winning touchdown. By winning the big game these movie athletes affirm that hard work, strong moral character, and a commitment to fair play all lead to championships:
No one ever wins because of superior talent. No one ever wins because of superior strength, speed, and coordination. There is no inspirational moral to such victories. The only proper explanation for an athletic triumph is ‘character.’ This nebulous term is built into our Judeo-Christian heritage through the farfetched story of David and Goliath, the model for almost every college football movie comedy...Only in movies has the underdog defeated the favorite with any consistency. Linked to the cliché of the underdog is the cliché of the Big Game or the Big Fight, the one event above all others that demonstrates the spiritual heights to which the most untalented underdog can rise by displaying ‘character.’

Character is a central issue in *The Busher*, as well, however this film follows a slightly different trajectory that will become increasingly familiar to the genre: the hero is discovered, he prospers, his arrogance leads to his downfall, and in the final moments (typically surrounding the final big game) he is redeemed. The manager of the Pink Sox tells Ben, “You got so stuck on yourself you forgot all about your work,” because it is Ben’s arrogant engagement with the sport that needs to be corrected.

In and around this narrative structure, the film offers audiences a representation of sporting activity as a means of class ascension (in addition to providing gainful employment, baseball is the means by which Ben is reckoned to be superior to the banker’s son), as a corrective for improper and immoral actions (when Ben stops working hard he stops winning), and as the proper masculine endeavor for young men (Mazie ultimately chooses Ben for a mate).

The rapid rise in popularity of sports in the U.S. during the early twentieth century was specifically attached (with bonds that were not simply rhetorical) to the development of a national masculine ideal, and as the culture of sports grew, it created an arena that proved to be fundamental to the development of normative American masculinity. In the cinema, the subject of masculinity is the obvious core of almost all sports films. The genre is centrally concerned with representations of the ideal American man as an athletic man. In *The Pinch Hitter, The Half Back, and The Busher* males demonstrate that only by participating in sports can they interact profitably and acceptably with other men, and be deemed suitable partners for the opposite sex. In other words, only by becoming successful sports playing men can they achieve the Athletic American Dream.

Using these three films as an example, one can see how the syntax of sports films solidifies over the first decades of the twentieth century. The novice/natural becomes the expert/professional through hard work; individuals integrate themselves into social groups and forge “winning” communities; the mind and the body make a great effort to work together to form an integrated “winning” sports “hero” who is an idealized model of American masculinity. As athletes labor in concert to achieve victory, they are asked to subjugate their
own individuality for the sake of the team (an action represented symbolically by the wearing of uniforms). As athletes labor as individuals, they strive to gain full control of their earth-bound bodies and to manage the emotions that might betray their attempts to maximize their athletic potential. From youth sports fiction and American Dream ideology and from the narrative nature of the games themselves, the sports film genre at the turn of the century develops a syntax of success for the common man. It appeals to a nation of immigrants looking to assimilate and succeed for themselves. Although it comes in many variations, it is by and large a unique syntax that structures these texts into films that engage with the spectacle of moving bodies and the possibilities of controlling one’s own destiny. It is the underlying syntax of the Athletic American Dream.

The Big Game(s): The Cinematic Heroes of the Athletic American Dream

One could say that the modern age of sports superstars begins in the 1920s. Baseball’s Babe Ruth, boxing’s Jack Dempsey, and football’s Red Grange are but a few of the new mass mediated athletic icons of the era that come to the public complete with press agents and commercial endorsements. They were tremendously popular figures, and they were carefully packaged in audience friendly narratives of the Athletic American Dream. George Herman Ruth was the man-child from the urban East Coast whose frequent over-indulgences were overlooked because of his love for “the game.” Jack Dempsey was the tough guy from the West, whose experiences on the other side of the tracks were deemed necessary and advantageous to his career as a prizefighter. And Red Grange was the small town Midwestern boy, who’s working class credentials were celebrated as much as was his success at the state school, the University of Illinois. The rags-to-riches stories of “The Babe” (Ruth), the “Manassa Mauler” (Dempsey), and the “Wheaton Ice Man” (Grange) were ample evidence that anyone could succeed in Post World War I America, and it is no surprise that their sporting legends so closely paralleled the motion picture productions that surrounded them. The Athletic American Dream was becoming an ever-growing part of the American economy:

Films featuring stars of the sports world during the 1920s represented heroes who succeeded in attaining the public success necessary to purchase the consumer goods that American industry, aided by advertising, hoped to sell to a mass audience. Yet such heroic characters also retained traditional beliefs so as to reassure audiences that small-town values of hard work, family, and community still meant something in an increasingly leisure-oriented, industrialized and urbanized society.
Still, these real life athletes are only part of the story. Even as their sporting success was broadcast across the expanding mass media, the mythos of the Athletic American Dream was constructed and distributed across movie screens all over the United States.31 Take for example the film _Dynamite Dan_ (1924) about whom _Variety_ magazine claimed that; “Never in the wildest dreams of Alger, Henty, Barbour and the gentlemen who wrote the classic ‘Rover Boys’ and ‘Frank Merriwell’ series was there pictured such a hero as Kenneth MacDonald portrays in this film.”32 This predictable success-through-boxing story makes explicit from the beginning the idea that sporting achievement is an appropriate vehicle for class ascension. The film opens with a drawing of a boxing ring upon which the opening credits are placed thus establishing sports as a central object of the film. Then, immediately after the credits, the movie’s common laborer/hero, Dan McLeod, is shown working on a construction project and talking about the “ladder of success.”33 From this beginning, the film constructs a framework of expectations and assumptions in which the desire for and realization of class movement is the structuring logic of the narrative.

From this point on Dan’s movement upwards is fostered by fisticuffs. He leaves his construction job, rises through the ranks of professional boxing, and at the film’s conclusion, to no one’s surprise, he wins the championship and marries his faithful girlfriend. In the final images of the film Dan and his wife, now dressed in the casual attire of the young and wealthy (sweater and slacks for him, sporty dress for her) look on approvingly as their progeny engage in their own playful boxing. Dan’s class ascension is complete, and it comes via his athletic ability and good character. He succeeds because he has talent as a boxer, and because he is better person that the former champion. During the film, Dan’s hard work in construction does not lead to success, nor does his work as a teacher. Our hero does not achieve the American Dream through these conventional occupations. Instead, Dan rises in class because he is able to harness his talent in the increasingly popular, very contemporary world of American sporting culture.

The class-ascending narrative of _Dynamite Dan_ is echoed in numerous films of the period such as _Slide Kelly Slide_ (1927), _Palooka_ (1934), and _Idol of the Crowds_ (1937), and in all of these films class movement is attached to monetary gain. But the Athletic American Dream is as much about achieving “success” as it is about making money, and during the first half of the twentieth century athletic success is just as likely to be found in the amateur ranks as in the professional. In particular, it is college that represents a sporting utopia for the cinematic athlete in the in the 1920s and 1930s as this era bears witness to a veritable explosion of college-situated sports films. As depicted in movies like _The Freshman_ (1925), _The Kickoff_ (1931), and _The Gladiator_ (1938), the central protagonists begin college as hicks, rubes, and milquetoasts, but leave as
lettermen, athletes, and heroes. They become real men with real girlfriends. These storylines are easily recognized, as these reviews from *Variety* make apparent:

The underlying situation is that he is an earnest young boob making his way through college and intent upon doing well in his studies. But his sweetheart wants him to shine on the athletic field.¹³

The hero comes to the school, a hick from the country, and is immediately rejected by the smart-alecky element but is taken up by those who believe in and trust his athletic prowess.¹⁴

In this manner, the Athletic American Dream is expressed by boob-to-jock college stories in which becoming a man is the ultimate goal, and masculinity is defined by athletic prowess. Take for example, the 1926 comedy, *College*, in which the central protagonist Ronald (played by Buster Keaton) is a rather bookish character who praises academics and disparages sports as a high school valedictorian. Following his speech, Ronald is pushed away by his would-be girlfriend Mary who tells him “Anyone prefers an athlete to a weak-knee’d teachers pet.”¹⁵ In response Ronald decides to become an athlete, and as this story continues he tries his hand at a wide variety of college sports (baseball, crew, track and field) with little or no success. Ronald’s sporting failures provide ample opportunity for comedy as Keaton moves from one physical gag to another, but in the end, as one might guess, Ronald saves Mary from the unwanted advances of another suitor through a combination of athletic maneuvers. In the final moments of the film, Ronald sprints down the sidewalk, hurdles over hedges, and pole vaults into the room of his beloved. Not only does Keaton perform physical feats with an ease that highlights his remarkable athleticism, but also he does so while still wearing a university team uniform. He has at last become her college athletic champion.

In *College*, Buster Keaton’s Ronald wins the hand of his ladylove over the protestations and efforts of another suitor. He is one corner of a boy-girl-boy romantic triangle, and this social pattern (and social contest) is repeatedly exhibited in many other college films, as well. Movies like *The Plastic Age* (1925), *College Lovers* (1930), and *Two Minutes to Play* (1936) are just some of the stories that feature narratives in which athletic and class-conscious rivals vie for the same girl in much the same way that they compete on the field. Romance is highlighted in these motion pictures, to be sure, but class conflicts are accentuated as well, whether it is the daughter of a millionaire snubbing and then falling for a waiter/football star in *The Snob* (1921) or the debutante choosing the working class football hero rather than the upper class rich boy in *Collegiate* (1926). It may be that these college sports films camouflage the capitalist underpinnings of the Athletic American Dream under a veneer of
amateur university athletics, but that does not hide the fact that the economic and social value of a college diploma was (and is) extremely high. Even if the sports were amateur, the successful college athlete was clearly at the top of the social ladder. In these films, athletic ability levels the social playing field and still supports the class ascending power of the Athletic American Dream.

The college sports films of the 1920s and 1930s were also important in their validation of the "anyone can succeed in America" ideal that is fundamental to the level playing field ideology of the Athletic American Dream. This was most apparent on the gridiron where football's movement from an elite to a working-class sport took place at the college level and beyond:

Football's most fundamental development from the 1920s to the 1950s was its (incomplete) democratization, its transformation from a predominantly Anglo-Saxon "gentleman's sport" to a multi-ethnic, classless one. This democratization entailed both the spread of big-time college football from a handful of elite northeastern institutions to state universities, land-grant colleges, and immigrant-rich Catholic schools throughout the country, and the popular acceptance of professional football as a legitimate sport rather than an organized brawl staged by hired thugs. College football was democratized by the sons of Polish steel workers and Italian coal miners who transformed the faces, and the names of football lineups.

In this manner, the presence of working class college athletes combines with the success of conspicuous individuals (like Ruth, Dempsey and Grange) to establish a sporting foundation upon which the cinema constructs its mythic narratives. Narratives that suggest that individuals have control over their own destinies. Narratives that "prove" that the Athletic American Dream is available to anyone.

Extra Innings: Concluding Thoughts on the Cinematic Athlete and the Athletic American Dream

It would be a mistake to assume that the cinematic expression of the Athletic American dream is always positively portrayed. Although it is connected to the sports film from its outset, it is often questioned or critically appraised. Movies as early as A Football Warrior (1908) and Strongheart (1914) seriously interrogate the value of athletics in American society, and even during sport's Golden Age in the 1920s there are sports films that are critical of the Athletic American Dream. Battling Bunyan (1925), for example, follows the class-ascending narrative pattern of many films from the sports film genre, and yet at the same time it is extremely critical of the violent brutality of professional boxing. In Battling Bunyan, although the hero does rise in class as he moves
from common laborer to business owner, Bunyan does not win his boxing match, and he is not an athlete at the end of the movie.

In the following decade, as movies transition from the optimistic buoyancy of the Jazz Age to the economic disaster of the Great Depression, negative representations of the Athletic American Dream appear more frequently. Films like *The Champ* (1931), *Kid Galahad* (1937), and *Yesterday’s Heroes* (1940) all question the value of the hero-athlete, but even this questioning reflects the compelling power of this sporting ideology in American society. The Athletic American Dream is both popular and recognizable in the 1930s as the sports film parody *Horse Feathers* (1932) makes abundantly clear. Parodies require identifiable elements in order to succeed, and this Marx Brothers classic assumes an audience conversant with the underlying structures of the athletic rags to riches myth that has become a familiar part of American culture.

That being said, this trend toward more negative portrayals represents but a small part of the total. Cinematic sporting culture on the whole, continually reproduces the myth of the American Dream, and consistently represents and presents images of idealized American masculinity. As the United States moves into World War II and beyond, biopics like *Knute Rockne, All-American* (1940), *Pride of the Yankees* (1942), and *Gentleman Jim* (1942) signal the complete solidification of the Athletic American Dream in America’s cultural firmament. All of these films tell the same story; the story of how boys from working-class immigrant families can use sports to achieve athletic, social and economic success and become national heroes. In their casual acceptance of sport’s power to transform, these films suggest that the Athletic American Dream has attained iconic status in everyday popular culture. The cinema has produced ready evidence of the availability of the Athletic American Dream for the American male, and these biopics suggest that athletes have become the new “great men” of society on par with historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and Louis Pasteur.

Of course, these films rarely, if ever, acknowledge that social factors may affect an individual’s chances for success. The nature of American Dream ideology is precisely to obscure any and all obstacles that cannot be overcome by individuals. In this manner, sport, which demands that athletes exercise complete control of their bodies, is a perfect vehicle for this ideology. If the Athletic American Dream is a dream of opportunity and of social mobility for working class immigrant families, however, it should be remarked that despite the level-playing field ideology that suggests that all men have equal chances to succeed, the cinematic expression of this ideology (and its expression elsewhere in popular culture) is marked by a looming absence. As constructed by the cinema, non-white athletes are not allowed to share in this dream. Sport may be represented as a democratizing force in society, but it is still an all-white society...
that is being described. There are individual athletes who achieve success within this era (like Jesse Owens and Joe Louis), but the Athletic American Dream is still expressed as an all-white dream. It is not until the 1950s as professional leagues begin to integrate and television begins to cover them that this begins to change.

In the world of sports and media, television changes everything. Sports from boxing to baseball appear in living rooms across the country from the earliest moments of this new medium. And as sports on television increase steadily throughout the 1950s and beyond, the production of sports films declines precipitously. One could almost say that the sports film genre dies in the second half of the 1950s. But the Athletic American Dream continues to grow ever stronger. It becomes more inclusive and more pervasive as non-white athletes become athletic superstars, and televisions and the internet build upon the solid foundation constructed by the cinema.

Following narrative patterns influenced by both newspaper sports sections and juvenile sports fiction, the Athletic American Dream seeps into the American consciousness during the nineteenth century, but it is not until it combines with the mass media technology of film that it gains widespread popularity. The Athletic American Dream coalesces around underdog-to-champion, hard-work-leads-to-victory narratives that shape the sporting imagination and help to forge the masculine ideal that is the foundation of American self-image. The cinematic Athletic American Dream is produced, packaged and is sold to children and adults alike through a master narrative repeated and refined over hundreds of sports films that present a wide variety of sporting activity. From college football to professional basketball, motion pictures continue to produce, reproduce, and reinforce a construction of sporting culture that engages with a democratizing everyone plays by-the-rules ideology; an ideology that often disguises social troubles by suggesting that if individuals can gain control over their own bodies they can gain control over their own economic and social destinies. The Athletic American Dream may be a relatively new phenomenon in American history, but it has become a very powerful ideological force in American culture. And it was the cinema that made it happen.

Notes

3 Ibid., 53.

24 The number of sports films that include female athletes is so small (especially before the 1980s) that it justifies this concentration on the issue of masculinity. Additionally, many sports films revolve around homosocial relationships between men, where women are tangential both thematically and narratively.

25 The ascension of the professional middle-class during the latter half of the 19th century combined with a multitude of factors (the industrial revolution, the proliferation of assembly-line labor, an increase in immigration, a population shift from rural to urban living, etc.) to create a working atmosphere in which men encountered increasing difficulty defining their masculinity through their work. Men lose control over their own bodies as they are increasingly forced to labor for others (and for many this is non-physical work). Additionally, the role of the father changed in American society as more men were called away from the home to work and a larger percentage of children were sent off to school. So instead of a parent-child relationship formed around the bonds of a shared working environment, fathers were largely absent and sports were a place that was called upon for social fatherhood.

26 As is the case with war films, the relations between male teammates (or comrades) usually involve close physical contact, but the stories of these relationships rarely, if ever, lead to problematic homosexual encounters of any kind. It is certainly possible to read various moments of male centered spectacle within a wider variety of perspectives, but within sports film narratives the only “suspect” men are those that do not play sports. This is strikingly dissimilar from depictions of women participating in sports who must always be wary of the lesbian tendencies that seem to lurk behind any close physical athletic contact on the screen.

27 As is always the case with genres, the structure of the sports film is historically sensitive, so for example, the representation of the “winning sports hero” and “winning communities” varies in different eras. Broadly speaking, in the early part of the century, winning meant that sports heroes would enter into heterosexual unions at the conclusion of the film. This representation is far less prevalent after World War II when more often sports became enclaves of all-male activity.

28 Team sports, in addition to being compared to military service, have also often been identified with theories of corporate management. In fact, as Walter Camp developed the rules of American football at the turn of the century he explicitly connected the workings of the game to the industrial theories of Taylorism popular at the time. See Oriard, *Reading Football*, and Goldstein and Gorn, *A Brief History of American Sports*.

29 The nicknames of these athletes fit ever so neatly with their on and off-field personas. George Herman Ruth’s nickname of “Babe” was given to him by his fellow ballplayers when he first signed a professional contract at the age of 19, Jack Dempsey was from the small mining town of Manassa, CO, and Red Grange made a living delivering ice in Wheaton, IL. As often occurs all of these athletes had other nicknames, too.

As a point of reference, it should also be noted that many athletes appeared in films throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Babe Ruth appeared in over a dozen films, Dempsey starred in his own multi-part serial as *Daredevil Jack* in 1920, and Grange starred in his serial, *The Galloping Ghost* in 1931.

Review of *Dynamite Dan*, *Variety*, 8 August 1924.

Intertitle from *Dynamite Dan*, directed by Bruce Mitchell, 1924.

Review of *College*, *Variety*, 14 September 1927.

Review of *The Kickoff*, directed by George Stevens, *Variety* 8 October 1937.

Intertitle from *College*, Directed by James W. Horne and Buster Keaton, 1927.

Under the influence of The Great Depression markers of economic success became less obvious in the sports film genre. In many films, as mentioned previously, the Athletic American Dream still presents rags-to-riches stories, but in a time when captains of industry are no longer held in high regard, many more films replace professional moneymaking athletic success with college-situated underdog to champion narratives.

Oriard, *King Football*, 225

*Horse Feathers* quickly acknowledges its sports-conscious audience by giving Chico Marx’s character the nickname of “The Iceman” which is clearly a direct reference to the “The Wheaton Iceman,” Red Grange. Of course whereas Red received his nickname for his honorable working class job delivering ice in the Midwest, Chico gets his for pouring drinks at a speakeasy. By choosing this nickname and attaching it to a culture of alcohol related illegality, *Horse Feathers* neatly references a famous football hero and undercuts the culture that he stands for at the same time. And yet in so doing, it seems to recognize the power of sporting culture because it assumes that this nickname will be known to moviegoers.

*Knute Rockne, All-American* tells the story of Notre Dame football player and coach, Knute Rockne, *The Pride of the Yankees* is a recounting of the tragic life and death of New York Yankee Lou Gehrig, and *Gentleman Jim* is the tale of Jim Corbett’s struggle to become boxing’s heavyweight champion. In addition to these films, one could also point to numerous other biopics such as *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948), *The Great John L.* (1948), *The Stratton Story* (1949), *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), and *Jim Thorpe, All-American* (1952).

Biopics, mostly of historical male figures, have been produced throughout cinema’s history and *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935) are but two examples.

The first ever broadcast of a heavyweight title fight occurred in 1946 with the televised Joe Louis-Billy Conn rematch. This began a very profitable relationship between the networks and boxing. By 1952 Wednesday and Friday were fight nights on television, and televised prizefighting reached an average of 5 million homes; by 1955 the number had risen to 8.5 million.

There are approximately eighty-three boxing films released between 1940 and 1960 as compared to thirty-two baseball films, but only eight boxing movies are produced after 1954 (and only three baseball films are released during the same period).