

# Nostalgia for the Masculine

## Onward to the Past in the Sports Films of the Eighties

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### Introduction

Sport would seem to be a natural source of filmic narratives, with its high level of action, natural heroes, dramatic spectacles and contained win/lose story lines. "Yet sports films have rarely been satisfying in the cinema, either financially or artistically," says Neil Sinyard, writing in 1982. He cites a number of reasons for this including the divergent demands of documentary realism in sports footage and dramatic imagination in narrative, and the didactic quality of the sports film where sporting prowess is necessarily accompanied by exceptional morality (Sinyard 1982 p15). Balancing the sports fans' experiences with the cinema audiences' expectations had left many sports films lacking either credibility, or dramatic interest. However, Sinyard notes four contemporary films that suggest "that the box office jinx on sports films might have been broken." The films are *Raging Bull* (USA, 1980, Martin Scorsese) which "projects boxing as slow-motion pain and masochistic character building and the way it uses external aggression to suggest an intense inner life," *Chariots of Fire* (Britain, 1981, Hugh Hudson) which sees sport as "an extension of nationalistic fervour . . . generating a nostalgia . . . for the confidence of old England," *Gregory's Girl* (Britain, 1981, Bill Forsyth) which "approaches football as an image of chauvinism in action" offering a "satirical critique of the relation society often posits between sport and the concept of masculinity," and *Escape to Victory* (USA, 1981, John Houston) which "proposes football as a cross between absurdist adventure and sublimated warfare" (Sinyard 1982 p20).

Sinyard's prophecy was fulfilled as the next decade saw films that had sport as a major narrative element achieve significant popularity measured in terms of box office success. *Major League* (USA, 1989, David S Ward), *The Natural* (USA, 1984, Barry Levison), *Rocky II* (USA, 1979, Sylvester Stallone), *Rocky III* (USA, 1982, Sylvester Stallone), *Rocky IV* (USA, 1985, Sylvester Stallone), *Rocky V* (USA, 1990, Sylvester Stallone), *Youngblood* (USA, 1986, Peter Markle), *Hoosiers* (USA, 1986, Davis Ansbaugh), *Days of Thunder* (USA, 1990, Tony Scott), *Color of Money* (USA, 1986, Martin Scorsese), *Field of Dreams* (USA, 1989, Phil Alden Robinson), *Bull Durham* (USA, 1988, Ron Shelton), *Eight Men Out* (USA, 1988, John Sayles), *Karate Kid* (USA, 1984, John G Avildsen) - during the eighties the sports film proliferated, no longer a difficult and unpopular genre.

While there can be no single reason to account for the increased popularity of the sports narrative in the cinema, one reason is hinted at in Sinyard's description of his four watershed films. In dealing with the building of character through pain in sport, nostalgia for an old-style nationalistic sport, the relationship between sport and masculinity, and the connection between sport and warfare, the films reflected social concerns with the way in which established norms of masculinity appeared to be increasingly difficult to live out. The version of masculinity variously referred to in each film, a physical machismo, became less available as a style of living in the face of social and economic change in the seventies. For a hegemonic masculinity threatened by liberal social movements and changes in social structures, sports films enabled a reassertion of a highly stylised version of traditional masculinity, and made this retrospective version of masculinity available for popular consumption. As white, heterosexual, patriarchal masculinity was becoming just one type of lived masculinity, nostalgic sports films allowed black, homosexual, and other marginalised masculinities to be temporarily elided. And at a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult to live out the white, heterosexual masculinity of patriarchy, sports films made this role symbolically available. In a society where the traditional masculine roles of warrior or lord, or even breadwinner, were unavailable, the sports films of the eighties reflected a communal desire for a past of 'heroic' masculine roles, and masculine centred social organisation.

### Sport and Masculinity

In the nineteenth century there existed a high level of self-provisioning in families, accompanied by multiple earners within the family group and a sharing of parenting responsibilities. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, a move to waged labour meant a division of responsibility between home and workplace, and mothers took primary responsibility for raising children, both girls and boys. At the same time an active women's movement began to challenge masculine social power and men's claims for exclusive social and political spaces (Pahl 1984, Rotundo 1987). Women's domination of the domestic sphere and their demand for inclusion in the public sphere led to a belief in the incipient 'feminisation' of society. "The rapid rise and expansion of organised sport during this same era can be interpreted as the creation of a homosocial institution which served to counter men's fears of feminization" (Messner 1992 p14). The growth of modern competitive sport during a time when

hegemonic masculinity appeared to be threatened by changing social and economic forces explains the type of institution that sport became. Sport was conceived of and evolved as a masculine space, supporting male dominance not only by excluding or marginalising women, but by naturalising a connection between masculinity and the 'skills' of sport; aggression, physical strength, success in competition, and negation of the feminine (Bryson 1987 p349).

"We can say, then, that modern sport is a 'gendered institution.' That is, it is a social institution constructed by men, largely as a response to a crisis of gender relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dominant structures and values of sport came to reflect the fears and needs of a threatened masculinity. Sport was constructed as a homosocial world, with a male-dominant division of labor which excluded women. Indeed, sport came to symbolize the masculine structure of power over women." (Messner 1992 p16).

After the Second World War the wage of a single earner was sufficiently high to sustain a whole family, and the image of the male breadwinner grew (Pahl 1984). Success in the workplace came to define masculinity itself, as for working class men their sense of masculinity was crucially formed in the workplace (Donaldson 1991). But the seventies were a period of rapid change in the nature of work, as social changes introduced new groups to the workplace (women, ethnic minorities, and the large number of young people known as the baby-boomers); economic changes spawned new industries and sent established ones into decline; and rapid technological change revolutionised traditional competences and devalued age-old skills (Howard 1985 p2). Social and economic shifts substantially reduced the dominance of men in the workforce. The jobs predominantly held by men were in a declining segment of the economy, while the major employment opportunities from the seventies had been the low wage jobs of the service industries, which were seen as women's jobs. The industrial sector which typically employed males was being replaced with high technology manufacturing positions, with fewer, less well paid, jobs available (Wilkie 1991 p113). At the same time women's political movements were demanding equal opportunity in the workforce.

Hegemonic, or normative, notions of masculinity are constantly constructed and renegotiated within the context of an evolving social structure (Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985 p89) and institutions such as legal and education systems, and culture carriers such as television and popular entertainment are important sites for this negotiation. Normative ideas of the masculine persist in the face of wide-ranging changes in the way men and women live their lives. Significantly large numbers of men are complicit in sustaining hegemonic forms of masculinity, even when their own experience of masculine identity is far removed from the ideal (Carrigan *et al* 1985). During the eighties, as fewer men held positions of power in relation to the workforce and the

family, they were accomplices in maintaining a hegemonic masculinity through the institution of sport. Both on a personal/participatory level for athletes and on a symbolic/ideological level for spectators, sport became the most significant arena in which males could prove their power over, and separation from, the feminine (Messner 1985 p196). Sports became the major social forum for traditional male ideas of success, masculine power and male superiority. In prioritising traditional male qualities, sport, and its fictional representations, conjured up nostalgic ideals of an increasingly impossible manhood. However, sport itself had changed within the context of evolving social structures, and sport in the eighties was not the haven of hegemonic masculinity it one had been.

In commodifying an exemplary masculinity in the sports star, the corporate sports world of the eighties simultaneously made this version of masculinity both more and less accessible to the 'ordinary man'. The eighties' fascination with health and fitness, the growth of sport's priority in television programming, and the promotion of sportsmen as the last of the heroes, all evidenced a public connection with contemporary sport. At the same time however, the escalation of players' salaries, the increasing control of sport by corporate and media interests, the higher profile of black athletes, and the increased participation of women in sport lessened the availability of 'sportsman' as a role that could be unequivocally occupied by those who saw 'masculinity' as under threat in their own lives. But if sport, as played out in stadiums and on television screens, was occasionally problematic for hegemonic masculinity, what sport did offer was a productive source of nostalgic fictions. If contemporary sport had been tainted by greed, scandal, feminism, and social liberalism, then the sport of a mis-remembered boyhood safeguarded hegemonic masculinity in providing an arena where individual success, male-male bonds, the reaffirmation of the father, and the rejection of the feminine, could be comfortably accommodated.

### Nostalgic Revisions

"Somewhere in the course of the eighties of the twentieth century, history took a turn in another direction . . . a sliding back of events set in, an unfolding of inverted meaning" (Baudrillard 1994). If, in the eighties, the present was unsatisfactory, and the future a threat, then looking back to the past addressed the absence of hope. If the present struggled to sustain national myths of shared economic prosperity, the centrality of the family, and the cultural stability of gender norms; and the 'new bad future' abandoned the notion of progress in the face of social and environmental decay; then the past was elevated to a mythical 'Golden Age'.

This turning back of history was evident in the nostalgia films of the period, which demonstrated "the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past" (Jameson 1983 p116) in a re-invention of the feel and shape of the past, not a past as lived but "some indefinable nostalgic past, an eternal 30s say, beyond history" (Jameson 1983 p117). The nostalgic past

was not a replicated history, but a restructuring of that history in the hope of a revised future. The “failure of the new” was ultimately a failure of capitalist patriarchy, and the “retrospective melancholy” (Baudrillard 1994) brought on by a crisis in patriarchal masculinity. In the face of changed economic and social conditions, normative versions of masculinity were problematic in the present, and threatened in the future. The ‘new’ social and political conservatism of the late seventies/early eighties reflected a hope that allegiance to old doctrines might somehow restore ‘masculinity’ and the nostalgic quest was elevated to the mythic in the cinema, in a romantic reaffirmation of boys’ own adventure.

The eighties’ cinema evidenced a fascination with the past. Many films from *First Blood* (USA, 1982, Ted Kotcheff) to *Born on the Fourth of July* (USA, 1987, Oliver Stone) revisited the Vietnam War in a nostalgic gesture that Jeffords (1989) explains in terms of a recuperation of traditional masculinity. Time travel that enabled the rewriting of personal histories was a popular theme in films such as *Peggy Sue Got Married* (USA, 1986, Francis Ford Coppola) and *Back to the Future* (USA, 1985, Robert Zemeckis). Many other films featured narratives set in time frames mythologised in personal or cultural terms such as *Diner* (USA, 1982, Barry Levinson). However, the past recreated in the eighties’ cinema was not a lived, or remembered past, although it was authenticated by reference to actual events and by objects and images of the past. The history revisited in the cinema was a restructured history. The past of the cinema was the mythical past of a desired future, sidestepping the present. It was a construction of the sort of past that would have guaranteed a preferred future.

Sport provided a popular narrative mechanism, enabling an allegorical expression of a collective yearning for a particular style of masculinity which was becoming increasingly difficult to live out in the present. What Jameson (1989) describes as a “nostalgia for the present” took two dominant forms in the sport films of the period: the recreation of a ‘small town’ lifestyle, and the rewriting of ‘aberrations’ of personal and social history. The ‘small town’ had little to do with any home town reality of life in fifties America, but was rather “a kind of distorted form of cognitive mapping” (Jameson 1989 p522). The simple life of the past was never a memory but rather an unconscious ‘retrojection’ of desires for the future. Viewed from this perspective, “the future no longer exists” (Baudrillard 1994) replaced in representations of the present by a “retro-curvature of a history” (Baudrillard 1994), a history that is rewritten to provide the possibility of a desired future. The personal and social past is revised to compensate for the present, and provide hope for the future. Stepping back from the present of corporate sport, the sports film of the eighties retraced the footsteps of its history, erasing its own traces in the process. The past was revisited “to remake history proper to whitewash all the monstrosities” (Baudrillard 1994), in a reversion of history that offered a talisman for masculinity in the present. Re-

making the history of hegemonic masculinity involved, in the eighties sports films, a return to a prelapsarian past, or a reliving that rectified that past.

### Rewriting the Past

These two nostalgic scenarios, going back to a better time and rectifying past wrongs, were repeated in film after film during the eighties. The film of *The Natural* translated a rather grim novel about a necessarily doomed search for the American dream into a bucolic parable of sporting success set in a sepia toned, soft-focus past. After losing an arm Ray Hobbs/Robert Redford is ‘remasculinised’; hitting a home run as he finds out that he is the father of a son. In *The Best of Times* (USA, 1986, Roger Spottiswoode) the various personal and social ills that confront the characters are attributed to their loss of a crucial high school football game when the hero drops the ball. Replaying the game victoriously allows them to reclaim the masculinity threatened by discontented wives and derisive fathers-in-law. Both scenarios allow for a ‘remasculinisation’ of society through narratives that enable the staging of individual success; the recuperation of male-male bonds; the re-affirmation of the father; and the exclusion of the feminine. While market forces and social changes were making an impact on the institution of sport and the social construction of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity was naturalised by the sport of popular memory, and normalised by nostalgic sports films.

The films legitimated individual competitiveness and winning as the ultimate goal. The romanticised past of the *The Natural* enables Hobb’s sporting success, despite his personal misfortunes and physical disability, and *Running Brave* (Canada, 1983, DS Everett (Donald Shebib)), based on the story of Olympic gold medalist Billy Mills, returns to a time when a man could achieve against seemingly overwhelming odds. The films emphasised male homosocial relationships in that they established male-only social groupings and prioritised male/male friendships over cross gender relationships. The twenty-fourth reunion of a high school basketball squad in *That Championship Season* (USA, 1982, Jason Miller) allows the men to reestablish their bonds with each other, and refocus their lives, and in *American Flyers* (USA, 1985, John Badham) brothers unite to confront the spectre of hereditary disease. The eighties’ sports films reinstated a patriarchal social organisation, recuperating failed fatherhood. *All the Right Moves* (USA, 1983, Michael Chapman) recreates the testosterone-fuelled world of small town high school football, where the ambitions of the star player are thwarted until he accepts the paternal authority of the coach. Similarly in *The Karate Kid* Daniel/Ralph Macchio is only ready for the championship tournament when he accepts the old ways as best, and recognises ‘the father’ in Mr Myagi/‘Pat’ Morita. *On the Edge* (USA, 1985, Rob Nilsson) is the story of a bitter middle-aged man who wants to prove something to his coach and his father, the men who were important to him twenty years ago. In *Sam’s Son* (USA,

1984, Michael Landon) a boy lives out the dreams of his frustrated father on the athletics field. The sports films also marginalised or excluded women from the narrative, legitimating their relegation to the bleachers or their characterisation as the source of men's problems in *Separate Ways* (USA, 1981, Howard Avedis), *The Natural* (USA, 1984, Barry Levison), *Tough Enough* (USA, 1983, Richard O Fleischer) and *No Holds Barred* (USA, 1989, Thomas J Wright), by a veneer of historical accuracy. In returning to a time before the commodification of sport, or in replaying the game the way it should have been played, sports films constructed a masculine past that provided the hope of a future for hegemonic masculinity.

Two films can be taken as exemplifying the two nostalgic scenarios of the period, going back to a better time, and rectifying past wrongs. *Hoosiers* is a return to the fifties and a way of life that allows a recuperation of 'fatherhood' and a writing of individual wrongs. *Field of Dreams* is a return to a vanished way of life where a belief in dreams is sufficient to recuperate social loss and restore father/son bonds. Both films reconstruct the history of hegemonic masculinity to provide for the possibility of a more stable masculinity in the present. The narratives of both films reify cultural dreams of father-son reunification, a subjugated feminine, a revived pastoralism, and a reaffirmation of patriarchal social structures.

*Hoosiers* takes us back to rural Indiana in 1951, the camera following Norman Dale/Gene Hackman down the narrow country road to Hickory, a town "so small that it doesn't even appear on most state maps." "Hickory signifies unspoiled innocence, an image of small-town America... the small town often invoked as the 'real' America" (Tudor 1988 p2). Most of the residents are self-employed businessmen, the men economically independent, secure in their masculinity. Dale was blacklisted as an NCAA coach for hitting one of his own players, and Hickory holds his only chance of redeeming himself as a 'father' and a man. *Hoosiers* is essentially about fathers and sons. Jimmy/Maris Valainis was the team's star player, but with his father dead, the death of the former coach leaves him under the influence and control of his invalid mother and the school's assistant principal, Myra/Barbara Hershey. The film echoes a sentiment popularised by Robert Bly, that women cannot help boys achieve the transition to manhood. Myra tells Dale that she and Jimmy "have decided that it would be best for him not to play ball." She wants Jimmy to escape the small town life through higher education, a point of view in direct opposition to Norman Dale, the townspeople, and the film. Myra is presented as an outsider, and the way she is depicted in the film makes her point of view unattractive. With a college degree, a successful career and an independent lifestyle she could be seen as a 'modern' woman, an eighties' threat to small town harmony. Physically she is presented as a frustrated spinster, drab clothes, severe hairstyle, controlled, prim, speech and body movements. In taking on the role of

Jimmy's mentor she disrupts the father-son nexus. When Jimmy identifies with 'the father', supporting Dale at the town meeting, Jimmy and Dale go on to prove an indomitable combination. Much of what Myra says is a rational critique of the valorisation of physical achievement over other types of success, but the film refuses her logic, as she abandons it to accept woman's traditional place in team sports (cheering from the bleachers) in exchange for Dale's 'love' and Jimmy's transition to manhood. The character of Shooter/Dennis Hopper reinforces the message that sport can recuperate failed fathering. He is an alcoholic former basketball player whose son now plays for the team. When Norm allows him to return to the sport as assistant coach, Shooter regains his self respect and the love of his son, and acquires the will to dry out. Sport rescues the father, offers promise for the son, and heals the father/son relationship. Until the state final, the all-white Huskers play only all-white teams. Although this has some basis in realism (integration in professional sport in America began cautiously in the fifties), it allows the state final to become a mythic contest of white versus black as the all-white, wholesome, rural Huskers take on the urban, racially mixed South Bend Central Bears in the climatic game. Aberrant readings of the game's significance are deflected by the minister's pre-game prayer, where he quotes the story of David and Goliath, identifying the Bears with "the Philistine." The 'Philistine' reference, with its connotations of barbarians, emphasises that the final game is a conflict between the 'real America' normalcy of the traditional small town, and the menace of 'progressive' social policy embodied in the city.

*Hoosiers* creates a nostalgic world where Americans were unified by a common set of values, women were passive supporters of the active man's quest for success, a belief in white domination was largely unchallenged, and 'alternative' masculinities unknown, or at least unacknowledged. In an eighties where race, class and gender issues increasingly problematised traditional masculinity, *Hoosiers* presented a rewriting of the past of gender hegemony, where a traditional white middle-class version of masculinity could prevail.

The reconstruction of the past in the eighties sports film culminated, perhaps, in *The Field of Dreams*. The film "is in many ways a typical product of the Republican decade of Reagan and Bush as described in some key critical studies: it is an escapist fantasy; it sentimentalizes the nuclear patriarchal family; it bears features of the father-son melodrama; and - more generally - its values are highly conservative" (Cooper 1995 p164). Kinsella/Kevin Costner, former hippie, Berkeley dropout, estranged from his now dead father, has abandoned life in the fast lane to return to his mythical roots, an Iowa farm, where despite problems with the mortgage he is content to watch the corn grow. A disembodied voice tells him "If you build it, he will come," and Kinsella obeys the voice and his own inner prompting to plough under his corn crop and build a baseball diamond.

Through his unquestioning obedience to a disembodied 'father' a variety of personal and social ills are magically righted. Shoeless Joe Jackson/Ray Liotta and the other Black Sox are declared innocent by association with cornfields, white clapboard farm houses and porch swings. Fictional writer Terence Mann/James Earl Jones is forgiven for sixties liberalism. Doc Graham/Burt Lancaster plays again in the Major Leagues, and this time gets to bat. Daughter Karin's/Gaby Hoffman's life is saved. Ray's financial problems are solved, and he is reunited with his father as the two of them play catch on the magic field.

*Field of Dreams* is usually discussed in America-centric terms. Its nostalgia is read as post-American regret, where baseball is seen "as an inscriptive space in which 'America' is repeatedly rewritten" (Brown 1991 p49). "*Field of Dreams* wishes aloud that America could return to the innocent days of white baseball . . . *Field of Dreams* weeps for what is not now and never was. It remembers America before it lost control" (Jacobson 1989 p79). "Ray Kinsella's creation of the mystical ballfield wipes all memories of a sinful past and replaces them with an Elysian manifestation of baseball, America as pastoral paradise" (Ardolino 1990 p45). However, reading *Field of Dreams* solely as an 'American' film fails to account for firstly, the popularity of the film with audiences outside America, and secondly, the gendered foundations of nationalism. Although nostalgic constructions of baseball as America's national game,

"undoubtedly carve out a vision of 'America', the signifier seems to be somewhat subdued, having less to do with maintenance of an international political boundary than it does with more local concerns . . . . The emphasis in representations of baseball has shifted to more local axes of power and identity . . . marked for example by race, gender, and consumption" (Springwood 1996 p146).

Further, *Field of Dreams*, "much more than being 'about' baseball, attempts to signify the supposedly 'archetypal' male quest for a return-to-(God)-the-father . . . . Tortured by decades of emasculating feminism and the hypermasculinity of their fathers, 'today's men' need to reconcile themselves to and reclaim the power of the caring, (life) giving father" (Maurer 1992 p145).

While the film can be read in specifically American terms, for international audiences it dealt with global concerns of failed fathering and declining patriarchal power. *Field of Dreams*, like the other revisionist sports films of the period, worked in tandem with Robert Bly's men's movement and vague projects of recapturing an archetypal masculinity through a recuperation of father-son relationships.

The first two words spoken in *Field of Dreams* are "My father." Baseball is a metaphor for traditional masculine values, for a time when sons conformed to the practices of their fathers, and one man's personal vision can restore the father in various symbolic representations. The willingness of Ray

Kinsella to pursue his personal vision enables an erasure of eighties conflicts in lived masculinities, conflicts arising out of urbanisation, immigration, feminism, civil rights, and economic downturn. Based on the novel *Shoeless Joe, Field of Dreams* foregrounds Ray's relationship with his father, in a way the novel did not. Ray's regret that the two never reconciled, and his nostalgic yearning for a boyhood not experienced, runs through the film as a leitmotif, turning the film into a story of failed and recuperated fatherhood. The film begins with a photographic life story of John, Ray's father, as a voice over tells us that his mother died when he was three. Removing the mother from the narrative and downgrading the narrative agency of the wife, completes the conversion of the story to a father/son redemptive plot. Ray feels guilt that he never forgave his father "for getting old," and above all that he never played ball with him. But when Ray's rejuvenated father appears on the magic field Ray finally gets to say, "Dad, do you want to have a catch?" Their past is erased and rewritten. "The complex reality of a difficult father-son relationship is transformed into the facile simplicity of their final handshake" (Cooper 1995 p165).

## Conclusion

At a societal level nostalgia functions as a sanctuary from disappointment and frustration in the face of the loss of valued standards. Collective nostalgia acts to restore a belief in the superiority of traditional social arrangements and practices, while at the same time facilitating the adoption of new ways and beliefs. Collective nostalgia is usually based on a reconstructed or misremembered social past; on an idealised or romanticised history. The "obsession with pseudohistory" marked "a culture trying desperately to rope off, sanction, and harden its myths into an intellectual iconography" (Graham 1984 p350). A masculinity in retreat from contemporary social realities, produced and consumed stories and images that sanctioned an archetypal version of masculinity, inscribing 'the sportsman' as cultural icon.

The nostalgia evidenced in the eighties' cinema was never memory, or reminiscence, of a certain style of lived masculinity. "[S]ince our awareness of the past, our summoning of it, our very knowledge that it *is* past, can be nothing other than present experience," (Davis 1979 p9) nostalgia is necessarily of the present. Nostalgia is a response to a fear of change, either actual or impending, it represents concern over, or denial of, the future. In the 1980s the future of hegemonic masculinity appeared under threat. The creation of a nostalgic past in the sport films of the eighties allowed a restoration, at least temporarily, "of a sense of sociohistoric continuity with respect to that which had verged on being rendered discontinuous" (Davis 1979 p104) patriarchal masculinity. The sports fields of misremembered childhood provided a symbolic terrain on which masculine identity could be revisited and rewritten, re-establishing gender hegemony.

## NOTES

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