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## "Everybody Else Ain't Your Father": Reproducing Masculinity in Cinematic Sports, 1975-2000

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### "Everybody Else Ain't Your Father": Reproducing Masculinity in Cinematic Sports, 1975-2000 / Marc Ouellette

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**Abstract:** This essay stems from two cultural strands, which intersect in one cultural form, the sports film. The first of these is the figure of the "star," as opposed to hero, who is interested only in self-promotion. The second strand, masculine nurturing, provides a direct counterpoint to the first. Sociologist Robert Connell explains that "In historically recent times, sport has come to be the leading definer of masculinity in mass culture" (54). In North America, sport plays an important and increasing role in our culture. Each of the four major sports leagues added teams in the last decade of the last century after little or no growth in the 1980s. [1] Coverage of sports at all levels has also increased through the addition of all-sports television networks and even a few, such as Speedvision and The Golf Channel, that are dedicated to a specific variety of sport. Only a very select few become elite athletes; the rest can compete at much lower levels, fantasize, or participate vicariously. Thus, sports films help to compensate for the disparity between those who cannot be and those who are professional athletes by contributing to the fantasies of the former group. By translating athletics to a cinematic venue, the film maker is better able to foster an identification between the characters and the viewers by placing the protagonists in situations that cannot be viewed in a regular sporting event.

<1> The combination of sport and film is an ideal location for portraying the reproduction of masculinities. In order to present plots and characterizations that are readily recognizable to the viewer, the typical sports film involves an aging coach (usually looking for redemption); an aging veteran (sometimes the two are combined); a young player (generally from a different background than the coach/veteran pairing) who is in need of guidance; a tenuous relationship between players and management, often with the folding, sale, or movement of the team looming; and a female intrusion into the masculine world of sports, most frequently in a management position. The younger and older men struggle to relate to one another. This situation is reflected in the on-field performance of the team, which is always enduring a seemingly interminable losing streak. Eventually, the older player or the coach becomes a father figure to the younger player's son and the latter passes into manhood. Once this relationship solidifies, the team's fortunes are reversed and victory is achieved. This formulation and its variations reflect not a change in masculinities, but in what contemporary society is doing to men: there are increasingly fewer opportunities and venues through which males can learn how to be men.

#### Genre

<2> It may seem trivial to recall that genre refers to the categorization of a group of works according to plots, characterizations, settings, themes, stereotypes, and other common features. However, it is worth recalling this term because it develops expectations for viewers about the kinds of stories and affects they offer - even for those who rarely watch a sports movie or for those who would watch a sports movie but not a professional (or other) televised sporting event. Our expectations mean that we will know roughly what kind of story will unfold because of our familiarity with the codes and conventions of the genre. Christine Gledhill suggests that these conventions "represent a body of rules or codes, signifiers and signs, and the potential combinations of relations between, signs which together constitute the genre" ("Soap" 351). More significantly, familiarity with a genre allows viewers to discern differences and variations when they occur. In this regard, Steven Neale differentiates between verisimilitude and realism, since the latter is a "highly problematic category" ("Soap" 360). Neale divides verisimilitude into two categories that he refers to as "cultural verisimilitude" and "generic verisimilitude." Gledhill nicely summarizes the distinction: "Whereas generic verisimilitude allows for considerable play with fantasy inside the bounds of generic credibility, cultural verisimilitude refers us to the norms, mores, and common sense of the social world outside the fiction" ("Soap" 360). In fact, Neale states that verisimilitude is "complicated by the existence of genres, as each genre has its own particular conventions of verisimilitude, over and above those of mainstream narrative fiction as a whole" (Genre 36). By verisimilitude, Neale means "probable" or "likely," since it entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and therefore probable (or probable and therefore appropriate) ("Questions" 46). Generic verisimilitude ensures that films within a specific genre will resemble each other enough to be recognizable as members of that genre.

<3> The individual elements of a particular genre may appear in other, often seemingly different, genres. It is the arrangement, then, of the elements that distinguishes the genres from one another. Generic verisimilitude guarantees the (type of) outcome that is likely,

which cannot happen in "real" life. [2] In contrast, cultural verisimilitude measures the extent to which a form mimics "real" life. Since cinematic sports depend on viewers' identification with the subject matter, given the mass appeal of sports, the genre necessarily emphasizes cultural verisimilitude. In such a genre, there is consequently a need "to maintain the recognition of existing audiences and attract newly emerging ones, together with the constant need for new story material and the need for an edge over competitors, [which] makes topicality, being up-to-date, [and] controversy, all vital factors in the form's continuance" ("Soap" 361). These factors contribute to the cultural verisimilitude of the form and ensure that the films reflect the society that produces them. Therefore, sports films, with their portrayals of physical, masculine competition and a heavy investment in cultural verisimilitude, will exhibit shifting patterns of masculinities, should they occur. However, Neale cautions that "genre films and their conventions tend to be collapsed in the "reality" which is held to motivate them. Hence, two impulses are constantly at odds, their mutual incidence engendering a further set of contradictions, most notably between general statements with regard to a genre and its socio-historical "roots" and particular analyses of specific genre films and conventions" (Genre 15). In historical films, the balance is often between "accuracy" and drama. Similarly, the realistic elements of sports films - physical competition - are in tension with the generic elements - nurturing relationships. In addition to the relationship between cultural and generic verisimilitude, Neale considers the extent to which "generic regimes of verisimilitude can ignore, sidestep, or transgress . . . broad social and cultural regimes" ("Questions" 47). Thus, as will be shown, the generic elements which sport films share not with (real) sports but with other movies can also transgress the prevailing social and cultural regimes by playing with the arrangement of those elements.

### Where Sports Films Fit

<4> In considering the sports film genre, we should consider how it is related to other genres. Sports films have much in common with action movies, such as the *Rambo* (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* 1985) and *Missing in Action* series that were made during the 1980s because both genres employ the father-son relationship that occurs within a context of organized, ritualized violence and masculine competition. These movies featured fierce, often grossly exaggerated, depictions of combat situations whereas contemporary sports films depict equally fierce, and often equally exaggerated depictions of sporting events. In this regard, the main contribution of Varda Burstyn's *Rites of Men* is that she connects contemporary sporting culture with Susan Jeffords' study of action films, *The Remasculinization of America: Hollywood, Gender, and the Vietnam War*. Jeffords analyses action films in terms of their attempts to re-articulate the American experience in Vietnam; that is, to win (in Hollywood) the war that was lost (in Vietnam) and redress the national humiliation stemming from that loss. Jeffords argues that the efforts to "remasculinize" the cultural and political situations in the United States are reflected in what she calls the movies' "Vietnam representation," which includes "films, novels, personal accounts, collections of observations and experiences, and political and social analyses" (1). She suggests that "Vietnam representation is emblematic of the general restructuring and circulation of ideological production in America today" (1). The restructuring Jeffords cites centers on "the shift from ends to means, the proliferation of techniques and technologies, the valorization of performance, the production and technologization of the male body as an aesthetic of spectacle, and the blurring of fact and fiction" (1). Burstyn finds these terms to be appropriate for the consideration of sports culture: "Jeffords sees this tide of Vietnam representation as having been central in re-creating narrative and symbolic forms that - like those of sport - served to validate what she called 'masculinity' and the 'masculine point of view'" (174). Moreover, Burstyn suggests that the strategies Jeffords enumerates are "familiar from sport culture, a partner with Vietnam representation in this larger remasculinization. . . . Most to the point here, however, is that equally within sport and Vietnam representations, as Jeffords puts it, 'the framework through which each of these operations is enacted . . . is that of gender'" (174). Perhaps surprisingly, sports films do not figure in either Burstyn's or Jeffords' analyses. Yet, especially in the case of the former critic, sports films comprise a genre which combines nearly all of the aspects the author wishes to critique. Indeed, the sports film genre occupies an interstitial space between the two commentaries.

<5> In terms of the present argument, the relationships between fathers and sons figure most prominently among the shared features of sports and war. Likewise, these relationships are of great significance to sports films and action (war) films. This occurs because "War is the time of social fathers - the Fatherhood - organized by men across family ties and divisions of color and class. For the Fatherhood, individual parenting has been displaced or superseded by the allegiances of collective warriorhood. For many, if not most, boys, the template is first cast in childhood by sport" (Burstyn 179). War can be a proof of manhood, but sport is a more common part of the reproduction of masculinity through competition. Although she chooses the words "the Fatherhood" rather than the more common refrain of "the patriarchy," the effect is little different. As with the usual term, "the Fatherhood" receives a paltry definition. Sports and war are inextricably linked in the web depicted. Films are also implicated in this seeming conspiracy, from which Burstyn acknowledges few benefits. She agrees with Jeffords' proposition that "during the Reagan era popular culture became the mechanism not simply for identifying but for establishing the relationship between the people and the State, through the articulation of that State as the unified national body of masculine character" (*Hard Bodies* 13). However, unlike Burstyn, Jeffords asserts that the masculine character depicted in popular culture underwent a transition following the Reagan administration.

<6> Jeffords' follow-up study, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, also focuses on action films but does add other versions of the father-son narrative to the analysis. In addition she considers the periods of the first Bush presidency and the beginning of Clinton's first term. Although she does not attribute a direct causal link between Ronald Reagan and the films during and after his presidency, Jeffords does suggest that there is nevertheless a relationship. In this view, genre films supply the audience with what it wants to see. However, as Jeffords points out, concurrent social and political trends can also provide insight into what audiences want. In both of her books, Jeffords looks at the "heroic masculinity which attracted Robert Bly and seems to structure so many popular narratives of the 1980s - the father/son relationship" (*Hard Bodies* 22). In the second book she also considers how films of the "later years of the 1980s indicated changes in the hard-body

mythology, particularly in the apparent negation of that body in favor of a more internalized and emotional kind of heroic icon" (Hard Bodies 22). Jeffords concludes that not only did the "heroic icon" change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but the father-son narratives took on less importance. In these years, the moviegoing public's fascination with the father/son plots seemed to have dwindled with the appearance of many popular films celebrating brother and buddy films again over father/son narratives. Perhaps the growing recession, increasing joblessness, and decreasing U.S. economic standing have led some viewers to feel less concern about continuity than about the need for a "revolution" in their own economic positions, a tendency that the presidential campaign of . . . the Clinton/Gore ticket [indicates,] that the father/son narrative . . . may, in the 1990s, no longer be a dominant narrative for the construction of U.S. masculine subjectivities (Hard Bodies 90).

<7> What is interesting about Jeffords analysis is that in the chapter from which the preceding passage is drawn, she cites the father-son narrative as being instrumental in facilitating or dealing with change. In fact, father-son narratives are ideal in such times because they "help to make change possible (the son replaces the father) and to prevent the change from taking too radical a form (the son models himself after the father)" (Hard Bodies 90). Jeffords also uses the word "revolution" to describe the impact of Ronald Reagan's presidency and claims that the father-son narrative was a key to this revolution.

<8> However, she sees no place for the father-son narrative in the era following the Reagan terms, despite her outline of the changes that did occur. Jeffords almost completely ignores two important events that took place during the Bush term - the end of the Cold War and the stunning success of the Gulf War - in terms of their impact on father-son relationships. These two events went a long way towards purging American grief over Vietnam and restoring pride. They also signal what came to be called a "New World Order" in which global nuclear war receded as an omnipresent threat and the American way had been vindicated. Jeffords assumes that these events contributed to the demise of father-son films and the rise of buddy films. Jeffords does not look at sports films in either work. Burstyn, too, ignores this body of cultural production. Yet sports films are the logical successors to the action films since they overlap both Jeffords' and Burstyn's critiques in the crucial area of the father-son relationship. Moreover, sport is war without guns and involves an analogous proof of manhood through physical competition. [3] Change and continuity can both be accounted for by the unifying discourse of sport: the seasons and players may change, but the sport will always be present. Given the virtual a priori guarantee of continuity, a great deal of fluctuation can be accommodated within the framework of sport.

<9> Slapshot, a 1977 comedy about a minor-league hockey team, serves as a model for the sports movie genre. Admittedly, the selection of Slapshot as an archetype will cause some pause, especially given its temporal proximity to Bang the Drum Slowly. [4] The plot and characterizations of Slapshot reveal its comic version of Vietnam representation. The aging player-coach, Reg Dunlop, and the young star, Ned Braden, represent two very different generations. Braden is college-educated and certain to do better than his figurative father, whereas Dunlop came up through the junior and minor leagues. Braden is also a member of the generation of college students who protested against the Vietnam war. The action of the movie centers on Braden's refusal to play the new style of mindless, violent, "goon" hockey that Dunlop adopts. The rest of the team is forced or coerced into fighting because the style is successful; that is, might makes right. Braden wants to go back to the old style of cooperation and fair play, but unlike the other players he has a choice. The closing of the steel mill, coming on the heels of the fall of Saigon and the oil crisis, is a reminder of the failure of the fathers' generation and the lack of opportunities for the sons to succeed, in both senses. For example, Johnny, the team's captain, joins the fighting grudgingly because his only alternative, the oft-repeated "Fucking Chrysler plant, here I come!" entails begging his brother-in-law for a job in an auto plant. In the end, Reg briefly changes his ways only to go back to fighting when he finds out that scouts are in the crowd for the championship game. A bench-clearing brawl - i.e., full-scale war - erupts but Braden does not join the fray. When Ned sees his wife in the crowd, he leaps from the bench and strips out of his hockey equipment in a mock-epic reversal of the ritual of dressing for battle. Non-violent protest and disarming win the day.

<10> Slapshot introduces two important features that have remained significant in the genre: economic uncertainty and a powerful female presence. In Slapshot, these two elements are concentrated in the person of the owner. This figure is repeated in Major League (1989) and Any Given Sunday (1999) but the uncertain future for the team, usually relocation or folding, and some form of female "interference" are central to all. [5] Previously, as in Grand Prix, the female was merely the final piece of a love triangle. [6] The setting of Slapshot in Charlestown and its team, the Chiefs, are based closely on Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and the Jets hockey franchise. In 1983, Johnstown would serve as the setting for All the Right Moves (1983), a movie about high school football, featuring a very young Tom Cruise. In both movies, the closing of the steel mill, the town's largest employer, because of a recession, looms large. [7] As well, these movies end with the player-coach relationship solidified because the latter adapts to the player. They then move together to a new team, in a new city.

### Melodrama for Men

<11> Yet the sports film, with its emphasis on familial relationships, in all of its manifestations, has one major element in common with that most feminine of genres, the soap opera. [8] The distinguishing feature, Christine Gledhill explains, is that women's genres depict a version of domesticity in which:

a set of highly articulate discursive forms - talk, the confessional, heart-to-heart, gossip - work through psychic and social contradictions which melodrama must externalize through expressive action. Far from representing an "excess" of emotion which displaces action, talk in soap opera is its action, while action in masculine genres more often than not represents unexpressed and often unexpressible male emotion, which needs a melodramatic climax to break out. ("Soap" 380)

In a subsequent study of melodramatic forms, Gledhill gathers that "Melodrama has frequently

been identified as a woman's genre. However, this is arguably a retrospective categorisation, following the role of gender in the delegitimation of melodrama by realism and tragedy" (Home 33). The latter categories traditionally constitute the masculine genres. However, in her study of soap opera, Gledhill recognizes that "genre production is equally about differentiation - managing product differentiation to maximize and appeal to different audiences, and to keep tabs on changing audiences" ("Soap" 355). Furthermore, within this process of differentiation, according to Gledhill, gender can be one of the key signifiers. In the sports film, the locker room provides the setting for the discursive action of the film. That the locker room is both a sanctuary and a symbolic womb is often reinforced with a female presence inside its confines, as occurs in *Major League*, *Any Given Sunday*, and *Sunset Park*, among others. This is surprising given that "in the twentieth century, melodramatic forms, such as the so-called 'women's picture' or 'weepies' which Hollywood produced in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and the emotionally intense TV drama series and serials, such as soap opera, have become identified as feminine genres" ("Soap" 350). [9] What becomes clear is that being a star is secondary to the connections - to use a word that men fear, relationships - that develop among the team members.

<12> While they are in the locker room, the men are usually in various stages of dressing or undressing for battle. Indeed, *Any Given Sunday* crosses the line of full-frontal male nudity in its depictions of the locker room. In this film, the female owner frequents the locker room, while the players are changing. For some years it has been a common practice for female reporters to enter men's locker rooms, but never the other way around. [10] The rationale is that women do not look. However, in the movies the females do look. In *Any Given Sunday*, the owner, Christina Pagniacchi, walks over to her star quarterback, Willie Beamen, and looks him up and down. When Beamen asks her to have dinner with him, she replies that she does not date players. She leaves, but not without looking again. The effect is to say that no matter how much money you might make or how potent you are, you will never break the class barrier. [11] Indeed, via their contracts, players are the largest assets a team has. They are investments - proverbial pieces of meat - and not human beings. Nowhere is this more visible than in the behaviour of the team doctor, Harvey Mandrake, in *Any Given Sunday*. The doctor tells one seriously injured player to stop whining because the TV broadcast has gone to a commercial. At the end of the film, Pagniacchi "converts" and realizes how important the game, the players, and the coaches are, as opposed to the profits. She even makes overtures to Beamen. However, this possibility is subverted by both the coach and the quarterback of Pagniacchi's team leaving to join an expansion franchise. This parallels the departure of Dunlop and Braden for a new team at the end of *Slapshot*.

<13> The importance of the locker room to sports films and the melodramatic elements therein, provides an (other) opportunity to reconsider Laura Mulvey's oft-cited position in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In a later reconsideration of the essay, Mulvey attempts to clarify her original position. Nevertheless, Mulvey's position in "Afterthoughts" is meant to further support rather than redress what is lacking in "Visual Pleasure." Not only does she state that she still stands by her earlier argument, that the cinematic apparatus replicates and reproduces the patriarchal apparatus, she structures her analysis of melodrama to bolster it. Mulvey considers melodrama because it is a woman's form, with women at the center of the action, and women (only) identifying with the heroine. Moreover, Mulvey purports to be interested in the narrative of the film. However, her consideration of the narrative function provides the same answer as her consideration of the viewing function. For example, she claims that conventions of the Western genre require a "marriage" to occur and that this "ritual is, of course, sex-specific, and the main rationale for any female presence in this strand of the genre. This neat narrative function restates the propensity for 'woman' to signify the 'erotic' already familiar from visual representation (as, for instance, argued in 'Visual Pleasure')." ("Afterthoughts" 35). In other words, the narrative merely reiterates what the visual depicts, and the visual always depicts the female as the object. The narrative aspects of the story therefore are virtually insignificant in the final analysis.

<14> For Mulvey, melodrama and the gaze are inextricably linked. On that point, at the most fundamental of levels, there is agreement between her analysis and the current consideration of sports films. Yet there is tension within Mulvey's own argument - tension she does not acknowledge - regarding this connection. Since she is tied to her original statement, there is no flexibility within the argument for her to consider other points of view within the diegesis. The films cited in this essay are all male-centered melodrama which is not possible, let alone given any thought, within Mulvey's framework. Moreover, as in *Any Given Sunday*, the male is often the object of any number of gazes, including a desirous and consuming female gaze. In "Notes on Sirk" Mulvey again considers melodrama. She begins her analysis with a brief definition: "Roughly, there are two dramatic points of departure for melodrama. One is coloured by a female protagonist's point of view which provides a focus for identification. The other examines tensions in the family, and between the sexes and generations" ("Notes" 40). The tensions in the family in Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*, which Mulvey cites, are central to the sports film but the protagonist is unquestionably male. In Sirk's film, Ron Kirby is the gardener employed by Cary, a wealthy widow. The plot is something of a masculinized version of *Cinderella*. Nevertheless, the class difference stands out, as in the sports films mentioned. In focusing on the female, Mulvey manages to contribute something to the understanding of masculinity in the film in a lengthy but important passage:

In the opening scene of *All That Heaven Allows*, Cary (Jane Wyman) looks at Ron (Rock Hudson) with the first inklings of desire. The emotion is carried through into the second scene through the presence of the autumn leaves he has given her, so that we, the spectators, share with Cary his secret importance . . . [prior to] what is to prove a barren evening at the Country Club. The children comment on Cary's red dress, interpreting it, as we do, as a sign of newly awakened interest in life and love but mistaking its object as the impotent and decrepit Harvey. . . . The camera does not allow the spectator to make the same mistake, establishing in no uncertain terms the formal detachment with which Cary sees Harvey, in contrast to the way in which in the previous scene Ron had been subtly extracted from the background and placed in close face-to-face with Cary. ("Notes" 41-2)

Mulvey describes the plot and the camera as focusing the gaze on a man: the "object" of Cary's desire. Clearly, Cary's red dress is an obvious sign both of femininity and of desire. Moreover, this man is not feminized, nor is the female masculinized. According to the generic conventions elaborated by Neale and by Jeffords, Harvey is "feminized" through his frailty and

so he should be the object of the gaze, but this is not the case. In contrast with the "impotent and decrepit" Harvey - to use Mulvey's words - Ron's phallic masculinity is emphasized. Moreover, Ron's association with nature suggests an immanent rather than a constructed masculinity as the preferred state within the diegetic world. Without fully acknowledging it, Mulvey describes a situation which suggests that there are multiple and simultaneous gazes and that there can be melodrama for men.

<15> Unfortunately, Mulvey only concerns herself with imagined female spectators, in part because she sees narrative and camera as the same thing. The Cinderella story (in reverse) is not considered to have any power for viewers of either sex despite being an essential element to the film Mulvey analyses. She does not even recognize it as such. It is well worth noting that the Cinderella story is frequently (over) used in relation to sports teams and figures. A classic parodic example occurs in the golf send-up, *Caddy Shack* (1980), when Carl, the greens keeper, narrates his after-hours final eighteen holes at Augusta for the Masters' title. With flowers serving as golf balls, he recites his biography: "Cinderella story, kid out of nowhere . . . former greens keeper." Every year during the NCAA basketball tournament one or more teams is marketed as the "Cinderella story" because it is one to which nearly everyone - man, woman, child - can relate. Both sports and sports film are placed within the realm of fairy tale. [12] It is a way of drawing viewers who might not otherwise identify with the sport. At some level, the Cinderella story forms the kernel of nearly every sports film: the team is in the midst of an incredible losing streak, faces incredibly hard times ahead, then someone new arrives or something miraculous happens (or both), which sets them on a winning streak. Such is the importance of the "come-from-behind," or "rags to riches," narrative that the biographies of real athletes tend to adopt the form, as in the various versions of Babe Ruth's life. Prior to his conviction for rape, Mike Tyson's life was similarly presented. While the figure of the domineering female owner can stand for the wicked stepmother, more often the enemy is the absence of team unity.

### Masculine Nurturing

<16> While locker rooms and other male domains are often criticized as sites of the exclusion of females, this is not the central focus of cinematic sports. Instead, sports films tend to portray them as environments of caring and sharing. Locker rooms become domestic settings - analogous to kitchens and living rooms - in which the familial relationships of the melodrama can occur. Football and hockey players, for example, often need the assistance of teammates to don their protective equipment. Any man who played team sports in his youth will have memories of the entire experience, including the locker room and the relationships forged within its walls. This aspect of sports, missing from the star-oriented broadcasts of live sporting events, is emphasized in the cinematic versions in order to capitalize on the viewers' familiarity and enhance the identification processes. Time and again, we see that no man can succeed without the help of his teammates. The previously mentioned Billy Chappel needs his catcher, Gus, whom he calls "the ugliest wife in the [American] League," and several great fielding plays to help him to pitch a perfect game. Although they were not pitching perfect games, this pattern occurred earlier for the pitchers in *Major League* and *Bull Durham* (1988). Importantly, in the former movie, Dorn, the Cleveland Indians' third-baseman, transforms from a selfish player who refuses to make difficult plays in order to avoid injuries, despite the damage to his team, into a player who sacrifices his body for his pitcher and his team. This occurs even though the pitcher had a sexual encounter with Dorn's wife (although, at the time of the encounter, the pitcher was unaware of the fact that the woman was the spouse of a teammate). The other sports have their own take on the same formula. For example, freshman running back Darnell Jefferson, in *The Program* (1993), needs three crucial blocks to allow him to break free for the long kick return that sets up the championship-winning touchdown. The key block on Jefferson's game-tying touchdown was thrown by the senior whom Jefferson supplants, both as the starting half-back and as the object of a beautiful girl's affections. Moreover, Darnell's new-found focus on his academic performance also wins the approval of the girl's father who happens to be an alumnus of the school and its football team. In both cases the younger player wins the game and gets the girl, with the tacit approval of the older player and/or father-figure. It might be argued that this suggests a hierarchy of masculinities in which those possessing lesser abilities give way to and make sacrifices for those with greater skills, it also sets up a line of succession in which masculinity is reproduced. Once the players emerge as men and as leaders, their success is inevitable.

<17> The process presented above can also happen in reverse. That is, the team recognizes that it needs a leader who then accepts that role. *The Replacements*, released in 2000, takes this form. Shane Falco is chosen by coach Jimmy McGinty to be the leader of a rag-tag group of castoffs. The Washington Sentinels are a fictionalized professional football team that requires a completely new team to be put together in the middle of the season due to a strike by the regular players. In order to "break" the strike, all of the teams in the league seek "replacement" players. The real players are portrayed as prima donnas: spoiled and self-centred. One complains that \$5 million does not go very far when one considers how much money is needed to pay agents, managers, accountants, bodyguards, personal trainers, and other dependents. A teammate simply adds: "Do you know how much insurance costs for a Ferrari, mutha?" In their place, coach McGinty assembles a group of "wannabes," or in the case of Shane Falco, "never was," in the words of Eddie Martel, the Sentinels' star quarterback. The other replacement players accept Falco as their leader, despite his reputation for "choking" under pressure. This is the reason that Falco was not originally a professional player. Falco possesses the physical attributes of a winning quarterback, but not, allegedly, the complementary intangible character qualities. Like his players, coach McGinty is being given a second chance. Earlier in his career, McGinty failed in his relationship with the star quarterback whom he coached in Dallas. In the economy of professional sports, coaches are cheaper and easier to replace than star quarterbacks, no matter who is right. Coaches have lower salaries than players and fans do not attend games to watch coaches. The bond between Falco and McGinty is immediate and occurs due to two basic reasons: the quarterback has no pretensions and the coach has faith in the player. The distinctive quality the coach seeks in a player is "heart." This is an intangible quality, presumably found only in men (who play team sports), as reflected in one of the coach's favourite sayings: "That's why girls don't play the game." When Martel returns to the team, turning his back on his original teammates by crossing the picket line, he finds that his star-status is not sufficient for the replacements to follow him. The players would rather lose with Falco than win with Martel because the

replacement quarterback cares about them.

<18> Admittedly, unselfish play typically occurs in team sports, but the highly stylized cinematic versions definitely tend towards the melodramatic. In fact, as has been shown, such scenes are predictable features of any sports film. Nevertheless, melodramatic scenes produce another apparent paradox, for as Gledhill asserts, the term "melodramatic" is often applied to a genre to "describe its emphasis on the heightened drama of family relationships and personal feelings, as opposed to the focus on public action in 'male' genres. But melodrama's long and complicated history demonstrates perfectly the shifting intersections between realism and gender in struggles for cultural definition and control" ("Soap" 350). As melodrama, the scenes described are paradoxical in that they constitute "public actions" - performances on the playing field - that depend on the "family relationships and personal feelings" - the domestic matters, if you will - of the players involved in order for the action to occur. The scenes depict, then, the difficult balance between the public and the private as well as the individual and the collective personae of masculinities. Although the sports film is nominally a "male" genre, it has much in common with the "feminine" genres, even with respect to the action involved.

<19> Slapshot can serve as an archetype for the current form of the sports film. One of the central tensions of the movie is that the ownership of the Chiefs is a mystery for most of the movie until Reg Dunlop, the aging player-coach, visits the owner's home. He discovers that the owner is a woman who would rather fold the team and take the resultant loss, than operate the franchise because it does not make enough profit. [13] Dunlop, played by Paul Newman, protests but is rebuked that he does not know enough about finance. He then tells the owner that she does not understand people and asks her what will happen to the players if the team is folded. She responds apathetically, since it is, after all, a business transaction that is being discussed. This is a rather stunning reversal, but is totally in keeping with the generic form involved. Relationships are stereotypically exclusively feminine domains, whereas business practices involving a lack of emotion are stereotypically male. Carol Gilligan's influential work, *In a Different Voice*, concentrates on demonstrating that very point. Her thesis is that as opposed to men, "women experience a world comprised of relationships rather than of people standing alone, a world that coheres through connection rather than through systems of rules" (29). While sports are essentially systems of rules, sports films clearly emphasize relationships, especially those among men. Moreover, the relationships are nurturing in nature.

<20> Gilligan's research is influenced heavily by Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*. In this work, Chodorow serves up a harsh condemnation of the masculine mode of reasoning. This is in contrast to the feminine mode she describes and which inspires Gilligan:

girls emerge from [childhood] with a basis for empathy built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not. . . . Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's need or feelings as one's own (or of thinking that one is so experiencing another's needs and feelings). . . . From very early on, then, girls come to experience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to their external object-world, and as differently oriented to their inner object world as well (*Mothering* 117).

<21> Chodorow explains the type of deep empathy and identification, the kind Reg Dunlop and other male figures in sports film express, as exclusive to women. Behind the seeming paradox of the nurturing male is the threat to male solidarity posed by both the female intrusion and fiscally-based management strategies. These are combined, perhaps conflated, in the bottom-line oriented female owner. Masculine nurturing, in contrast, becomes one of the expectations viewers bring to a sports movie and part of the pleasures they derive from the film. Rather than being a particularly new feature, masculine nurturing has been and is a commonplace in sports films. What is new is recognizing that it exists. While it might appear that masculine nurturing requires the cover of a proof of manhood through, often violent, physical competition this is not necessarily the case. Rather, the emphasis given to nurturing suggests that in terms of masculinities relationships are at least as important as competition and are often more important.

### Contemporary Variations

<22> Three recent films stand out for being slightly different with regard to the father-son relationship and the nurturing involved. First, *Sunset Park* (1997) features Phylis Siroka, a small Jewish woman with no basketball experience, who becomes the coach of a basketball team made up entirely of urban African-American boys. While there are potential "father" figures for the boys, none of them materializes. For example, one of the players, Spaceman, contemplates killing his science teacher because the latter constantly bullies the boy. Siroka stands up to the teacher and informs him that science is Spaceman's favourite subject, a fact previously unknown to the teacher because he had never talked with the student. Although the boys have a successful season, there is no reconciliation with any of the father-figures. Indeed, they learn about being men from a woman. In *Varsity Blues* (1999), all of the boys in West Canaan, Texas, have two fathers: one is biological and one is the football coach. However, the biological fathers replay their competition with each other through their sons or attempt to relive their youth through the boys. The story centers on Jon Moxon, the backup forced into the starting role when Lance, the star quarterback, blows out his knee. When Moxon receives news of his acceptance to Brown University on an academic scholarship, his father, the former backup to Lance's father, says "That's great, but I need to talk to you about [the game against] Gilroy," because Coach Kilmer had asked him to do so. It is worth adding that when Lance was hurt, his father yelled at him, "Don't do this to me, boy!" Yet, the boys revolt against both their coach and their fathers in the locker room, at half-time during the crucial game. Coach Kilmer wants a player to take an injection so that he can play, despite the risk of further injury. However, this is what happened to Lance and led to his demise. Moxon leads the revolt and Lance becomes the coach during the second half of the big game. Although they violate the "sanctity" of the locker room - that is, the space where nurturing between men can be done safely - the boys keep the dispute in the domestic realm of the locker room. They win, but the pep talk is more telling: "We have the rest of our lives to be

mediocre." The emphasis is still on the bonds the players have but with a definite break from their fathers and their fathers' operating methods.

<23> Finally, *He Got Game* (1998), from which the first part of the title of this essay was pinched, is another recent film that ends without a father-son reconciliation, despite the presence of dozens of would-be fathers. Jesus Shuttlesworth is a highly-regarded high school basketball player who has yet to decide on a college. Several college coaches attempt to woo him. His high school coach, who had served as a father-figure of sorts during the absence of Jesus' father, offers him \$10,000 to choose the "right" school. Uncle Bubba, too, wants a piece of the action because he assumes Jesus is going to be paid to play college basketball and that Jesus will become a professional player, as well. And then there is Jesus' biological father: he was imprisoned for killing Jesus' mother during a domestic dispute arising from the father's excessive pushing of the son to be a great basketball player. The warden of the prison wants Jesus to go to Big State and offers Jake Shuttlesworth his freedom if he can convince his son to sign a letter of intent. Jesus chooses Big State, but not before beating his father one-on-one - a strutting, in-your-face version of "I'm a man now" as well as the end of the only remaining thing they have in common - and dad's subsequent return to prison, with the parting words, "You've only got yourself, son." The film emphasizes not connections but standing alone. Indeed, the most sage advice given to Jesus comes from a white gangster named Big Time, who informs the young star about the trappings and pitfalls that come with fame. Disturbingly, this movie connects all of the dangers with women, and more specifically, white women. What the recent sports films do suggest is that young men, and especially young black men, will have to reach manhood without any guidance from their fathers.

<24> Central to the genre, in all of its iterations, is the figure of the "prodigal father," to borrow Susan Faludi's term, who deserts a (figurative) son, realizes the mistake, and returns seeking redemption. He is always near the end of his coaching career. For example, Gene Hackman plays this role twice: first as the coach who lost his job for hitting a player, in *Hoosiers* (1987), and later as the coach who could not get along with his quarterback, in *The Replacements*. If he is not looking for redemption, he is definitely looking to prove himself: for example, Craig T. Nelson as Coach Nickerson, in *All the Right Moves*, whose yearning for a college position echoes his players' dreams, and John Voight as Coach Kilmer, in *Varsity Blues*, who wants a twenty-third title, and the maintenance of the status quo. In both movies, the coach is in his last year as a high school football coach. In all cases, the coach needs to prove that his style is both successful and justifiable. In other words, the coach's playbook is the Law of the Father - "Thou shalt not desire what was my desire" - by another name (Film Theory 73). That is to say, in the revised Oedipal scenario the player seeks to replace the coach as the team's leader or focal point. The coach in turn "lays down the law" to resist such an advance. Indeed, Coach Nickerson tells star defensive back, Stefan Djordjevic, the cliché, "It's my way or the highway," when the player refuses to follow instructions. Complicating the development of the father-son relationship is the fact that the coach and player come from different backgrounds. This emphasizes the "generation gap" that already exists. This gap is crucial to the narrative and the genre. Jeffords cites its importance in action-adventure movies of the 1980s. She observes that:

Because the relationship between a father and a son automatically invokes time, these films all take the spans of time as their subjects. . . . Consequently, one of the keys to the success of these films is not only their resolution of father/son relationships but their appropriation of time. In each case a "happy" ending depends on the ability of the hero to overcome the limitations of time, to rewrite history, to restructure the future, or to rescue the father from the burdens of time itself. (Hard Bodies 88)

It is in this regard that the sports film has a built-in focus on time. Sports of all sorts automatically invoke time. They are broken down into careers, seasons, games, rounds, and parts of games. The typical sports film needs one entire season for its span. Moreover, the promise of "next year" also is invoked to ensure continuity, if only by inspiring a sequel.

<25> It is also with respect to time that the three films cited stand out when compared to other members of the genre. None of these films has a particularly happy ending and none of them provides a resolution to the Oedipal scenario. When Jake Shuttlesworth fails to recruit his son - too little, too late - he goes back to jail. The son refuses to rescue him; Jesus does not save. Coach Kilmer never coaches again and Moxon goes to Brown, on the academic scholarship. The boys at Sunset Park lose the championship game and while they have next year, they have a female coach and no father figures. Even *The Replacements* is noteworthy for reducing the season to four games, or one-quarter length. Although the ending is happy and the father-son continuity is achieved, there is no promise of next year. The sons ultimately control time in the final three films cited, but the fathers are not brought back as Jeffords suggests is necessary. The prodigal father does not receive redemption. The strongest example is Coach Kilmer who is replaced in the middle of a game. As well, Jake could have had an early release from his "time" but instead returns to "doing life." By distorting the generic form, these films indicate how dominant the traditional form has been and still is. Effectively, they represent "negative" versions of the genre. Transgressing the generic verisimilitude of the form emphasizes the different or absent resolution to the father-son relationship that Faludi currently finds, as opposed to the resolution Jeffords cites as being necessary to the continuation of the American way of life. More properly, the sons now control time, but without their fathers.

<26> In Jeffords' defense, it must be admitted that she assumes that fatherhood and patriarchy are synonymous and automatically reproduced. Likewise, Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan make the same assumption. This is part of the reason Chodorow, especially, focuses solely on mothering. What becomes clear in considering the seemingly "male" genre of the sports film is that it involves men, in an all-male setting (which is much feared and resented by feminists, as Faludi points out) and yet they are nurturing each other. Moreover, the "mothering" occurs in spite of all of the stereotypically male-heroic activities taking place around them, often simultaneously: hitting, conquering, competing, masculine displays, and women as items of exchange in the economy of the masculine hierarchy. In the last regard, the economy is not as simple as might first appear. For example, in *The Program*, the female character, Autumn, dictates the terms of the economy to Darnell: academics must come first, not athletics. Perhaps the best example comes from *Bull Durham*. Annie Savoy initially chooses Nuke over Crash. The choice sets up not a love triangle but an Oedipal triangle, for Annie is



significantly older and more experienced than Nuke. Her last name, derived from the French verb, *savoir*, meaning "to know" alludes to this fact. Likewise, Crash is older and wiser than Nuke. He was acquired by the Durham Bulls precisely to mentor the young pitcher. However, the "mothering" and "fathering" roles are reversed. Although Annie commits figurative incest with Nuke, she concentrates on teaching him to pitch. Conversely, Crash teaches Nuke a myriad of things: how to get along with teammates, especially his catcher, how to deal with interviews, how to handle winning as well as losing streaks, and, as if to emphasize the mothering aspect of the relationship, how to dress himself on the road and how to keep his shower sandals clean.

<27> The final three movies make a significant statement in their play with the conventions of the genre. One of the repeated patterns of the entire genre is that the younger males seek surrogate fathers, if only to provide mothering. Corneau's experience with his own patients leads him to conclude that "A boy whose father has left home will tend either to idealize the father or to seek an ideal father-substitute. Often he will be so blinded by his desire that he will be unable to assess accurately the father figures he has chosen, and this will lead to yet another betrayal by the substitute father" (19). However, while the boys in *Varsity Blues*, *He Got Game*, and *Sunset Park*, to name only three films, search for fathers, they ultimately refuse to opt in to the usual process of succession. While the betrayal by the father occurs as a rule in the genre, usually it is resolved. This, too, is no longer the case, as the last three movies demonstrate. The sons refuse to reunite with their fathers and opt out of the "patriarchy" or the "Fatherhood," as Burstyn calls it. Rather than being met with fear and condemnation, this development should be welcomed by feminism(s) and recognized for its significance. While the genre does involve the traditional proof of manhood through physical competition, it becomes clear that the mutual nurturing Corneau describes is equally important. This suggests that not only is nurturing possible for men, but it is a significant part of manhood.

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## Filmography

- All the Right Moves . Director Michael Chapman. Universal, 1983.
- Any Given Sunday . Director Oliver Stone. Warner Bros. 1999.
- Bull Durham . Director Ron Shelton. Metromedia, 1988.
- Days of Thunder . Director Tony Scott. Malofilm Group. 1990.
- Field of Dreams . Director Phil Alden Robinson. Universal, 1989.
- For Love of the Game . Director Sam Raimi. Universal, 1999.
- He Got Game . Director Spike Lee. Buena Vista, 1998.
- Major League . Director David S. Ward. Paramount, 1989.
- Mr. Baseball . Director Fred Schepisi. Universal, 1992.
- The Program . Director David S. Ward. Touchstone, 1993.
- The Replacements . Director Howard Deutch. Warner Bros., 2000.
- Slapshot . Director George Roy Hill. Universal, 1977.
- Sunset Park . Director Steve Gomer. TriStar Pictures, 1997.
- Varsity Blues . Director Brian Robbins. Paramount, 1999.

## Notes

[1] The National Hockey League went from twenty-one to thirty teams, the National Football League from twenty-eight to thirty-two, the National Basketball Association from twenty-three to twenty-nine, and Major League Baseball from twenty-six to thirty. In the same time period, new stadiums were erected for nearly fifty of these teams (although some are shared facilities). Even greater growth has been achieved in professional golf and automobile racing. [^]

[2] Narratives are often imposed on actual sporting events, presumably to heighten viewer interest. Methods of imposing narrative include sports reporters' frequent references to the themes of "revenge" and "redemption" for earlier losses and miscues. Pregame shows and features contribute not only hype but also narrative to the games. For example, key match-ups and strategies during game coverage are "plotlines." The vaunted "West Coast Offence" used by former San Francisco 49'er and Stanford University football coach, Bill Walsh, is said to be "scripted." Perhaps the most famous example of such an approach is the team motto of the Montréal Canadiens hockey team: "To you from failing hands we throw the torch. Be yours to hold it high" ("Torch"). These words, taken from John McCrae's WWI poem, "In Flanders Field," appear in both French and English versions on the walls of the team's dressing room. The team's website explains that "Since 1952-53, they have been the words and symbols according to which successive generations of hockey players have patterned their professional lives" ("Torch"). Thus, the players know that they are part of a never-ending story, what they can expect as members of the team, and most important, what is expected of them. [^]

[3] In fact, Sandra Curry Jansen and Donald Sabo compare the presentation of the Persian Gulf War to broadcasts of sporting events: "The press briefing room in the field closely resembled the set used by producers of television sport media for pre- and postgame analyses and interviews with coaches of professional football teams" (3). [^]

[4] It is arguable that Grand Prix follows a similar format and that LeMans, North Dallas 40, and The Longest Yard were earlier offerings. The Fish that Saved Pittsburgh and Rocky were roughly contemporaneous and unlike the other films, the apparent fade of American prominence during the 1970s does figure. I avoided Bang the Drum Slowly because it is among the very few sports films to have received any academic treatment and it is too closely tied to an allegory of Vietnam rather than the "Vietnam representation" which Jeffords argues works out the tensions of America after the war had ended. [^]

[5] It is worth noting that the child saving the team formula introduced in the otherwise forgettable The Fish that Saved Pittsburgh would be repeated in The Kid from Leftfield, Little Big League, and Rookie of the Year and Be Like Mike, among others. [^]

[6] The love triangle does not disappear altogether. It is most frequently reconfigured as a variation of an Oedipal theme, as in Bull Durham, Major League, Varsity Blues, He Got Game, and, to a lesser extent, Slapshot, The Program, and Sunset Park. A traditional love triangle appears in a brief, if not forced, fashion in The Replacements. This topic will receive more attention later in the paper. [^]

[7] Although I did not include *Love and Basketball*, *Remember the Titans*, and *Girl Fight* in this paper, the first and last of these are extremely noteworthy in that the female presence is central to the sporting aspects of the movies. Continuing a theme introduced by *Bull Durham*, the women in the more recent offerings play basketball and box, respectively. Another curious film in this regard is the Canadian offering, *The Rhino Brothers*, in which there is no father figure. Instead, it features a "hockey mom" who might remind viewers of Robert Duvall's character in *The Great Santini*. [^]

[8] Interestingly, professional wrestling, which now bills itself as "sports entertainment," is often referred to by fans and the popular press as "soap opera for men." This relative of cinematic sports deserves its own treatment. Another relative can be found in *Piledriver*, a Canadian play released in 1999, which combines professional wrestling with elements of the sports film narrative structure in a surprisingly sensitive treatment of gay culture in the late 1970s. [^]

[9] As a further example, many films of the type Gledhill cites and more recent offerings such as *Steel Magnolias* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* can be seen in Canada on the Women's Television Network's "Chick Flicks" broadcasts. This is contrasted with the "Superstation," WTBS's weekly movie broadcasts, "Movies for Guys Who Love Movies." The latter's movie selection includes sports films such as *Rudy*, *Hoosiers*, and *Major League*. [^]

[10] This practice is not without some controversy and backlash. For example, in the late 1980s several San Francisco Giants were accused of harassing a female reporter whom they accused of staring at them and gossiping about which players were well-endowed. Former Atlanta Braves' outfielder, Dale Murphy, routinely refused to talk to female reporters in the locker room and occasionally ushered them out of the room due to his Mormon beliefs. More recently, several naked Phoenix Cardinals were reported to have surrounded a female reporter who had written negative stories about the team. [^]

[11] Several former players, including Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Mario Lemieux, and Wayne Gretzky, have earned enough money to become owners themselves. It remains to be seen whether this trend will curb the growth of player salaries. [^]

[12] Nowhere is the Cinderella format of a masculine, sporting movie more obvious than in the Russell Crowe vehicle, *Cinderella Man*, which became imbricated in the popular press with post-9/11 politics and so falls both within and outside of the rubric I have elaborated in this paper. A related fairy tale is that of Peter Pan since grown men play children's games in perpetuity. The so-called "Peter Pan syndrome" in contemporary masculinities receives a great deal of attention in the popular press and is beyond the scope of the present essay. [^]

[13] The future, especially the ownership, whether male or female, is always in doubt in sports films. In *Major League*, the owner wants to move the team. Any Given Sunday's Christina Pagniacchi wants a new stadium. The owner of the Tigers in *For the Love of the Game* does not know whether to sell to a conglomerate that has no interest in baseball or equally disinterested children. A football strike provides the impetus for *The Replacements*. [^]

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