

Fields of Dreams

American Sports Movies

By DAVID J. FIRESTEIN

Reflecting Americans' love for sports of all kinds, U.S. filmmakers turn repeatedly to sports themes to convey messages much larger than the stories themselves.

There are few, if any, countries in the world in which sports—not a sport, but sports in general—permeate national life to the degree that they do in the United States. Sports are part of the very fabric of American life, discourse and lexicon, so much so that it is commonplace to hear prominent national leaders speak about matters of state with reference to such sports metaphors as “throwing up a Hail Mary,” “scoring a slam dunk,” “playing hardball,” and “hitting below the belt.” Indeed, the little black presidential briefcase that holds the codes necessary to launch U.S. nuclear forces is referred to as “the football.”

The centrality of sports in American life is amply reflected in contemporary American cinema. For decades, U.S. moviemakers have successfully mined sports to produce some of the most inspiring, poignant, exciting and memorable American movies. This tradition started in the first half of the 20th century, but remains vibrant today. Just in the past few years, Hollywood has produced popular and critically acclaimed films featuring virtually every major sport, from football, basketball, baseball and hockey, to boxing, horse racing and even surfing.

Since the mid-1970s, four U.S. sports films have won Academy Awards, or Oscars; most recently, *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), the Clint Eastwood film about a woman boxer, won four Oscars, including for best picture (an honor the film shares with just two other sports movies). Though American sports movies make use of a common vehicle to explore the fullness of American life and the nuances of human psychology, they tell us many different things about the values that are important to Americans.

American football, always an important subgenre of U.S. sports cinema, has overtaken baseball in recent years as the sport most frequently featured in U.S. films. The last several years have seen the release of a plethora of serious, high-quality football movies that have explored such diverse themes as overcoming adversity (*We Are Marshall*, 2006); working hard to achieve your dreams (*Invincible*, 2006); the unrelenting pursuit of excellence (*Friday Night Lights*, 2004); the power of sports to heal racial and class divides and build communities (*Remember the Titans*, 2000); and the triumph of an athlete’s innate competitive spirit and innocence over the crass commercialism and cynicism of the U.S. professional sports industry (*Any Given Sunday*, 1999).

As diverse as these themes are, an overarching message about football emerges from these recent films: Football—in its epic scale, over-the-top pomp, gritty attitude, and, yes, hard hitting—is the most complete and vivid sports metaphor for American life itself.

There has been a relative paucity of recent American films about basketball and baseball, the second and third most popular spectator sports in the United States. The two most successful American basketball films of recent years, both based on inspiring true stories, address themes of racial reconciliation (*Glory Road*, 2006) and teamwork and self-respect (*Coach Carter*, 2005). Another American basketball classic (*Hoop Dreams*, 1994), one of the relatively few documentaries in the sports film genre, painted a compelling portrait of inner-city American life and the power and real-world limitations of dreams. In their own ways, the two more recent basketball films make the same point: whatever the color of our skin, whatever our rung on the socioeconomic ladder, we can do great things when we commit ourselves to a larger team and a loftier goal. *Hoop Dreams* tells us that, even so, it’s probably not going to be easy. Meanwhile, the one major American baseball movie of



Courtesy NBC Universal

Left: Tobey Maguire, who played a jockey in *Seabiscuit*, at the movie’s 2003 premiere in Los Angeles.

Above: A still photo from *Seabiscuit*.

Right: Hilary Swank with the 2005 best actress Oscar for her portrayal of a boxer in *Million Dollar Baby*.

Far right: Ken Carter in front of a promotional poster for *Coach Carter*, the basketball film he inspired.

the last few years (*The Rookie*, 2002), also inspired by a true story, reminds us, in true American fashion, that you’re never too old to reach for your dreams, whatever the odds against realizing them.

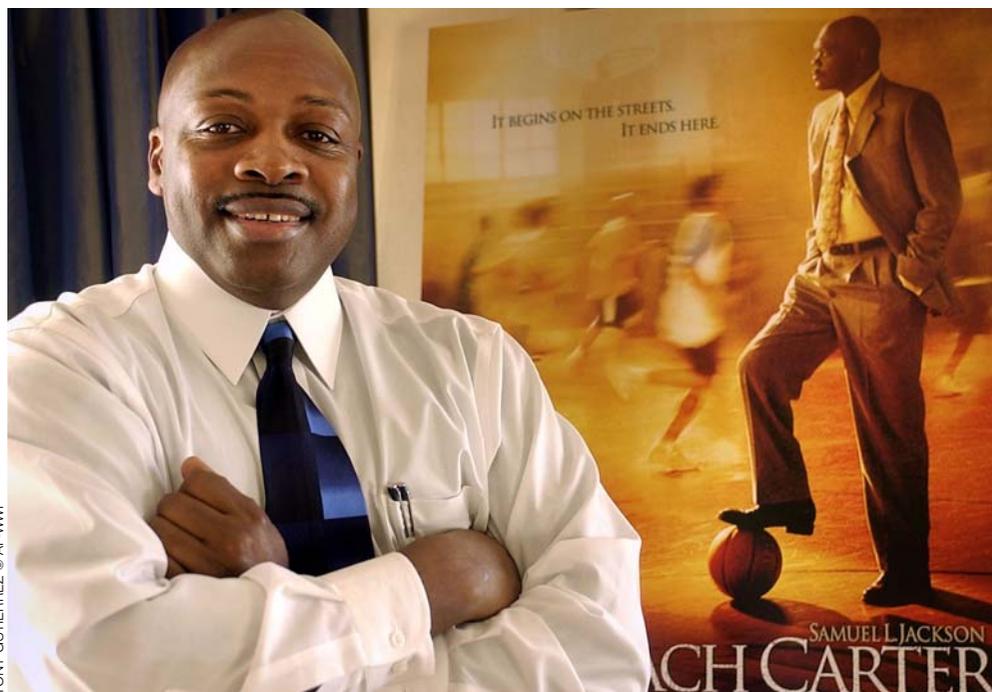
Hollywood has long demonstrated a fascination with boxing. The three major boxing films produced in recent years (*Rocky Balboa*, 2006; *Cinderella Man*, 2005; and *Million Dollar Baby*, 2004) are all classic underdog stories (while *Million Dollar*

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Shooting of a football game scene for *Friday Night Lights* in Odessa, Texas.



TONY GUTIERREZ © AP/WWP



Baby explores other, more complex themes, as well). The underdog theme—a perennial favorite of U.S. producers of sports films—also extends to the Olympic hockey rink (*Miracle*, 2004) and the horse racing track (*Seabiscuit*, 2003), in which athletes (and, in *Seabiscuit*, a racehorse) achieve stunning victories in the face of overwhelming odds.

Collectively, these movies say a lot about American values,

but they strike a chord with foreign audiences, as well. That's because these films, at their core, are less about sports than they are about that part of each of us that yearns to take the field, give our all and live our dreams.



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