

SportsLetter Interviews

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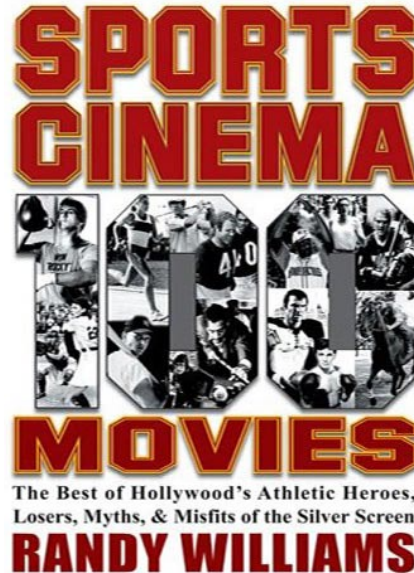
Randy Williams

Randy Williams has built a career that revolves around sports and storytelling. In television, he has worked as a field producer and researcher for Fox Sports Net, ESPN, CBS and NBC (at the 1988 Seoul and 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games). He writes regularly about sports for the Washington Post, Sports Illustrated and the Hollywood Reporter, and serves as an editorial consultant for the International Olympic Committee.

Williams' first book, entitled "Sports Cinema: The Best of Hollywood's Athletic Winners, Losers, Myths, and Misfits"

(due in November from Amadeus Press/Limelight Editions), explores the convergence of two bastions of American pop culture — sports and movies. Sport has been a significant facet of cinema history since 1894, not long after Thomas Edison produced the first motion pictures in America, when a bout between Michael Leonard and Jack Cushing was staged and filmed at Edison's Black Maria studio in New Jersey. Since then, thousands of sports films have been produced world-wide, from "Olympia" to "Pride of the Yankees" to "Fat City" to "The Longest Yard" to "Bull Durham" to "Hoop Dreams" to "Remember the Titans" to "Dogtown and Z Boys."

The stories within these films, Williams writes in the book's introduction, "reflect the human experience: from racism (The Jackie Robinson Story) to love (Million Dollar Baby) to passion (The Cup) to cynicism (North Dallas Forty) to our need for heroes (Knut Rockne, All American) to culture



clashes (Mr. Baseball) to fantasy (Field of Dreams).”

In “Sports Cinema,” Williams selected 100 of the top sports films and used them to provide a comprehensive guide to sports cinema. Williams chose these particular movies, he writes, for “their fresh perspectives, larger look at life, technical innovations, pure entertainment value, verisimilitude, originality, insightful characterizations, and historical importance.”

In each chapter, Williams dissects the film’s production process — from the casting decisions to the cinematography, and explains the film’s history. Some 22 different sports are represented, including bowling (“Kingpin”), bicycling (“Breaking Away”), surfing (“Endless Summer”), rugby (“This Sporting Life”), pool (“The Hustler”) and the bobsled (“Cool Runnings”). Olympic-themed movies also are well-represented (“Tokyo Olympiad,” “Chariots of Fire” and “Miracle,” among others). The book also includes the “Starting Five,” a sampling of the favorite sports films of celebrities (Donovan McNabb, Tony Gonzalez, Spike Lee, Sylvester Stallone, Billy Crystal, Dennis Quaid and John Turturro), as well as a list of those sports films that have won or been nominated for Academy Awards.

SportsLetter spoke with Williams via phone from his home-office in Santa Monica.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Why did you decide to write this book?

Randy Williams: I wanted to create an in-depth companion guide to sports movies because nothing like that exists. I wanted to share my knowledge on the subject so that, if people wanted to explore the genre, they could pick up the book and find out where to start. The nature of the subject demanded a competitive way to rank them.

SL: Why are sports films such a popular topic for Hollywood filmmakers?

RW: First off, there’s a huge market for sports — it’s become 24/7 entertainment — so over the years, more than 2,000 films have used

sports as a backdrop. Filmmakers like to put heroes up on the screen. There've been several American sports films that portray heroes during down times. For example, "Seabiscuit" was inspiring people during the dark days of the Depression.

But our knowledge of sports is also why they're so difficult to make. Most people that follow sports consider themselves to be experts. In the film world, that's a bit unusual. Most times, when you watch a movie, you go in and learn something. With a sports picture, the audience is often hypercritical because they enter with a keen eye and past knowledge. If you don't get the sports right, the people are going to walk out.

SL: Do you think filmmakers should try to re-capture the live sports experience?

RW: The better sports movies do achieve a high level of authenticity, but the best sports movies don't pretend to be able to capture the real action we see in the ballparks. What they do is put the motion in motion pictures: they show the art and science of athletic movement. Talented filmmakers are able to create powerful emotions with the aesthetic elements and the stories in sports. The best ones offer revealing insights, both in the minds of the actors and in the audience, and convey aspects of the human experience.

SL: What makes a great sports movie?

RW: The best sports films illuminate why sports matter so much. They do that by looking into the social and cultural issues of the times. For example, a popular theme in sports movies is redemption and the struggle of personal transformation. So, you have movies like "Somebody Up There Likes Me," with Paul Newman, or Tom Cruise in "Jerry Maguire." Another popular theme, especially for American audiences, is self-reliance. That's personified by Russell Crowe in "Cinderella Man," about Jim Braddock.

What the best sports movies do is the same thing that live sports do at their height: they inspire. They share this magic — distinct but hard to quantify — that draws you in time and again. And, you learn something

with each repeated viewing.

One of the things I learned when I sat down to write this book was realizing just how much of a collaborative effort movies are. It's the same thing that makes up a Super Bowl or Stanley Cup champion: it's talent plus teamwork.

With film, all these different elements are all very important. To use an NFL analogy, it starts with a solid game-plan — the script — and the screenwriter is like the offensive coordinator. Music can be very important because that's another way we retain movies in our imagination. For example, you can't think of "Chariots of Fire" without Vangelis' theme and the image of the guys running on the beach. The theme from "Rocky" — how important is the music there? We tend to concentrate on the stars. But what surprised me is that the difference between a good movie and a bad movie are the set designers and the cinematographers and the composers. They all have to be on the same page.

SL: Many boxing films made your 100 list. Why is boxing such a popular sport for Hollywood?

RW: It comes down to several things. One, boxing is very, very simple to understand. Basically, you've got two nearly naked guys trying to beat each other's brains out. So, you don't have to explain anything. The audience gets it right away.

Also, one of the things that get movies made is to have an actor interested in a role. Well, actors love to play boxers. I spoke to Kirk Douglas, who starred in "Champion," for an article I did for the Washington Post, and he talked about boxing being this one-on-one drama. It's exciting and dangerous — you get all the glory or all the blame. Actors love that because the spotlight and the focus are on them. Like a boxer, he's basically naked and exposed. So, what great actor wouldn't want that chance? There's been a plethora of great actors who've played boxers. It's like an all-star team: Kirk Douglas, Errol Flynn, James Cagney, Robert De Niro, Russell Crowe, Will Smith.

Plus, among the most interesting supporting roles are the characters

outside the ring. The boxers themselves are generally hard-working, straight-forward guys with a goal. But the shady guys around him and all the cranky trainers make for a pretty interesting stew.

SL: Boxing, baseball, and, in the past, horse racing were all popular subjects of sports movies. What sport has been underserved by Hollywood?

RW: Auto racing. Because of its world-wide popularity, from NASCAR to Formula One, it does not match the output that Hollywood has done, in terms of quality. For some reason, they haven't been able to capture that world definitively. There have been exceptions: "Grand Prix," in 1966, starring James Garner, which won a couple of Oscars for sound. [Director] John Frankenheimer did a fantastic job in presenting that world. You also had "Le Mans," with Steve McQueen, who was originally set to be in "Grand Prix." And, McQueen shows up in "On Any Sunday," a motorcycle documentary. But the best movies in that sport are 40-years-old.

SL: How about soccer?

RW: It's the same thing as auto racing. Overall, if you compare it to the popularity of the sport world-wide, where is the cinema product? Why haven't they been able to capture that on the screen?

There are a few soccer movies that are pretty good. "Gregory's Girl" is a nice little movie, and there's a Scottish movie called "A Shot at Glory," with Robert Duvall and Michael Keaton, that I really liked. "Victory" is one of the successful ones. That's actually based on a 1962 Hungarian movie — the title basically translates to "Two Halftimes in Hell." But I couldn't track down a copy of that one.

SL: You didn't include a tennis film in the book. Why not?

RW: I'd rank tennis with auto racing and soccer, although at this stage, auto racing and soccer are much more popular than tennis. But it's been a poor showing with tennis. The closest one is "Pat and Mike," but that combines tennis and golf and other sports.

SL: You mentioned not being able to find a copy of that foreign film. Were you able to view all of the films that you wanted to see?

RW: No, I was not. I went to many sources, including my own personal collection, the UCLA film archives, Turner Classic Movies, and Eddie Brandt's [the video store in North Hollywood]. Even when I was working in Europe, I would see films there. But there were a few that eluded me.

For the book, I would not consider a film that I didn't see. For example, writer-director Robert Rossen is considered to be one of the very best filmmakers. He made "Body and Soul," with James Garfield, "The Hustler," "All the King's Men," "Lilith." He also did a movie called "The Brave Bulls," a bullfighting movie, but I couldn't track down that film. So, I didn't write about it.

SL: You write about several documentaries in the book, including "Olympia," "Hoop Dreams" and "When We Were Kings." Why are sports films so popular as documentaries?

RW: First off, I would have liked to have written a book about sports documentaries. There are so many good ones. Amidst the big-budget theatrical releases, these documentaries resonate with audiences, even with low budgets and without hugely talented actors to market the film around.

Think about "Olympia." It will always be locked in controversy because of its association with who financed it. But, in terms of pure cinematography and filmmaking, it is one of the most influential films in the past century. [Director] Leni Riefenstahl used tracking cameras and subterranean cameras. She even had cameras attached to balloons.

Think about a film like "Hoop Dreams." The guys who made that spent years and years working on that film, shooting thousands of feet of film. That movie could only have been done as a documentary.

SL: If you were the head of a studio, what sports documentary would you green-light?

RW: There's so much subject matter to the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. You can pluck out the Black Power element, the killing of the students there, George Foreman waving the flag, Bob Beamon.

SL: You have many bio-pics on your list. What sports bio-pic would you green-light?

RW: The first one that comes to mind is Arthur Ashe. He had such an interesting life, and it was just as interesting off the court.

SL: Many sports films have been remade, or they've spun off sequels from the original movie. How do they stand the test of time?

RW: Some of these are among the worst sports movies there are. But in any genre, how many "Godfather 2s" are there? With sports, you've got "Bad News Bears Go To Japan" or "Mighty Ducks 3" or "Rocky 9" — I mean, you're asking for trouble.

There are a few exceptions. I'd start with Marty Scorsese's update of Eddie Felson's story [from "The Hustler"] in "Color of Money." In bullfighting, Rudolfo Valentino did "Blood and Sand," and Tyrone Power and Rita Hayworth did a terrific job in a later version of "Blood and Sand." "Heaven Can Wait" is a classic, and that came from "Here Comes Mr. Jordan," which also won several Academy Awards.

SL: You wrote about several "smaller" films, like "Junior Bonner" and "Phar Lap." How important was it for you to include those movies?

RW: That was one of the great joys of doing the book, finding those hidden gems. I mean, "Junior Bonner" has Steve McQueen, and it was directed by Sam Peckinpah. Who would have thought Sam Peckinpah would be in a sports movie book? And, "Phar Lap" is a terrific movie — a small film that's well-executed. It also happens to be a true story.

SL: You don't include either of the two highest grossing sports films of all-time — "The Waterboy" or the remake of "The Longest Yard." Why not?

RW: With "The Longest Yard," well, how do you beat the original? That

didn't happen. Very few remakes or sequels are superior to the original. With "The Waterboy," it had funny elements, and Kathy Bates is hilarious as Adam Sandler's mother. It just didn't have enough to crack the top 100.

SL: In the book, you mentioned several made-for-TV movies, including "Soul of the Game" and "Brian's Song." Why did you decide to include them?

RW: They were just as good as the theatrical films, but what made them more impressive to me was that they were done on a much smaller budget. Ultimately, what has to resonate is the story. But, really, who could consider writing a book about sports movies without "Brian's Song"? That would be blasphemy.

SL: In the "starting five" section, you ask celebrities to list their five favorite sports films. What's your starting five?

RW: I'll go with "Requiem for a Heavyweight," the 1962 version with Anthony Quinn. "Jim Thorpe — All-American," with Burt Lancaster, which was the film that started it all for me as a kid. Then, "Chariots of Fire," "Bull Durham," and "Heaven Can Wait." If you ask me the same question tomorrow, I might have a different answer.

SL: If you had one sports film to watch on a weekend, what would you choose?

RW: [Long pause]. "Chariots of Fire."

SL: The book lists 100 movies. What films would you include if you had a little more space.

RW: There's a couple. There's a bio-pic about Shirley Muldowney called "Heart like a Wheel," with Bonnie Bedelia and Beau Bridges. It's a very good small movie. I also like "Shot at Glory," that [Robert] Duvall soccer film.

SL: What's the future for sports movies?

RW: Sports is playing a bigger part of our leisure time and entertainment. And, you've got a big company like Disney owning ESPN. That said, things are cyclical in Hollywood. During the mid-1960s, sports films weren't that popular. Now, sports films are popular. You've got "Friday Night Lights" being made into a movie, and now it's a primetime television show. But things are cyclical, and that includes sports films.