

Durham Bulls and Tin Cups - How Ron Shelton Reinvented the Sports Movie

PANNING WITH ALMOST SADISTIC stealth, away from the centre of the ring, the heart and heat of the action, the camera alights on the perimeter, on the top rope. On a patch of fresh blood. Coal-black blood. Slowly, hypnotically, the treacly trickle becomes an ooze, splashing onto the next rung in a series of chilling plops. The director defies you to look away. You don't. You won't. You can't.

Martin Scorsese knew what he was doing when he shot *Raging Bull* in sternest, grimmest monochrome. What could be more black-and-white than boxing? Somebody wins, somebody loses, everybody hurts. Body and mind in perpetual search of fusion. And no editor or producer to correct flaws or eliminate longeurs. The ultimate competitive art. The last word in nudity as entertainment. Unless, of course, the fix is in.

Much the same can be said of those pastimes more worthy of being described as a "game" (not even Rocky Marciano ever claimed to have [itals] played [end itals] boxing?). Hence Hollywood's passion for sport in general. Hence the 700-odd titles listed in the index to Ronald Bergan's *Sport In The Movies* - and that was published nearly three decades ago. From King Vidor to Chaplin to Scorsese, directors have sought to capture sport on screen, but comparatively few celluloid incarnations have strayed beyond the clichéd and the formulaic. For every John Goodman (Babe Ruth) or James Earl Jones (Jack Johnson) there have been dozens of mono-dimensional Gary Coopers (Lou Gehrig) and Glenn Fords (Ben Hogan); for every *Raging Bull* a rash of *Rockys*. The overriding reason for this low success ratio, of course, is that sporting fact tends to be far richer than fiction. Art, almost invariably, imitates life, often to the letter, yet sport's athleticism and endless hazards are seldom possible to replicate with conviction.

Without offering any analysis of the possible reasons, Bergan noted, with justified dismay, the paucity of original screenplays. Most, as he reasons, have been "adapted from novels, short stories, plays and even poems". This is a trail blazed and followed, as Bergan emphasised, "mainly by American writers". It was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a lavish claim. The Stateside list could scarcely glitter more: Mark Twain, Damon Runyon, Clifford Odets, James Thurber; Mailer, Roth and Hemingway. From the British corner, in terms of turning fictional water into cinematic wine, only two,

Alan Sillitoe and David Storey, stand out, the former for *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, the latter for *This Sporting Life*. This may well be simply because Americans romanticise sport far more than Britons, are less sheepish and bashful about deploying it as fable and parable, not to mention employing it as a fertile arena for dissections of masculinity. That the master of both the original screenplay, and the modern sports movie, should be American, therefore, should come as no surprise. What is arresting and singular about his work is that it does not tout success as the only goal worth chronicling.

At 63, Ron Shelton, an ex-minor league baseball player turned film director and screenwriter, can look back with pride on a quintet of sports movies united both in their celebration of outsiders and underdogs and in their utter disdain for tradition. Nor, one hopes and strongly suspects, has he finished doing so, though it is now a decade since his most recent sporting release, *Play It To The Bone*.

Bringing his own first-hand understanding of sport to bear - besides having been the proverbial "phone call away" from baseball's major leagues, he also won a college basketball scholarship - this thoughtful Californian invites you to taste the pain, touch the tension, smell the sweat. Focusing on the foothills and the margins, the players rather than the plays, the gamers instead of the games, he takes sport seriously enough not to patronise its followers and practitioners, and addresses it with a perspective that allows him to locate the humour and contradictions with pinpoint accuracy. He has an ear for passion and dressing-room banter, an eye for masculinity in crisis. He even gives women elbow room, and something other than fluff to spout. *Bull Durham*, his widely-admired and much-loved debut, is narrated by a female character, not exactly a common device in any film, much less a sporting one.

In fact, when invited to select my Top 10 Sports Movies by *The Guardian* in 2000, *Bull Durham* was my first choice. A witty, wartsy and warm homage to baseball as well as an exploration of the sporting psyche, *Bull Durham* made Shelton's name, securing him an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay in addition to numerous other awards. *Tin Cup* and *White Men Can't Jump*, in particular, have also done much to revitalise and redefine a stale and creaking genre.

Consider the array of oddballs: Wesley Stipes and Woody Harrelson as basketball hustlers in *White Men Can't Jump*; Tommy Lee Jones as baseball's very own sultan-cum-Satan in *Cobb*, "the man you hate to love". Susan Sarandon as Annie the Schoolteacher-Groupie in *Bull Durham*, quoting Walt Whitman and batting averages while tying her bemused young pitcher of a lover to the bedposts and persuading him to wear her suspenders on the mound. Crash Davis (*Bull Durham*) and Roy McAvoy (*Tin Cup*), mavericks of diamond and tee, remain the most resonant roles of Kevin Costner's career. The sorely underrated *Play It To The Bone* centres on Shelton's first love, boxing, tracing the tale of two feckless pugs, bosom pals whose last shot at the big time is a fight on the undercard of a championship bill - against each other.

Nobody in cinema has done more to invest sportsmen with dignity and communicate their humanity. Before Shelton, sports movies dwelled on aspiration and redemption, prodigies and tragedians. Shelton chose character over caricature and turned the spotlight downstairs. He celebrated the grime beneath the glitter; hailed the small victories and made light of defeat; offered us the serial incompetencies and omnipresent fears - of injury, of waning powers, of superior colleagues and rivals - that benight all sportsfolk.

Bar Ty Cobb - who for all his record-breaking baseball feats was considerably more villain - Shelton's heroes are wannabes and also-rans, never-weres and nearly-men. Beyond proficient hand-eye coordination, they are rebels without much of a clue. Why? "The fringe players in life are frequently more interesting than the winners," he told me. "Those trying to reach the spotlight are more interesting. It's a traditional element of American literature. I might write a piece about it one day. Celebrity does something to people. We haven't addressed the sickness. If, as the old saying goes, success brings out the real person, we're a sorry lot."

SHELTON HAS BROUGHT AN AUTHENTIC and perhaps unique perspective to bear on his subject. "I was an athlete," he recalled. "I won a college basketball scholarship. I got up at 2.30 every day, and only because it was baseball or basketball practice then. The only reason I majored in English Lit was because it was the only course that fitted that schedule. And I make movies from the athletes' point of view, not the fans'. You see things differently from the dugout."

Those experiences undoubtedly fuel his work. "As they say in *Bull Durham*, I was a phone call away [from the major leagues]. I was in Triple A for a year and a half, in the minors for five years. Played with a lot of very tough men, every one of whom became a success in some field. Natural leaders such as Don Baylor, Johnny Oates and Ray Miller, all of whom went on to become major league managers. One year we won the minor league world series and were cited as one of the ten greatest minor league teams ever."

The appeal of baseball, the subject of three of Shelton's films, had not waned in the least. "It's the only game without a time limit," he reasoned. "Therefore, in a kind of blind, American, optimistic way, you always have a chance to win. There's something fabulously, stupidly American about it. I enjoyed playing it. It's the slowest and fastest game all at once – and you play it every day."

Wives and girlfriends tend to sit in the wings in sports movies, as they generally do in sports, yet Shelton's female characters – most notably Susan Sarandon's Walt Whitman-quoting schoolteacher-groupie in *Bull Durham* – are as intriguing as the men: strong but nervy, fretting earth mothers and uncertain high-fliers. Did his own mother play a significant part in his own career? "I had a strong and wondrous mother, fiercely independent, generous, opinionated and well read. She died very young. Perhaps her spirit is kept alive in my movies."

In *Bull Durham*, Costner's wise but ageing catcher, Crash Davis, sits Tim Robbins's gifted but erratic and headstrong young pitcher down at the back of the team bus and tells him it's time to learn his "clichés". Was that scene plucked from Shelton's own time with the Baltimore Orioles, reflecting his own sense of being a man apart? "Not in those terms," he said, "but I came to that recognition in my second or third year. The radio interviewers began calling and I wanted to give real answers, get involved in an exchange, about Indo-China, or politics. But their faces fell as soon as I started. All they wanted to know was, 'do you hunt and fish?' I got the message."

What was Davis's fatal flaw? Shelton puts it down to the curse of so many sportspeople: bad luck. "Crash could have made it," he averred. "He was not quite in the right place at the right time. It could have been a tragedy. I remember [the great New York Yankees hitter] Mickey Mantle being asked about his favourite sports movie, and, remarkably, he said *Bull Durham*. Asked why, he replied, 'It's just so sad. That man got 250 home runs, he was a

switch-hitter, great catcher, and still never really made it.'" Whether he simply wasn't quite good enough, curiously, was not addressed: that in itself would have been a statement about the mountainous climb required to scale the heights of modern professional sport, a fact often lost on the audience.

In *Tin Cup*, Shelton points out, "Roy McEvoy is the Tim Robbins character at 40, still a man with a million-dollar gift in a 10-cent head. He was afraid of success." Did Shelton draw on golfing history for the scene where McEvoy declines to lay-up at the US Open and keeps attempting to drive the water only to land in it every time? Was it, as many have suggested, Ray Ainsley, who became a national hero in 1938 when he took a record 19 at the par-four 16th in the US Open? "I only heard about that afterwards," came the only slightly defensive reply. "I'd been trying for years to figure out how to do golf. It's a sport you either love or hate. The question I had to answer with Roy was, how do you make his life transcend golf? Then one year I was watching the Masters on TV, and Chip Beck, who was a shot behind Bernhard Langer, could have taken a risky shot over water to catch him. He laid up, played safe, and lost. I immediately got on the phone to a buddy and told him, 'It's about a bloke who can't lay up.' Americans now chant 'Tin Cup' during events whenever somebody plays safe. I'm rather proud of that."

Tin Cup has always struck me as the most autobiographical of Shelton's movies. Did Shelton concede that there might be a link between himself and McEvoy? "I certainly don't do what the studios ask. I do what I want. Which is why [*Play It To The Bone*] was done independently, low-budget, although it was released through Disney. But at times you have to play the seven-iron."

Boxing remains Shelton's best-loved competitive art and the subject of his favourite sports movie. "One of John Huston's late, neglected films, *Fat City*," he recalled, "starring a young Jeff Bridges. Nobody saw it." A familiar tale. When we spoke, he had recently been spending time at Oscar de la Hoya's training camp and rubbing shoulders with Mike Tyson. "I got to know [Tyson] quite well. He was completely and utterly victimised and abused as a kid and so naturally became a victimiser and abuser as an adult. I think 98% of him is sweetness and compassion - he's quite bright, too - but the other 2% is this rage. In 100 years, some new Shakespeare will write his story as a tragedy, but we need to get some distance.

It's too fresh now." James Toback's 2009 documentary sought to fill the void by interviewing Tyson, but the subject's involvement necessitated compromise, making a rounded portrait impossible. Shelton may well be the man to make amends.

As may readily be gauged from the uncommonly fine performances he has drawn in relatively small-budget movies, from leading Hollywood types such as Costner, Woody Harrelson, Wesley Snipes and Tommy Lee Jones, Shelton is widely respected as an actor's director - "Whatever," as he put it with typically modest scepticism, "that means." He certainly found the devil in Costner, who appears to have saved his most convincing performances for Shelton. Why did he think this was? "Actors are confident with me. I take an almost parental role. I always let them try things but occasionally have to remind them where the boundaries are. I'm not cowed by celebrity. Antonio Banderas thinks *Play It To The Bone* is his best film outside the ones he's done with Almodovar. And Costner is comfortable enough with me to explore his full range. You should judge actors by their best work, not their worst. You wouldn't judge a sportsman by his failures, would you?"

Given this open-house approach, had Costner, say, ever contributed his own lines? The reply was instructive. "I do a lot of rehearsal," said Shelton, "and when I encourage actors to try things nine out of ten things don't work, but there have been some I've worked into the text. When Crash Davis tries to provoke Nuke Laloush into pitching more accurately in *Bull Durham*, he says 'You couldn't hit water if you fell out of a boat.' That was Kevin's line. I already had one but I threw it out."

One of the major problems in making sports movies has been the authenticity of onfield scenes. Did Shelton believe that technology can simplify the process? "I don't know whether you need to. The best movie car chase in years was in *Rodin*, and that was because John Frankenheimer insisted on using real cars and stunt drivers, not computers. I always choreograph the onfield action - every punch, every shot - to make it *feel* spontaneous."

Regrettably, Shelton acknowledges that sportspeople have no option but to accept their function as role models - hence, presumably, the attraction of his current project, *Game of Shadows*, based on a book about another flawed hero, the controversial black baseball record-breaker Barry Bonds. "I wish [sports heroes] didn't have to [feel that], but you can't go back now, sadly.

They didn't used to have that responsibility to the same extent, but society and the media have imposed it. My baseball hero as a child was Eddie Matthews, who was from my hometown of Santa Barbara, but he kept on getting arrested for drink driving. My dad used to say, 'Y'know Eddie has a drinking problem.' But that meant I had to learn those other qualities from other people, which I see as a valuable rite of passage. By the time people become professionals they are like idiot savants. They can only do one thing. And when they can't do that they're sunk."

Which brings us to Ty Cobb, the troubled anti-role-model who until Babe Ruth began hitting home runs for fun in the 1920s had been baseball's greatest and most celebrated player. Malevolent on the field, Cobb was also a violent and unabashed racist. He once beat up a disabled spectator who had been jeering him, and carried a gun everywhere he went. Towards the end of his life he admitted to one main regret: "I wish I'd made more friends." Shelton's searching biopic, his only dip to date into those treacherous waters, is low on laughs but high on questing, open-minded intelligence.

"It did very little business but Tommy Lee Jones said it was the best movie he'd ever done," said Shelton, acutely aware of the difference between artistic merit and box-office bounty. Did he feel any differently towards Cobb himself after making the film? "I had a curious admiration for him on some ways, and abhorred him in others. He was the most wilful, toughest athlete you could ever dream of. One of those people you could neither embrace nor get a handle on. By the end I understood his demons. We went back to his home town of Royston to shoot some scenes. There were people there who knew the man who was sleeping with Cobb's mother, who shot his father one night when reportedly mistaking him for an intruder. But the lover was a banker, and even now the whole thing is a guarded secret."

It was at the end of the interview that Shelton admitted that *Play It To The Bone* might well be his last sports movie for some time, and so it has proved. He wanted to tackle horse-racing but funding was proving elusive. He had a yen to diversify into "music, politics", though *Dark Blue* – set in Los Angeles in the year of the race riots that followed the murder of Rodney King - has been the only obvious fruit of this desire to reach the big screen. His admirers can only trust that *Game of Shadows* presages a return to the director's most fertile territory. In an age of black-and-white reasoning, we need somebody to paint the greys and beiges that make sport so compelling.