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The Heart of the Game

To set you up right for NBA Playoffs, we've gathered thoughts on what makes a great basketball movie.



by Emily Soares

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Full-court press and seconds remaining. Few things lend themselves to the rigors of a high-intensity plotline like the built-in drama of a movie about a sport. Hollywood has had a long association with sports since Harold Lloyd made the winning touchdown in *The Freshman* (1925). Since then baseball, boxing, golf, tennis, bobsledding and even bowling have joined football as great American pastimes used as backdrops for great drama. With NBA Playoffs heating up, it is time for us to turn our eyes toward the court and consider a few of the best films that the sport of basketball has netted.

Perhaps more than any other sport, save boxing, basketball is a sport of the streets. It's the sport of big cities, where parks are at a premium, or any place where there might not be much else for kids to do. You don't need any equipment except a ball. You don't need grass or even many friends. And for those who've got the gift, it can be the way out of a small town or a bad neighborhood and into a brighter future. Case in point is *He Got Game* (1998), a film less about the intricacies of the sport than about its urban trappings and the role the game can play in father/son relations. Denzel Washington is Jake Shuttlesworth, who is (rather unconventionally) sprung from jail so he can convince his superstar son, Jesus, to join the university team the governor has a penchant for, thus shortening his sentence. The problem is that Jake is doing time for the accidental killing of his wife and Jesus' mother, so his son is less than receptive to anything he has to say. What we learn though, is the way that basketball is the connecting point between everything that has happened to the family. It's what made Jake drive his son so hard as a child (a la *The Great Santini*), what led to the argument that kills the mother, what will allow Jesus to go on to fame and fortune and what may or may not shorten Jake's jail time.

Whether or not a person has "game" for the sport, often speaks to what moxy he or she has for the bigger picture. The best sports stories are about underdogs of all kinds. In *Hoosiers* (1986) based on the true story of a small-town Indiana team that goes all the way to state victory, Gene Hackman is a man grasping at his last chance for something like success. He arrives in Hickory, Indiana, after 12 years



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away from coaching. The denizens of Hickory are not at all happy to see him. Not a single one. Why is this town so cantankerous? Well we guess it's because their high school basketball team is desperately important to them and they just assume this outsider is going to blow it. And at first he seems to. But Coach, like all of his players, learns well and pulls it together, empowering the team and one player's alcoholic father (Dennis Hopper) in the process. *Hoosiers* is the perfect example of what makes a movie about a sport so compelling. It's not the game; it's the characters. It's what they struggle with off the court that makes their achievement in the game worthwhile. And when a team wins or loses it's never in a vacuum. In movie games, we learn that especially well, because we meet all the lives that are connected to the team.

Keeping the spontaneity of a game feeling real when moviemaking requires rehearsals, multiple takes and breaks for makeup and light-tweaking is not easy. We know how the game will turn out, because usually it has to be a victory for our heroes. The trick is to make the audience feel like anything could happen and is happening for the very first time.

Believability is also challenged by the fact that most actors are not great athletes. In *He Got Game*, leads Washington and real-life player Ray Allen prove an exception. In *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), Woody Harrelson can also really play ball, and the cornucopia of insults served up by him and Wesley Snipes is largely improvised. The two reportedly spent hours devising new and more elaborate barbs for the cameras. And this game, as it's played on the courts of America's concrete jungles, is at least half about the bravado and the repartee of its players. Director and former athlete Ron Shelton, whose first film as a director was the baseball comedy *Bull Durham* (1988), is well versed in the way the appearance of boys at play can cloud the reality of men at deadly serious work. And in *White Men Can't Jump*, the game sets the stage for two unlikely men to become partners in hustling and then friends for the long haul.

Great drama is about great heart, and it's hard to find more adrenalin-pumping power per frame than a movie that combines interesting characters playing the game of life...while they happen to be playing the game of basketball.