



YOU GOT GAME, mate? Hollywood stars looking for lead roles used only to have to worry about playing a character. Now, with more sport-themed movies being made than ever before, the stars are suddenly being asked to play ball as well. Or punch hard. Or swing true. Between learning lines, they're running, lifting, swimming, sparring and sweating – in short, giving 110 per cent, just like an AFL rookie at his first pre-season camp.

The stars are scared of getting found out as fakes. If their golf swings are more like Matt Damon's in *The Legend Of Bagger Vance* than Adam Scott's then, nowadays, they've got as much chance of being cast in a future golf movie as John Daly has of landing the romantic lead in the next Nicole Kidman

blockbuster. Anyone wanting to be the next Rocky better pack a right cross as good as Russell Crowe's in *Cinderella Man* or his celluloid career will be on the canvas before he (or she – we've all seen *Million Dollar Baby*, right?) can count to ten.

Cinemagoers will soon be able to boo or cheer the athletic skills of actors in movies such as *Leatherheads*, a George Clooney film about a 1920s American football team, and *Blades of Glory*, a figure-skating flick starring Will Ferrell, who tries his best not to look like a klutz as he performs his triple lutz. Ferrell's also set to dribble and score in the basketball film *Semi-Pro*.

This modern mix of sport and cinema is nothing new. Sport has been a star in Hollywood ever since Thomas Edison filmed a boxing exhibition with his new invention

in the 1890s. But these days too much is at stake to take a chance on a lead actor who plays ice hockey like a Mighty Duck or is as unconvincing behind the wheel of a racing car as Al Pacino was in the 1977 movie *Bobby Deerfield*. Unrealistic sporting action now sends cinema patrons scrambling for the exits.

John Lee Hancock, director of the much-admired baseball drama *The Rookie*, starring Dennis Quaid, can attest to the special challenges of the cinematic sporting genre.

"One thing I didn't realise was how tough sports movies are to shoot," he says. "They're very hard. Whenever you're doing sports action stuff, it's kind of like doing tile mosaics – a tiny little piece doesn't seem to mean much until you take a few steps

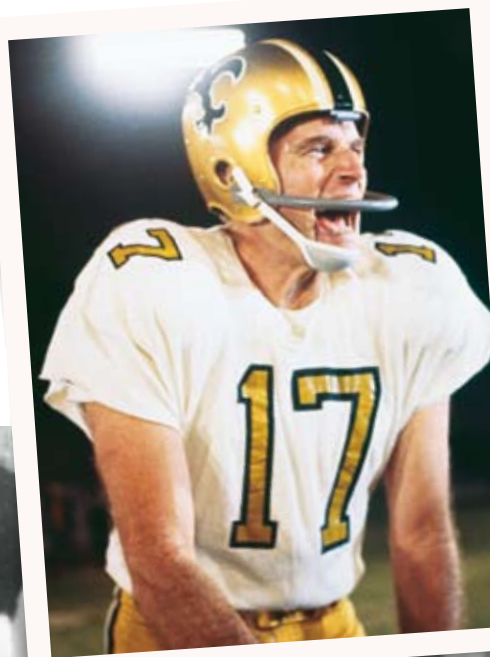
back and look at the whole thing."

Hancock recalls that one sequence involving a double play (two fielders assisting in getting two base runners out on the same play) took nearly ten attempts before he was happy with it. Why? Because what looks good to a coach doesn't always look so good to a camera, so directors need experts who can help them find the right angles and best plays to highlight the beauty of the sport under the spotlight.

Even the golden idols of cinema have been caught out by sport. Steve Sabol, president of

Real to Reel

IN HOLLYWOOD, IF AN ACTOR WANTS TO LAND A PART IN THE NEXT SPORTING BLOCKBUSTER, THEY REALLY HAVE TO LIFT THEIR GAME.



PHOTOS BY AUSTRAL PRESS INTERNATIONAL

GOOD SPORTS

THE BEST AND WORST ATHLETIC PERFORMANCES EVER SEEN ON THE SILVER SCREEN:



Gold Medalists



★ Kevin Costner: *Bull Durham*



★ Billy Crudup: *Without Limits*



★ DB Sweeney: *Eight Men Out*



★ Burt Reynolds: *The Longest Yard*

★ Errol Flynn: *Gentleman Jim* (BOTTOM LEFT)

Goofballs

★ William Bendix: *The Babe Ruth Story*



★ Jackie Mason: *Caddyshack II*



★ Ralph Macchio: *The Karate Kid*



★ Chelcie Ross: *Major League*

★ Anthony Michael Hall: *Johnny Be Good*

Reckon you've seen worse? Submit your nomination for the world's worst sports acting performance at www.insidesport.com.au

NFL Films, recalls a time in the late '60s when he was brought in to help Charlton Heston play a quarterback in a football film called *Number One* (LEFT). Heston had won an Academy Award for his acting in *Ben-Hur* in '59. The only problem was that in the role of a quarterback he threw a ball more like John Howard than John Elway.

"They couldn't get Charlton Heston to throw the ball right," he recalls. "This crew member said to me, 'Goddammit, they can teach a guy to ride a chariot as Ben-Hur; he can paint the Sistine Chapel as Michelangelo; he's Moses who parted the Red Sea ... and the son-of-a-bitch can't throw a spiral.'"

Gone are the days when body-doubles or faked scenes could pass unnoticed.

"How can you believe the tears in the locker-room are real if you can't believe the catch in the end zone," says Mark Ellis, a former collegiate wide receiver who helped train Cuba Gooding Jr to an Oscar-winning performance as an NFL receiver in the football drama *Jerry Maguire*.

Ellis has a full-time job coaching actors for their sporting roles. Currently, he's working with Ferrell on his basketball moves for *Semi-Pro*. Ellis says "real" sport makes for quality reel action: "Whether it's the

dialogue, body language, cadence, rhythm, or physicality, if the actor doesn't sell it, the audience isn't going to buy it."

This may be why casting agents have started looking for real athletes to play the roles of sporting stars. That's how NBA star Ray Allen ended up starring beside Denzel Washington

in Spike Lee's *He Got Game*. In *Rocky Balboa*, Sylvester Stallone cast light heavyweight world champion Antonio Tarver as Mason "The Line" Dixon opposite himself – surely the first time an athlete has not only out-punched but also out-acted a Hollywood star.

The huge popularity of sport is one major reason why sports movies are so hard to make. (And, ironically, it's why studios are so keen to make them.) Sport is now a multi-

billion dollar industry, with blanket broadcasting coverage, websites, blogs, print media, magazines and video games turning fans into around-the-clock experts.

"The public's knowledge of sport is one reason why sports movies are so difficult to make," says Gordon Gray, co-producer of *Miracle* and *The Rookie*. "Most people who follow sport 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 prior knowledge. If you don't get the sports right, people are going to walk out."

What the best sports movies do is the same thing that live sport does at its best: inspire. They share a magic – distinct but hard to quantify – that draws the fan in time and time again. Plus, with the best sports movies, you learn something with each repeat viewing. The smartest film-makers know the most important race in any sports movie is the human race. They capture the emotion of sport. They put character above winning.

Even when achieving a high level of authenticity, the best sports movies don't pretend to completely capture the real action we see on the field. But they do take you where you usually can't go as a spectator, like inside the huddle, on the bench or in the locker-room.

Just like in sport, film-making is a team effort, and while art directors, costume designers, writers and editors can make a difference, the believability of the sports scene in a movie usually comes down to the actors. Whether it's Geena

Davis as a baseball star in *A League of Their Own*, Kevin Costner behind the plate in *Bull Durham* or the racing scenes in *Seabiscuit*, how a viewer relates to the visual presentation of the sport has a big impact on their enjoyment of the movie.

So if you're keeping score of which actors connect and which strike out, you'll have plenty to critique as sport continues to be an appealing topic for film-makers. Happily for fans, Hollywood's hunger for sport doesn't look like being sated any time soon.

– Randy Williams

* Randy Williams is the LA-based author of *Sports Cinema: 100 Movies, The Best Of Hollywood's Athletic Heroes, Losers, Myths And Misfits*, available from bookshops and www.amazon.com

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Will Ferrell in *Blades of Glory*: A klutz or a lutz? You decide.

