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# Don't believe in miracles: the British sports film in the era of sporting rationalization

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## Introduction: nation, nostalgia and modern sport

This article will consider the uses and significance of the past in the recent British sports film. Combining film analysis with a wider historical and contextual approach, I consider the significance of the past to the culture and understanding of British sport, and its contributions to film as a narrative form. Specifically, I look at the particular relationships to the past constructed within individual films, and ask how we might view these within more contemporary contexts of British sport: contexts, as this article's title suggests, informed by types of economic, technological, and also political rationalizations.

Looking across a range of recent British films, their imagined view of sport appears a mostly nostalgic one. These films tend to engage with a past that is sufficiently distant yet close enough to be remembered by older viewers, but also, potentially, 'remembered' by younger ones through the prosthetic forms of film and television footage. Recent years have seen, for example, both fiction and documentary films on the career of football manager Brian Clough in the 1960s and 1970s (*The Damned United* [2009] and *I Believe in Miracles* [2015]). An earlier era of Formula One Motor racing (henceforth F1) has also enjoyed the narrative and documentary treatment, respectively, in *Rush* (2013), about James Hunt and Niki Lauda's battle for the 1976 world championship, and Asif Kapadia's film about the great Brazilian driver Ayrton Senna (*Senna* [2010]). The first feature-length film produced for BBC's iPlayer online service in 2016, meanwhile, was *The Rack Pack*, which dramatized the turbulent career of the Northern Irish snooker player Alex Higgins, and his rivalry with the sport's emerging star, Steve Davis, in the early 1980s. One film celebrating British Olympic 'achievement' during this period, released in 2016s Rio Olympic year, was *Eddie the Eagle*, about the English ski-jumper who competed, and finished a distant last, in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary. Most recently, and in a similar vein, Mark Rylance starred in *The Phantom of the Open* (2021), about the amateur golfer Maurice Flitcroft's entry in the 1976 British Open, at which he shot the highest score ever recorded in the competition. With the exception of *Fast Girls* (2011), there has in fact been little engagement with contemporary sporting stories in recent British film production, the cultural interest around the 2012 London Olympics notwithstanding (see Jones 2008).

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This article considers what motivates these films' narrative and aesthetic choices, with regard to their focus both on the past, and on specific individuals. As I note, there are broader aesthetic considerations concerning popular film, as well as cultural and institutional factors around British cinema in particular, that determine form and content in these films. As part of a broader discourse around British sport in the twenty-first century; however, these films also suggest a tension between the recent contexts of successful British sporting achievement, and a prevailing view – both cinematic, but, in turn, broadly cultural – of what sport in a British national context, and being a British sportsperson, 'actually means'.

While it is difficult to pin down precisely what we mean by the 'British sports film' either as a type or mode of national film production, there are significant pointers as to its character and origins. In some criticism, the British sports film is defined in distinction to more dominant forms of the genre – the Hollywood sports movie, in other words. Seán Crosson, for example, identifies more politically-nuanced aspects in the British form to its counterpart across the Atlantic. In so-called 'New Wave' films of the early 1960s, such as *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1961) or *This Sporting Life* (1963), sport was used as a narrative context for exploring issues of class division, identity and struggle (Crosson 2013, 136–138). These films rejected what Crosson calls the 'rags to riches' narrative favoured by many American sporting stories, which promoted a view of the American Dream (2013, 56; see also Whannel 2008).

More recent British films, however, made more accurately in a transatlantic context, have embraced Hollywood narrative trajectories and endings, while still seeking to differentiate themselves as 'British'. *Wimbledon* (2004), for example, as well as the boxing story *The Calcium Kid* (2004), were both produced by the British company Working Title, whose parent company is Universal Pictures. Both films operate through a form of culture-clash narrative, 'between a genteel, under-achieving or unassertive Britain' and 'a more demonstrative US culture' (Hochscherf and Leggott 2010, 12). This same trope typifies a number of Working Title comedies made during this same period, which often place their self-effacing and eccentric British characters alongside or against more confident or bullish American figures (*Bean* [1997], *Notting Hill* [1999] and *Love Actually* [2003]). This opposition is literalized in the form of the sporting context, with the narratives of both *Wimbledon* and *The Calcium Kid* pitching English journeymen against brash American champions. Both *Wimbledon* and *The Calcium Kid*, in turn, highlight the idea of the Brit as underdog, or, in Hochscherf and Leggott's terms, a 'fish out of water' (ibid.). But, unlike the earlier New Wave strain of British sports film, both these films allow their protagonists forms of improbable happy ending, with the English player in *Wimbledon*, for example, beating the American number one, and lifting the trophy.

Both films, then, despite their appeal to a certain kind of British difference, still adhere to the character-centred tropes of classical Hollywood film, focusing on psychologically-defined individuals, with specific goals and conflicts in need of resolution, usually a positive one (Babington 2014, 11–16; Crosson 2013, 15; see also Bordwell 1985, 157). Both *Wimbledon* and *The Calcium Kid* are fictions; yet as highlighted in the earlier outline of films, the sports movie most often elides with the generic frameworks of the biographical film ('biopic'), which uses an individual life and career, or a specific period within it, as the framework for its narrative (to the list above, we can add *The Flying Scotsman* [2006], about the Scottish cyclist Graeme Obree, and *The Program* [2015], about the disgraced American

cyclist Lance Armstrong). Even if there are differences between them, then, the distinctions between the British cinematic model of plucky under-achievers and the Hollywood mode are not necessarily so wide, since both emphasize the importance of individual effort and achievement in order to overcome narrative obstacles. As I will subsequently explore, this ‘ideology of agency’, as Aaron Baker describes it, runs through most fictional sports films as the defining value underpinning their stories (Baker 2003, 13, quoted in Crosson 2013, 22).

The past, similarly, is hardly a trope unique to the British sports film, but has played a key role in the Hollywood sports film at various points in its history. One might highlight the flurry of baseball-related films around the turn of the 1990s, either set or looking back to the earlier twentieth century (*Eight Men Out* [1988], *Field of Dreams* [1989], *A League of Their Own* [1992], *The Babe* [1992], *Cobb* [1994]); or equally, the sequence of films made by the Walt Disney Company in the 2000s, based on true-life sports stories from the three prior decades: *The Rookie* (2002), *Miracle* (2004) and *Invincible* (2006) (see Crosson 2013, 163–171). The importance of nostalgia to the wider consumption of sport, similarly, has not been lost on scholars, whether in terms of sports tourism as an emerging practice (see for example Ramshaw and Gammon 2005; Fairley and Gammon 2005), or of recent ideas around sports stadium architecture (Giulianotti 2016, 148). The past has also played a significant role across broader contexts of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century British cinema, beyond the sports film; to the extent that literary adaptations of classic novels, and historical dramas, have formed arguably *the* defining output of the national cinema during this time (Higson 2011; Vidal 2014).

The key question for this article is to what extent the uses of the past, as allied to its individual-oriented narratives, have a specific significance in the British sports-film context. As Andrew Higson suggests, from an overview of such British films, we might understand the nostalgic impulses and pleasures at work in them in ‘temporal’ terms, in the form of a ‘longing for the past, a time that once was’ (Higson 2014, 123). Higson refers back to his own formative work on what he calls the ‘heritage film’; a category of cinema marked by a pictorial, often idealized view of the past, tying in with contemporary theorizations of the ‘heritage industry’ in the 1980s (Hewison 1987, Wright 2009). Heritage culture, as theorized – a fascination with the manners, architecture and artifacts of the past, often commodified and preserved by touristic institutions like Britain’s National Trust – could be understood as the imaginary response to an historical context of decline, and of the once-imperial nation’s increasing lack of significance on the global stage (Higson 2014, 122).

For analysts of sports heritage practices, similarly, the evocation of the past can provide a sense of ‘order and identity’ (Ramshaw and Gammon 2005, 232). For Crosson, likewise, the impulse of a film like *Miracle*, about the US Olympic ice-hockey team’s 1980 victory over the Soviet Union, was that it could offer a narrative ‘of national sporting unity and achievement’ in response to recent crises – most notably, in this instance, the national trauma of the 9/11 attacks on US soil (Crosson 2013, 166). Even though this is not an inevitable way to understand the film, Crosson’s reading suggests that nostalgia in the sports film is not some vaguely universal appeal, but has its own specificity and inflections with respect to particular national contexts and audiences.

Importantly, a nostalgic investment in the past need not necessarily be seen in terms of a response to crises of security, or a conservative retrenchment against decline; it can also be ‘a product of and a response to the experience of modernity, [of] rapid change, mobility

and displacement' (Higson 2014, 123; see also Boym 2001). Nostalgia, in terms of a relationship to the past, also has different modes. As Simon Reynolds argues with regard to contemporary 'retro' culture (within which we can arguably include many of these films), modern nostalgia is 'reflective': a nostalgia that 'takes pleasure in the misty remoteness of the past and cultivates the bittersweet pangs of poignancy,' (2011, xxviii), while also allowing for the idea that we do not wish to return to this same era. Such uses of nostalgia, as Reynolds adds, are also bound up with the 'consumer-entertainment complex' that provides such opportunities for revisiting the past, to the extent that nostalgia is in effect born of 'the intersection between mass media and personal memory' (2011, xxix-xxx).

In the process, then, of looking at these sports films, the expectations of British cinema within the wider terms of this 'consumer-entertainment complex' cannot be overlooked. Yet, even once we acknowledge that nostalgia is to some extent a broader product of recent popular culture, what is it that informs the 'poignancy' of such representations in the sporting context? It cannot just be 'the past' in itself that accounts for this possibility, but specific qualities of the past in relationship to the present. To follow Higson, nostalgia need not be a response to decline as such, but an ambivalent response to the *character of the present*. This becomes especially pertinent when, in the case of British sport, the present is not in a state of 'decline' at all – at least in terms of global prominence.

Indeed, an irony underpinning recent British sports films is that they are produced in the real-world backdrop not of under-achievement, but of unprecedented success in world sports, in high-profile contexts such as the Olympic Games, road- and track cycling, F1, and beyond. In 2004, when *Wimbledon* was released, a British winner on tennis's most hallowed lawn could be construed as an endearing fairy-tale, yet by 2016 Britain had its own double-Wimbledon, double-Olympic champion (Scotland's Andy Murray), and could the same year – improbably – boast of being tennis's reigning Davis Cup holder. As late as 2018, meanwhile, with the release of Aardman Animation's underdog football film *Early Man*, we find the story of a beleaguered English football team taking on powerful European adversaries; while in reality, the English Premier League hosts many of the world's wealthiest, most international clubs, including European and World club championship winners. Last but clearly not least, the achievements of Britain's team at successive Olympic Games since Beijing in 2008, peaking in the team's performance in Rio 2016, where it finished second only to the United States in the medal table, clearly erases any prevailing myths regarding Britain's 'underdog' status on the global sporting stage.

A broader point raised both by these films, though, and by scholarship around sport more broadly, is the problematic nature of this same 'success' and what ideologically informs victory as a sporting aim. As Garry Whannel argues, an issue for the sports movie in general is that it must square modern sport's neoliberal ethos with film's broader narrative demands. Capitalist society and competitive sport alike 'reward winners, and in both the majority are losers.' Inasmuch, then, as popular cinema offers imaginary compensations for its viewers, such as fairy-tale victories, the sports genre exploits 'ideological elements... in order to mask [sport's] harsh reality' (Whannel 2008, 198). As I subsequently discuss, we can identify within these twenty-first-century films a mediation between the more recent contexts of British sporting power, and a perhaps more appealing ideological view – one sustained, to some extent, by other representations across film, and by the broader expectations of popular British cinema – of a *preferred type* of British sporting achievement.

The remainder of this article will explore these questions via its main case studies of *The Damned United*, *The Rat Pack* and *Rush*. Looking at these films' uses of nostalgia and attitudes to sporting practice suggests ways in which audiences might negotiate contemporary experiences of sport, together with more longstanding ideas around what sport actually *means* for them; a process inevitably tied up with the *memory* of sport, either as spectators or participants, though perhaps most prominently as television viewers and consumers of popular media. Assessing these films against the sporting circumstances of their production, in turn, highlights the ambivalences and tensions inherent to the cultures of sport in the recent British context; and yet, as I also conclude, such films can also dramatize and throw into relief these same tensions.

### ***Manager matters: Individualism and agency in the era of 'soccernomics'***

*The Damned United*, adapted from David Peace's 2006 novel, establishes a central narrative confrontation between Brian Clough and his club chairman at Derby County FC, Sam Longson. This is staged as an opposition between Clough as inspirational force, motivating his players to succeed, and Longson as embodying the plutocratic forces hostile to the best interests – though perhaps not the *economic* interests – of the sport. As already noted, such oppositions are a structurally important aspect of the sport biopic's privileging of 'individual performance' (Baker 2003, 13). *The Damned United* is consequently at pains to emphasize the achievements of its managerial team (Clough, along with his assistant Peter Taylor) in turning Derby County into English League champions.

In the first main dialogue between the two, Clough pointedly refers to Longson as someone who understands money more than football, suggesting he should leave choices about player acquisition and team selection to football professionals like himself. This presages a later, fateful altercation in which Longson questions Clough's team selection for a league match played days before a European Cup semi-final. Reacting to Clough's goad that, without his presence in the dugout, no one would know who Derby County were, Longson reiterates his view of Clough's real position in the club hierarchy: 'bottom of the heap, the lowest of the low... the one who in the end we can all do without: the fucking manager!'

These conversations highlight the ways in which dramatic uses of the past within the fiction film are rarely frozen in time, but are crafted and embellished in order to touch on contemporary legacies. In this instance, the film's screenwriter, Peter Morgan, uses these fictional exchanges to articulate contemporary debates around football club ownership. After Derby go on to lose their semi-final to Juventus, Morgan has Clough bitterly complaining to the press about Longson's plans to build a million-pound hospitality suite, instead of using the money to buy new players. Clough's remark here about executive guests eating 'prawn sandwiches' owes less to what Clough might have actually said, and more to a comment in 2000 by Clough's one-time protégé Roy Keane.<sup>1</sup> Then in his capacity as the Manchester United captain, Keane suggested that Old Trafford's emphasis on corporate hospitality was ruining the atmosphere in the ground (Giulianotti 2016, 140). Keane's comments had strongly class-based insinuations, reflecting the perceived gentrification of football audiences, following the conversion of top-flight English football grounds to all-seater stadiums in the 1990s. Like Keane's, Clough's tirade in *The Damned United* also implicitly targets, from a retrospective view, the acquisitions of English Premier League clubs by individual billionaire owners or consortiums (such as Roman Abramovich's purchase of



Chelsea, or the buy-out of Manchester United by the American Glazer family); as well as the increasing turn towards football clubs run not as local teams for local fans, but as trans-national corporations for a global television fan-base (Giulianotti 2016, 45–46).

Examined more closely, though, running through *The Damned United* is an actual ambivalence regarding the place of money in football since the end of the 1960s. The fractious relationship with his chairman does not revolve around Clough's disregard for the value of capital: indeed, Longson's early disagreement with Clough centres on his manager's profligate desires to *spend* the club's money, which Clough, as noted above, wants to do to improve his team. One of the film's more restrictive choices is, in turn, to focus less on Clough and Taylor's shrewd investments in the player market – such as their tendency to pick up ageing players, or buy under-valued players and play them in different positions – and more on Clough's charismatic form of player-management. In the film, Clough's main intervention is to bellow positive encouragement and quietly remind players of the position they are supposed to be playing. In one match, in fact, when the now promoted Derby County host Leeds United, Clough isn't even in the dugout, but is shown hiding in a room below the stands.

*The Damned United* in this respect highlights the particular challenges the sports film has in encompassing the complexities of sports practice and management, and how these may, in turn, be negotiated through a more simple narrative based around the charismatic individual. Notably, though, this is not altogether a given tendency across all sports film. Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland A's baseball team, is also shown hiding from the dugout in *Moneyball* (2011), the film based on Michael Lewis's 2003 book. Beane in fact *never* watched games live, but in *Moneyball*, this detail is contextualized by the film's emphasis on sports metrics, and how Beane, in a then radical but now largely accepted fashion, managed his players as statistical units. Though based on fact, placing Beane beneath ground during a key game has a rhetorical point within that particular film's rethinking of how we understand both modern sport, and the sports film's usual tendencies.

*Moneyball*, in turn, sheds light on *The Damned United's* narrative choices, because it invites a more thorough consideration of what role, in truth, managers actually have. Stephen Glynn suggests that Longson's derisory assessment of Clough's role is 'accurate' (2018, 82); a claim borne out by statistical research into the managerial contribution to football team success. As Chris Anderson and David Sally argue, from a data-analysis perspective, even the most successful managers probably account for only a small percentage of difference in terms of performance. This might be as high a factor, in their view, as 19 per cent; the remaining 81 per cent being determined mostly by money, in terms of expenditure on player wages (Anderson and Sally 2013, 257–259).

Anderson and Sally's assessment of managerial influence queries the view of Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski, in their book *Soccernomics*, who argue that the best managers are bought at a price, which is why they tend to end up at the biggest-spending clubs (2014, 133–137). Yet, Anderson and Sally are unable to determine what this positive influence consists of (2013, 262–267), and even if we accept the ability of the manager to effect outcome, the latter authors suggest the role mainly involves the management of resources. As Kuper and Szymanski likewise note, managers will always 'need 11 excellent players' if they are to win anything, and these are resources that need to be paid for (2014, 141).

In fact, Kuper and Szymanski make an argument for Clough and Taylor's distinctive ability in managing football players like a stock market: far from spendthrifts, they were,

in truth, gambling with the chairman's money. In a version of what Beane later did for the Oakland A's, Clough and Taylor engaged in a shrewd game of buying players below value and, later, selling them for significant profit when they had maximized their potential (Kuper and Szymanski 2014, 29). Clough later took the relatively small Nottingham Forest club to the heights of European Cup success: a team that, like Beane's was 'assembled largely for peanuts' (ibid.). It is one of the disappointments of both *The Damned United* and, to an even greater extent, *I Believe in Miracles*, which focuses specifically on Clough's tenure in Nottingham, that neither film is especially willing or able to explore how Clough actually did it, hardly ever touching, for instance, on team tactics or the specific logic behind player acquisitions. In fact, as the *Guardian's* reviewer put it, what was missing in the latter film was a more analytic, 'Moneyball-like' assessment of how this 'miracle' actually came about (Bradshaw 2015). The critical and commercial success of *Moneyball* suggests that such a move would not, necessarily, be either impossible or unpopular;<sup>2</sup> and that, in turn, the avoidance of such a move on the part of both *The Damned United* and *I Believe in Miracles* suggests more the fondness for a preferred narrative of charismatic agency. What we get, consequently, is biopic as near-hagiography, downplaying many of the rationalizations that actually contributed to Clough's period of achievement.

### **Memory sites: sports locations, topophilia and television**

In its resistance to dealing with more rationalized contexts of sport, we can also understand *The Damned United's* particular engagement with a more grittily 'authentic' past; one that is both nostalgic and idealized precisely for its rougher edges. The film invests considerably in the 'surface detail' of football in the early 1970s, especially in terms of costume design and setting (Glynn 2018, 79–80). The attention to a grubbier, physically more rough-and-tumble footballing era – *The Damned United's* story is premised on Clough's hubristic attempt to clean up what he sees as Leeds' dirty style of play – performs the strategic function of separating the global, corporate era of the game in the twenty-first century with a supposedly more earthy and localized idea of what football once was (or maybe even 'should be').

The type of detail lavishly displayed in the *mise-en-scène* of *The Damned United* goes beyond retro 1970s tracksuits and shaggy haircuts, extending, in this case, to the rusted and worn exterior of Derby's original Baseball Ground stadium, with its pre-Taylor Report wooden stands, unseated terraces, and dilapidated visiting team entrance.<sup>3</sup> The film revels further in the mud and grit of older grounds, before the days of under-soil heating and sprinklered, billiard-table turf. Prior to the early FA Cup tie with Leeds that forms the dramatic catalyst for Morgan's script, Clough urges the Derby groundskeeper to make the boggy and bumpy pitch as smooth as possible, anticipating the visit of a team that knows how to pass the ball. The groundskeeper grudgingly agrees, but adds, as a consequence, that Clough's team 'can't train on it'.

This very emphasis here on nostalgic *imperfection* aligns with wider tendencies of sports heritage experience. Derby's ground exemplifies what Richard Giulianotti calls the 'early modern' character of early twentieth-century stadiums, characterized by their 'topophilic qualities'. Here, it is the intimacies and rougher idiosyncrasies of the sports ground – those aspects, like Derby's bumpy pitch, that can 'influence play' in a distinctive way – that afford a closer contact and more affectionate relationship between fans and players (2016, 147). By contrast, Leeds' larger but more functional Elland Road ground, at least as shown in *The*



*Damned United*, is more typical of the 'late modern' stadiums renovated during the 1970s and 1980s, or, as is the case with Derby County's new ground, Pride Park (opened in 1997), purpose built in commercial zones on city outskirts. As Giulianotti suggests, these new grounds were built with 'multi-use' and maximizing capacity in mind; rather, necessarily, than generating an optimum environment for spectators (2016, 148).

What distinguishes a film such as *The Damned United* from the touristic sites of sports heritage industries – what Sheranne Fairley and Sean Gammon call 'tangible immovable' spaces of consumption (2005, 233–234) – is that such films work to evoke an 'intangible' space of memory and recollection that cannot be physically located (2005, 234–235). This is, in part, for the simple reason that Derby's Baseball Ground, represented by a proxy stadium in *The Damned United*, no longer stands. As noted earlier, it is also through forms of mediatization that viewers might either sustain their memory of a particular time or event, or acquire a form of prosthetic memory for a period they could only know through media (Ramshaw and Gammon 2005, 183). *The Damned United* consequently draws on this space of intangible heritage, accessing mediated memories of the sporting past, via the incorporation of televisual footage from the era alongside re-enacted sequences (specifically, from the ill-tempered 1974 FA Charity Shield match, played between Leeds and Liverpool).

As Reynolds argues, it is largely the twenty-first-century capacity 'to access the [recent] past so easily and so copiously' (2011, xxi), via media, that encourages and facilitates nostalgic revisitings such as the ones performed by these films. There are implications here for the *types* of nostalgic subject matter seen in the British sports film, to the extent that the content of nostalgia media generally harks back to a not-so-distant past for a particular demographic of consumer. With the exception of *The Program*, the films mentioned in this article cover a period of sporting events between 1974 and 1988: a thirty-to-forty year gap between production and setting which, I have speculated elsewhere, seems to be a standard period of time to allow for the recycling of pop-cultural artefacts into the mainstream (in Walfisz 2022). Revealingly, a recent YouGuv poll showed that over a quarter of 18–29-year-olds and 30–39-year-olds looked back, respectively, to the 1980s and the 1960s as a better time than the one in which they were living (Smith 2019). The fact that these respondents were harking back to a time just beyond their living memory strengthens the supposition that their nostalgic view of these pasts was informed by media products.

The obvious irony here is that such reference points of a pre-digital age are processed, produced and consumed through the technologies of new media, from VHS to DVD to YouTube, and online delivery systems that are production vehicles for the same content. *The Rack Pack*, produced to stream on the BBC's iPlayer service, exemplifies these paradoxes. There is an aspect of promotional self-validation in this particular film, given that its time-frame and subject – the growth of snooker as a lucrative television sport in the late 1970s and 1980s – was stimulated by the BBC's parallel commitment to cover the two weeks of the sport's world championship, played in Sheffield every Spring. The film, in turn, incorporates televisual footage from the time, combined with dramatically recreated moments of victory and defeat already familiar from their original screening and frequent repetition across subsequent decades.

Effectively rendering these images in the film part of a collective experience for its audience, *The Rack Pack* harks back to and commemorates older broadcast television in a contemporary era of niche, online delivery and 'narrowcasting', characterized by the production and exhibition contexts of *The Rack Pack* itself. The film, nevertheless, opts to

position the medium of television *ambiguously* within both its setting and its narrative, as befitting television's somewhat corrupting influence within the film's wider story. As in *The Damned United*, there is a similarly topophilic focus on the dirtier, more rough-hewn spaces of the game in its less commercialized form. The opening sequence depicts the 1972 world championship final, played to minimal media coverage in a poorly-lit, smoke-filled hall, to an audience made up almost entirely of old men. The victory in this final of the flamboyant Alex Higgins, and the post-match interview he gives over a pint with the spectators, aligns him with this predominantly working-class, male, pre-mass-media context. The rest of the film, subsequently, parallels Higgins' mixed fortunes with the rise of Steve Davis; the young English player who dominated the game throughout the 1980s, and who reaped the financial benefits of its increased television presence in the process. *The Rack Pack*, in turn, dramatizes Higgins' unwillingness and, later, inability to thrive in the same televisual exposure to which his own talent, so the film suggests, helped give rise.

### **Convenient failure: the problem with excellence and the meaning of 'good sport'**

As David Rowe observes, sports films often use the figure of the sportsperson and their practices to dramatize broader social concerns. Primarily, the efforts of athletes here take on an 'idealized' dimension, the films' dramas hinging around sport's and the sportsperson's ability to 'transcend... existing (and corrupting) social relations' (Rowe 1998, 352). Given the appeal in these films under question to ideas of authenticity, personality and talent, these 'corrupting social relations' inevitably tend to be associated with the intrusion of money, technology or sport politics, and their supposedly negative impacts on the otherwise idealized field of sport.

Given that Higgins in *The Rack Pack* is already connoted with a less mediated, pre-digital and pre-commercial era, the film consequently highlights in comparison the somehow *unsporting* nature of Davis's achievements. Davis is depicted in the film as at once childlike (he likes to drink milk and play *Asteroids*) and mechanical: in contrast to the more fluent, 'instinctual' depiction of Higgins, Davis takes notes, and is seen focusing on precise aspects of stance and cueing action. Davis's success in the film – absurdly, I would add – seems more ascribed to the ministrations of his entrepreneurial manager, Barry Hearne, who as a promoter was central to the commercialization and influx of money into the sport during the 1980s. As remarked at one point in the film, and seemingly ignoring Davis's own agency in becoming world champion, Davis is a 'robot' Hearne has 'built'. When he first appears asking questions about the tables in his local snooker club, Davis is associated from the start with a tendency toward *calculation* (he later tells Hearne his hobby is playing 'mental chess') and his assessment of the game as so much data – underscored by a tendency toward deliberation and slower play – that distinguishes him from his rival in the film, whose speedy shot-making earned him the nickname 'Hurricane'.

Hearne, in contrast to the notionally more romantic and sympathetic Higgins (a perennial crowd favourite, who earned the accolade of 'People's Champion'), is an archetypal figure of Thatcher-era entrepreneurialism, spotting opportunities in the market, managing a stable of player-clients, and providing extra income for them through endorsements and television appearances. These narrative segregations and oppositions are also at work in *Rush*, made between *The Damned United* and *The Rack Pack*. *Rush* highlights that Niki Lauda, Hunt's great rival, came from an Austrian banking family of sizeable means. What,

in turn, opposes Lauda to Hunt in the film is the former's use of economic acumen and attention to the technical specificities of both cars and racing strategy – in other words, the application of money and reason towards performance improvement. By contrast, Hunt, not unlike Higgins, becomes the exemplar of more traditional 'amateur' principles, aligned with an older, cavalier tradition of gentleman racer. In *The Rack Pack*, the difference between Higgins' and Davis's play is signified aesthetically, in the respective contrast between fluid Steadicam sequences (Higgins) and static framings (Davis). Such oppositions find similar aesthetic form in *Rush*, where we see Lauda perennially working on the machine, seeking extra improvements, tuning to find an extra bit of speed. His fixation with technical specs and data contrasts with Hunt's preference for just turning up, *feeling* his way in. We never see, for instance, Hunt working with the car; similarly, the one time we see Hunt, in his debut F1 season, going through pre-race visualizations, he quickly shrugs it off as a new gimmick being imposed upon his 'natural' style.

Lauda's approach nevertheless brought him multiple world championships, in contrast to Hunt's somewhat fortuitous single win: a point touched on at the end of *Rush*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the detail that Davis was a serial winner of world titles, garnering six between 1981 and 1989, is a fact *The Rack Pack* acknowledges only in passing. The film invests more, by contrast, in Higgins' achievement in reclaiming the world title once more, in 1982, before alcohol abuse effectively ended his career in the late 1980s. This focus on comparative, romanticized under-achievement is arguably one of the genre's conceptual limitations, since it denies the opportunity for alternative ideas of sporting achievement to be explored. Serial victory and the methods underpinning it are neither dramatic nor spectacular; like the depiction of complex managerial processes, these are also more challenging to capture in a feature-length narrative.

Davis's significant professional achievements testify to what Daniel Chambliss (2010) has called the 'mundanity' of sporting excellence. As Chambliss shows, talent, even when applied to youthful sporting prodigies, can only be identified at the culmination of a period of sustained practice and development. Talent is, as he puts it, 'indistinguishable from its effects', and is only visible '[once] its effects become obvious' (2010, 27). Excellence, in turn, becomes 'mundane' because it is not achieved overnight, but rather through the 'confluence of dozens of small skills or activities... which have been carefully drilled into habit and then are fitted together in a synthesized whole' (2010, 29).

Chambliss's conclusions shed light on a central narrative tension in the sports genre. Not only is the gradual acquisition and nurturing of talent too repetitive and painstaking to be encompassed by any single film narrative, but by Chambliss's own admission, top sportsmen and women '[a]ren't very exciting', but are merely very good at '[doing] the particular things one does' in order to be at the top level (2010, 32). Numerous recent studies of elite performance in sporting and other fields have stressed, precisely, the indispensability of long-term development through practice and repetition (see Colvin 2008; Syed 2010): qualities that are less amenable to the narrative- and time-constrained forms of the sports biopic. From one perspective, the attraction of 'Eddie' Edwards' story in *Eddie the Eagle*, like Maurice Flitcroft's in *The Phantom of the Open*, might be that it appeals to the romantic idea that one can just 'give it a go'; that the arduous, mundane process of acquiring excellence, and the compulsion to excel, robs both sport and its competitors of their joy and charm. As Josh Raymond (2017) points out, at the time of his Olympic appearance in 1988, Edwards jokingly opposed his own light-hearted attitude to the faceless, technologized sporting systems

and ideologies of the then Soviet Union and GDR. *Eddie the Eagle*, similarly, positions its subject in distinction to the more physically disciplined, but, in turn, more anonymous, Scandinavian squads that dominate Edwards' chosen sport and mock his entry into it (the Norwegian team, for instance, that shares Eddie's training facility – and at one point, his sauna – are only ever shown *en masse*, and never as individuals).

These appealing personal stories, nevertheless, come within contemporary contexts in which highly technological, rationalized and economic circumstances underpin 'pure' Olympian characteristics. As Whannel (1992, 182) recounts, it was in part the economic impact of television in the late 1970s – around the same time period covered in these films, in other words – that transformed sport along neoliberal lines, in its newly professionalized emphasis. The contexts Whannel highlights have, in the Britain of the 2000s, been both augmented and superseded by wider institutional policies aimed at maximizing performance among elite, potential medal-winning candidates, via an increased but more highly selective allocation of funds (Gibson 2016). This has been the tenet of British Olympic policy since the end of the 1990s, after the weak showing by Team GB at Atlanta 1996, and has enabled the rise of the Olympic team in successive Summer Olympics since 2000.<sup>5</sup> The wider cultural irony of Edwards' story in *Eddie the Eagle*, as Raymond suggests, is that it resurfaces at a point in time when Britain's heavily-funded Olympic project echoes the former Soviet bloc's own system, in its strategic and propagandistic bid for domination. As Raymond argues, even if programmes like that of the GDR were based on the use of performance-enhancing drugs, British Olympians in effect benefit from a process of 'fiscal doping': for example, the £26.5 m invested in the hugely successful GB cycling squad for the 2012 Games, and the £30.2 m it received ahead of Rio 2016. Performance can no longer simply be reduced to individual discipline, will, or 'talent'. Rather, it involves the cumulative combination of those individual factors with a corporate, rationalized and meticulous attention to small details in training, technology, diet, and even sportswear: a process now famously known, following its implementation within the GB and Sky cycling teams, as the 'aggregation of marginal gains' (Syed 2016).

As with economic investment, marginal gains application represents another way the sportsperson's agency and action can be disaggregated from performance, since money and technology are seen to be the key to success. Yet, it is also the lynchpin of British sporting achievement, in the Olympic Games and beyond. F1, for instance, recently dominated in championship terms by the British driver Lewis Hamilton, has for decades negotiated the tension between its technologized, team nature and the agency of the individual driver in the cockpit. Hamilton's former teammate and 2016 champion Nico Rosberg, echoing the aforementioned analysis of football manager contribution, once suggested that the driver's actual input to success was only around twenty per cent, against eighty per cent from the car (in Rokerbie and Easton 2022, 2). A more recent economic analysis nuanced Rosberg's impressions, arguing that the main driver of success was the 'interaction' between 'driver skill and team technology' – while still concluding, however, that in a field of largely interchangeable high-skilled professionals, individual driver ability 'contributed roughly 15%' to the outcome of a race (Rokerbie and Easton 2022, 12). As noted by the chief designer at Hamilton's Mercedes team, the modern F1 car produces 16,000 channels of data from 'every single parameter', from which teams can generate a further 50,000 channels of information (in Syed 2016, 193). The idea that success in the sport is largely down to the 'isolat[ion of] key metrics' deriving from this data is revealing in its rationalized logic (ibid.).

More revealing still is the coolly impersonal phrasing of one strategist at Rosberg and Hamilton's Mercedes team, who notes that performance data for every aspect of a race can tell him what has already happened, 'without speaking to the human involved' (in Syed 2016, 194).

### ***Beyond the 'golden age': the ambivalence of nostalgia?***

As mentioned above, *The Program* focuses on cyclist Lance Armstrong's, and his US Postal Service team's, long-term use of doping, which illegally helped to garner Armstrong seven successive Tour de France victories. *The Program* is actually not without its ambiguities: as Bruce Bennett (2019, 111–112) observes, the film is interested as much in the scientific realities of professional cycling as it is in demonizing its protagonist, to the extent that it almost tacitly accepts the realities of doping in the sport. By concentrating on an *American* cheat, though, and his team of continental-European cronies, *The Program* carefully avoids any grey areas between its main subject and the fiscal doping, or the other technologically-assisted means, through which dominant British cyclists were supported in their achievements at the time of production. It is noteworthy too that *The Flying Scotsman*, made a few years prior to *The Program*, but during the run of Armstrong's Tour victories, and following a wider recent history of doping in cycling, focuses on a cyclist upholding the 'make do and mend' tradition of the amateur underdog (Robinson 2018). Graeme Obree is set up within the film not just in opposition to the recent contexts of drug cheats, but more intriguingly, in contrast to his rival Chris Boardman: the technologically-minded English racer 'whose "professional" approach is portrayed as the antithesis of the Scottish underdog' (Robinson 2018).

Armstrong's greatest sin, of course, was not just that he 'cheated' (he was hardly alone in this respect), but that he did it while winning seven years on the bounce, making the Tour his own preserve – the latter also being the case, around the time *The Program* was released, for the British cyclist Chris Froome. Yet, the British sports movie appears uncomfortable with serial victory even in its legal form. It seems to prefer victories that exist in splendid isolation, or were unrepeatable outliers; or, in the case of *Eddie the Eagle*, where the victories are of a more localized and personal type. In the real world, Froome's four Tour de France wins between 2013 and 2017 did not appear to endear him to the British public in the same way as the more outspoken, stylish and 'characterful' Bradley Wiggins, who won a solitary Tour in 2012 – the same year he was voted BBC's 'Sports Personality of the Year', an accolade that the more reserved Froome never claimed. In so many of the films discussed here, in fact, it is as much the force of honesty or, indeed, 'personality' that triumphs – Edwards', Higgins', Hunt's or Clough's – over any other recognized idea of success. The films do not just celebrate victory in itself: rather, they suggest that certain kinds of victories may be better than others.

To see such nostalgic films simply as a desired return, though, to some lost sense of authentic plenitude, underestimates the extent to which the nostalgic is actually marked by a 'temporal *ambivalence*... between past and present' (Higson 2014, 124, emphasis added). It is worth reiterating that it is not a monolithic 'past' that is celebrated in the British sports film. One of the most commercially successful of all sports films, *Chariots of Fire* (1981), is sometimes used as a convenient exemplar of British cinema's fixation with the past, yet

the gap between the film's production and its historical contexts (the 1924 Olympic Games) precludes the appeal to nostalgia in the same sense as *Rush*, *The Damned United* or *The Rack Pack*. More importantly, one half of the film's dual-focus narrative centres on the uses sprinter Harold Abrahams makes of a professional trainer, Sam Mussabini, in defiance of the 'gentlemanly' amateur codes of his class and times: indeed, Mussabini, who introduces himself to Abrahams with the promise that 'I can find you another two yards', shows his nascent connection to what would eventually become marginal gains theory. And insofar as this brings Abrahams success, *Chariots of Fire* proves as much forward-looking as it is nostalgic; forward looking to the present and beyond, from the perspective of historical hindsight.

*The Rack Pack*, meanwhile, builds enough institutional self-reference into its narrative and *mise-en-scène* to make it function as a media bridge between the sport's pre-television past and its digital present. It tacitly recognizes the contribution of mass media and the BBC to its expanded reputation and coverage, granting the BBC, in turn, the exclusive rights to the film's dissemination. Of the players depicted in the film, it was Davis who became a congenial and popular figure within the BBC's coverage, for years after Higgins' eventual death in 2010. The dialogue engineered in the film's concluding scene, in which Davis describes Higgins as his inspiration, serves as a valediction for the latter; yet this same scene, which sees a defeated Higgins accepting a long line of drinks from fans, also tacitly points to the alcoholism that arguably undermined his career, denying him the opportunity for serial victories in the vein of Davis. *The Rack Pack*, in this respect, does not leave the myth of heroic under-achievement unquestioned.

Morgan's screenplay for *The Damned United*, as noted previously, is also forward-looking in its understanding of the role money was playing during Clough's tenure, and the role it would go on to play in the present. Morgan also scripted *Rush*, which, as also mentioned above, draws attention to Niki Lauda's moneyed background. Yet, the film also highlights that Lauda, unlike many of his peers, did *not* break into racing by exploiting his own economic privilege. Instead, he took out a personal loan and invested in his own ability: just as Clough did with football players, Lauda, in this way, bet on himself as a commodity. Similarly, while the screenplay for *Rush* depicts Lauda as entrepreneurial and businesslike, the significant ironies of Hunt's own 'amateur' entry to F1 racing are hardly overlooked, since the team he initially raced for was bankrolled by a Scottish aristocrat, Lord Alexander (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron) Hesketh.

*Rush's* concluding section serves as another bridge between the cinematic past and the present, underlining the blunter realities of modern sport: the demands, the mundanity, but also the *results* of sustained excellence. After his championship victory, we see a montage showing images of Hunt advertising a variety of consumer products. In a subsequent scene, taking place between the 1976 and 1977 seasons, Lauda and Hunt meet at an airfield, where Lauda, characteristically, is tinkering with his private jet. Lauda urges his rival, on his way to a wedding in Italy, to 'get back to work'. The retrospective touch is that Hunt would not, as two comparatively unsuccessful seasons resulted in his leaving F1. Hunt's embrace of the celebrity lifestyle is therefore aligned here with his subsequent decline in the sport, and premature retirement. Lauda, as the film's conclusion reminds us, added two further world titles to the one he won in 1975, and it is notably Lauda's reflective voice that concludes the film.



## Conclusion

As I have argued in this article, in order to make full sense of these films, we need to situate them within the wider output of British cinema, and indeed the sports film as a genre, which both historically and in more recent times has tended to shy away from tackling contemporary stories. The fascination with the sporting past and its most cherished figures, in this respect, still highlights some of the wider prescriptions within the sports film, and British film more broadly; as well as indicating an uncertain relationship to the present circumstances and realities of sport, at least in this particular national context.

As I have also argued here, though, it would be inaccurate to reduce these recent British sports films to entirely uncritical celebrations of the sporting past, since they may also act 'reflectively' as a means of dialogue between this past and the present. They may wistfully commemorate the sights, sounds and characters of a prior era, but they can also in part consign them to the past, acknowledging the wider historical and contemporary realities of the sports they depict. To what extent the narrative and aesthetic frameworks of the genre either can or wish to embrace the complexities of sporting practice and excellence, though, especially within the terms of a more rationalized approach to sport, to some degree still remains to be seen.

## Notes

1. Clough signed Keane, as a young player, to Nottingham Forest in 1990.
2. *Moneyball* had a worldwide box-office gross of \$110m; at the time of writing, it holds a Metacritic score of 87/100.
3. The Taylor Report (1990), officially the Hillsborough Stadium Disaster Report, was commissioned after ninety-five Liverpool FC fans were crushed to death at Sheffield Wednesday's stadium in 1989. The main recommendations of the Report were that top-flight teams convert to all-seater stadiums and remove perimeter fencing.
4. Hunt's victory in 1976 came after Lauda, critically injured in a crash at the German Grand Prix, was forced to miss several races. Lauda retired early in the final race of the season due to the dangerous weather conditions, allowing Hunt to claim the championship.
5. The British team in Atlanta 1996 returned with just one gold medal. By contrast, the 2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020 Olympic Games produced returns, of 17, 27, 29 and 22 golds.

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