

Real to Reel: The Image of the Sports Journalist in Film

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Predictably, sports journalists are relatively rare in the movies. Sports films are a small though important genre and journalists have only appeared in an even smaller number of those films. While commercial cinema, as we know it, was born in the struggle to produce and show films of the James J. Corbett vs. Bob Fitzsimmons (1897) and James Jeffries vs. Tom Sharkey (1899) heavyweight championship fights,¹ Hollywood's production of sports stories has been inconsistent, at best. Sports films have had sporadic surges of popularity with producers. In the 1990s, for instance, the box office response to *Field of Dreams* (1989), a nostalgic elegy to baseball and rural America, and to Ron Shelton's more realistic portrayal of life in minor league baseball, *Bull Durham* (1988), led to a brief burst of sports focused films. Despite the drama inherent in sports, Hollywood has only intermittently produced sports movies.

Sports journalists have been even more scarce in film. Many sports-related films, such as *Brian's Song* (1971), *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973), *Moneyball* (2004), *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) and the already mentioned *Field of Dreams* and *Bull Durham* leave journalists largely offstage. Boxing films, once quite popular fare in Hollywood, such as *Golden Boy* (1939), *City for Conquest* (1940), *Body and Soul* (1947, remade 1981), *Champion* (1949), *The Set-Up* (1949), *The Harder They Fall* (1956), and *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1962) do not always include

¹ See Albert E. Smith and Phil A. Koury, *Two Reels and a Crank* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc. 1952) for a detailed firsthand account of the competition for these films. See also Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

sports journalists. When they do, the journalists typically appear at the end of fights to get interviews with the combatants, often trying to get the story behind a surprise upset.² While journalists jumping into the ring to riddle the protagonists with difficult questions may seem to simply add realism to the scene, they actually play an important, if brief role, as exposition drivers. Their questions create tension and drama for the protagonists, as in the climax of the original *Body and Soul* in which John Garfield's champion boxer fails to take a dive but feels himself protected from the mobsters who tried to force him to lose by the press and its close coverage of champion fighters. Some films offer sports journalists more expansive roles as exposition drivers. Journalists in films such as *Eight Men Out* (1988) and *The Natural* (1984) largely appear to fill in plot points or to push the narrative forward. These are often important roles.

In *Eight Men Out* John Sayles, as legendary sports reporter Ring Lardner, sings "I'm forever blowing ballgames" to the tune of the once popular "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles". Lardner sings this in front of the Chicago White Sox baseball team. Eight White Sox players have taken money from gamblers to blow the 1919 World Series. The performance is a narrative tip-off to the players and to the audience that the press is on to their cheating and that their careers are doomed. Similarly, Robert Duvall plays an antagonistic reporter in Robert Redford's *The Natural*. Duvall's investigative reporting on Roy Hobbs, Redford's mysterious yet profoundly talented ballplayer, does not add anything to the core narrative. But it does create a secondary tension that helps propel the film through its slower moments. Hobbs has a

² In different ways, *The Harder They Fall* and the Rocky films modify the role of sports journalist beyond this description. I discuss the Rocky films later. *The Harder They Fall* stars Humphrey Bogart as the public relations director and all-around protector for an untalented boxer who is being guided to the heavyweight championship by dishonest promoters. Bogart is hired because he had been a respected sports journalist. However, Bogart does not act as a sports journalist during the bulk of the film. He spends his time helping promote and then helping protect the hapless boxer from the criminals who are using him.

scandalous secret in his past. He was shot by a crazed fan during a would-be sexual encounter in a hotel room. The film's narrative implies that revelation of that scandal would ruin Hobbs's chance to take his team to the World Series. Investigations into that past create stress for Hobbs as he seeks to win the heart of pure baseball fan Iris Gaines (Glenn Close).

As important as these sports journalists may be, they remain secondary characters, existing primarily to create tension and, often through exposition, move the plot of the film forward. This makes narrative sense as the central characters in sports films are typically the athletes who play the sports or the coaches and executives who run the sports organizations. Journalists, as they sometimes do in real life, play the role of chorus, a character or group of characters who offer us expositional information that helps tie the plot together and move it forward.

Two of Hollywood's most important and popular films involving sportswriters, *Woman of the Year* (1942)³ and *Paper Lion* (1968).⁴ These films are outliers, creating more out of their sports journalists than most motion pictures. As different as they may seem in plot, both films are wish fulfillment narratives. Moreover, they draw on our popular image of the sports journalist as wish fulfillment, a sports fan whose occupation is watching sports, as the foundation for their fantasies of occupational and sexual wish fulfillment, a popular image that gives their stories greater narrative probability for viewers.

³ Of course, "battle of the sexes" stories have been hugely popular since long before Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. Tracy and Hepburns' variation on the theme proved so popular that it launched a series of Tracy-Hepburn team-ups. They ended up co-starring in nine films together. *Woman of the Year* was also so popular that it also inspired any number of imitations, including *Designing Women* (1957) and a tv movie remake in 1976.

⁴ One might justifiably argue that *Paper Lion* does not fit into this discussion as George Plimpton was a popular author across several genres, especially known for narratives tracing his adventures in a variety of fields, and was only broadly and sporadically an author who covered sport. However, *Paper Lion* was a hugely popular book and film, so I include a limited discussion of the film here.

Paper Lion tells the story of author George Plimpton's tryout for the 1966 Detroit Lions football team. Based on a true story, the film follows Plimpton, who made something of a career out of venturing into various dangerous and unusual jobs and then writing about it, as he attempts to make the team and play through the Lions' 1966 season. Plimpton plays the role of would-be Lions quarterback, not sports journalist, in the film. His career as author has bought him this wish fulfillment opportunity. *Woman of the Year* tells a battle of the sexes-cum-class war tale of Spencer Tracy, a sports journalist, and Katharine Hepburn, a wealthy political columnist, who clash over Hepburn's call for banning baseball. In typical Hollywood fashion, the two battle and fall in love at the same time. Yet, again, the film's plot revolves around a wish fulfillment theme, Tracy's "every man" winning the heart of Hepburn's ideal "woman of the year."

While sports journalists have appeared rarely in film, I think these illustrations indicate that we can trace three general images of sports journalists in movies. As noted, perhaps the most common image of sports journalists reflects our popular public image of them as a sort of Greek or Shakespearian chorus to the struggles of our sports heroes, filling the audience in on plot points, creating a perspective for the audience and helping drive the narrative forward. Second, a subcategory of this image, we periodically find real sports journalists playing themselves in films. Using well-known sports journalists, of course, can help create a sense of verisimilitude for a sports film (especially one with a rather far-fetched plot such as 1999's *For Love of the Game*, which has Vin Scully calling a highly unlikely final game pitched by Kevin Costner, Scully gaining the film whatever realism it might hope to achieve). Finally, we have the sports journalist as central character in a very few films, a character whose role as journalist is largely left unexplored but whose popular image as living the "common man's" fantasy

grounds the film's story. This sports journalist embodies the image of every man, the common man who spends the plot trying to fulfill a "typical" fantasy of the American male.

The remainder of this article will take a closer look at these images of the sports journalist and what they add to movie narratives. Each discussion will focus on one film (or, in the case of the Rocky series, a cycle of films). The treatment of sports journalists as chorus will focus on the film that exploits this role more fully than any other in film history, *Pride of the Yankees* (1942). The image real-life sports journalists bring to this role will be examined in the Rocky films. Few sports films could be less realistic than *Rocky* (1976) and its many progeny. However, each film used ubiquitous sports anchor Stu Nahan as the play-by-play broadcaster of Rocky's fights. From personal interviews with Nahan, I will discuss his role and his understanding of that role in the various Rocky films.⁵ Finally, the discussion of wish fulfillment roles will draw some general notions about the image of the sports journalist from *Woman of the Year*.

Sports Journalists as Chorus

One might wonder why we have any number of films in which journalists play stalwart heroes, such as *All the President's Men* (1976), *Spotlight* (2015), *Truth* (2015), and *The Post* (2017), to name a few, yet sports films by and large play journalists as secondary characters whose only role is in narrative exposition. The reason might rest in our public mythology regarding sports. While sports journalists most assuredly create the story of sports, gathering raw data and performance together, editing and blending information, and creating character for athletes, in our sports myths we typically view the athletes as creating their own stories. The

⁵ I had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Nahan in 2005, two years before his death, and interview him at length regarding his Rocky roles and his career.

image of the sports journalists is often of a well-paid, perhaps somewhat pampered, amanuenses, writing down the story the athletes have created in their performances. As inaccurate and unfair as this may be, we can see it in our public image of the sports journalist's role.

While the idea of advocacy journalism ironically evolved from the same primordial pool as commercial cinema, the progressive advocacy of, in particular, William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* in the late nineteenth century, we continue to create narratives idealizing the image of advocate journalists (much as Hearst did in the *Journal*) as having a hand in shaping history by bringing to light hidden information.⁶ Each of the films mentioned in the preceding paragraph portrays its protagonists as having that potential. In our narrative world, a good day for the hard-hitting political journalist might involve playing a role in bringing down the Nixon presidency. On the other hand, we conceive of a good day for a sports journalist as one in which the home team is down by three points with thirteen seconds left to play. In that impossible moment, the hometown coach puts his hands on the shoulders of the team's erstwhile and immensely talented quarterback and barks, "When it gets grim, be the grim reaper. Now finish them off!" And the quarterback saunters onto the field and does.⁷ A good day for a sports journalist involves being handed a story that writes itself. A story that, if it was fiction, no one would believe. The sports journalist explicates these dramatic events to the reader.

The lead sports journalists, Walter Brennan and Dan Duryea, play this role throughout the Lou Gehrig biopic *Pride of the Yankees*. Their role is much larger than most sports

⁶ Pizzitola, particularly his chapter on film news. David Nasaw covers much the same material in *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000) as does Kenneth Whyte in *The Uncrowned King* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009).

⁷ Of course, I am referring to the finish of the 2022 NFL Divisional Round Game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Buffalo Bills.

journalists in films. One reason was the Hollywood star system. The film was developed for Gary Cooper, then at the top of his game as a major Hollywood star. Cooper had starred in a string of hits with Brennan as his sidekick. These films, *The Westerner* (1940), *Meet John Doe* (1941) and *Sergeant York* (1941), had not only been hugely popular, but they had also been artistic successes as well. *The Westerner* won Brennan his third Academy Award for best supporting actor and *York* won Cooper his first Oscar for lead actor. Following this string of successes, Goldwyn Studios created a fictional sports reporter for Brennan so that he could play sidekick to Cooper's Gehrig throughout the movie.⁸

Pride of the Yankees, of course, tells the story of Lou Gehrig, the New York Yankees "Iron Horse".⁹ Renowned as the most durable man in Major League baseball history, he would ironically die of a disease that stole his durability, strength and life at the young age of 37. Released early in World War II, the film contextualizes Gehrig's death within a war ethos. The title card that opens the film introduces Gehrig as a "hero of the peaceful paths of everyday life" whose early death echoes the sacrifice made by "thousands of young Americans on far-flung fields of battle." A tragic hero, Cooper's Gehrig needs a traditional Hollywood sidekick who can record and praise his humble courage in winning ballgames and facing death.

The film balances Brennan's sidekick with a reporter antagonistic to Gehrig, played by perpetual film antagonist Dan Duryea. Brennan and Duryea persistently appear to provide narrative exposition, Brennan praising Gehrig's many heroic acts, Duryea sardonically

⁸ Richard Sandomir, *The Pride of the Yankees: The Movie that Defined the Legacy of Lou Gehrig* (New York: Hachette Press, 2017)

⁹ I have written extensively about the narrative form of "*Pride of the Yankees*" in Daniel T. Durbin (2020) "A Hero for All Seasons: *Pride of the Yankees*, *Brian's Song*, and the Athlete as Christ-Figure" *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 37:10 917-936. This discussion draws on that article.

dismissing them. However, they have an even larger narrative role representing unacknowledged tensions in Gehrig's life. Gehrig and fellow Yankees star Babe Ruth had a well-known falling out during their careers. No one knows the exact reason. But the feud was broadly known.¹⁰

Duryea portrays a Ruth reporter, one of the reporters who always favors Ruth in his articles. Brennan portrays the one Gehrig reporter in New York. Their mutual antagonism embodies and replaces the larger Ruth-Gehrig tension in the film.¹¹ Babe Ruth played himself in *Pride of the Yankees* and, while he portrays himself as something of a blowhard and scoundrel, the film allows him to be empathetic to Gehrig and his plight. Ruth's portrayal works because Duryea and Brennan play the players' feud out in shadow. The sports journalists embody the well-known tension between the athletes, creating the opportunity for greater audience empathy with the lead characters as they both face Gehrig's plight.

Though *Pride of the Yankees* is, at best, a very broad fictionalization of Gehrig's life, Duryea and Brennan's sports reporters represent something largely lost in sports journalism. As David Halberstram's *Summer of '49* and Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer* report, sports journalists in the pre-flight days spent weeks traveling from game to game, often with players.¹² Many developed close relationships with the players and openly cheered the ones they befriended. These reporters created heroes from ballplayers, even lesser players, they particularly liked. As Duryea and Brennan openly cheer Ruth and Gehrig, they reinforce the

¹⁰ Jonathon Eig, *Luckiest Man: The Life and Death of Lou Gehrig* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006) and Richard Bak, *Lou Gehrig: An American Classic* (New York: Taylor Trade, 1995).

¹¹ Richard Sandomir, *The Pride of the Yankees: The Movie that Defined the Legacy of Lou Gehrig* (New York: Hachette Press, 2017)

¹² David Halberstram, *Summer of '49* (New York: Harper, 2006), Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York: Harper, 2006).

image of the sports journalist as fan, in many respects, the luckiest fans on the face of the earth as they get to befriend and lionize their heroes.

As a Ruth man, Duryea persistently criticizes, undermines and berates Gehrig. When Gehrig fails, Duryea shows his sneering smile. When Gehrig succeeds, Duryea dismisses it. When Gehrig faces challenges, Duryea flashes a critical look, clearly waiting for the great man to fall. While this may seem excessive for a reporter who otherwise has little stake in Gehrig's career, Duryea's hostile performance heightens the tension in scenes, significant in a story whose outcome we know.

Throughout the film, Duryea and Brennan inhabit the stadium press box as narrative drivers. Their reactions to the baseball action tell us what has happened and, to a great degree, how we should feel about it. When Gehrig first takes the field and stumbles, Duryea denigrates him while Brennan defends him. In a key sequence Babe Ruth has promised a hospitalized boy he would hit a home run for him and later the boy has gotten Gehrig to promise he would try to hit two. Duryea and Brennan release news of the promises to the public. They then spend the game making ever escalating bets on whether or not Gehrig can hit the second home run, Duryea, of course, betting against him. Predictably, Gehrig hits his second home run in his last turn at bat.

The gravity of Lou Gehrig Day, the climax of the film in which Gehrig, dying and barely able to walk, delivers his famous "Luckiest Man" speech, is relayed to us by the fact that even Duryea looks down and pained during the festivities. Even Gehrig's worst enemies are touched by his suffering and heroism in facing death.

As sidekick, Brennan often appears outside of the press box, facilitating plot development and giving the audience a human perspective on Gehrig's struggles. In one of the film's most

fully fictional moments, Brennan accompanies Cooper's Gehrig as he visits the Mayo Clinic to learn why he is weakening and, ultimately, is given his death sentence. In the film, Gehrig will not allow his wife to accompany him to the Clinic to learn his fate, taking only Brennan. Of course, this is not only a bit of Hollywood fluff, but also wholly untrue. Gehrig's family, not a local sports reporter, accompanied him to the hospital.¹³

Like the sports reporter who is our link to the excitement of a game we could not attend, who gives us a perspective, a story and sentiment to feel about the game, Brennan functions as our link to the Gehrig story, particularly in the Mayo Clinic sequence. Cooper, portraying traditional Hollywood stoic heroism in the face of death, cannot show fear or sadness on learning his fate. Brennan's pained and teary-eyed looks convey the sentiment of the moment. They create the emotional and narrative link between us and the baseball god who is soon to prove all too mortal.

Even this brief overview indicates some of the key characteristics of the image of the sports journalist in Hollywood movies. Sports journalists play the role we have created for them in our sports culture. They are our link to and expositors of the sporting events they cover. They frame the story, explain key narrative shifts, and show us the proper sentiment. They create an emotional link that puts us into the game or, in this case, movie. Most significantly, their presence humanizes the sports gods. Through them, we learn to see athletes as human beings, heroic and fallible, extraordinary and mortal. The sports journalist is not a protagonist, but an image consistent with public expectations, a reporter informing us of the story's meaning and of how we should feel about it.

The Image of the Real in Fiction

¹³ See Durbin (2020) and Sandomir (2017).

As noted, real sports journalists typically appear in sports films to give a sense of verisimilitude to the stories. This role grows out of the sports journalist's role as chorus. Real journalists usually appear in their role as reporters, relating the story of a fictional sporting event to us in a manner that lends credence to the event's narrative.

There have been few more fancifully fictional sports films than Sylvester Stallone's *Rocky* series. Often so far-fetched as to border on self-satire, the films have portrayed Rocky as fighting everything from an obvious caricature of Muhammad Ali to a robotic steroid-filled Soviet cold warrior. One of the few constants in the Rocky universe, as constant as the great fighter himself, is the play-by-play broadcaster at all of Rocky's matches. Longtime Los Angeles sports journalist Stu Nahan played the role in each Rocky outing, even recording a voice-over for the revival *Rocky Balboa* (2006).

A former professional hockey player, Nahan had already enjoyed a twenty-year career in television by 1975. In the early days of television, Nahan had performed play-by-play sportscasting, been the news anchor on local sports (at KCBS, KNBC and his longest tenure, at KTLA-TV, all television stations in Los Angeles), had appeared on national sports programs and had even been the star of local kid's programs in a variety of markets. By the mid-seventies, Nahan was nearly ubiquitous in television sports. However, he claimed that a cameo in an earlier movie landed him the *Rocky* role.

In 1971, Nahan made a brief but important appearance in the made-for-tv movie *Brian's Song* as the emcee of a testimonial dinner honoring NFL legend Gale Sayers. *Brian's Song*, the story of the life and recent death of NFL running back Brian Piccolo, became something of a

cultural phenomenon in the early 1970s.¹⁴ Hugely successful both in ratings and with critics, the film won a Peabody Award as well as a Director's Guild Award and four Emmys. The film was such a success that its producers took the unprecedented step of releasing it to movie theaters after its network showing. *Brian's Song* competed with the popular James Bond feature *Diamonds are Forever* (1971) in theaters across the country.

Nahan believed that his small but pivotal role in the film put him in line for the *Rocky* role. While Nahan was not a Chicago broadcaster and the film never specifies the emcee as a sportscaster, Nahan plays a role typically taken by a local sportscaster, emceeding an important dinner for Chicago's football team. Gale Sayers's speech honoring the dying Piccolo, delivered at that dinner, is the film's emotional climax. So, at the film's most impacting moment, Nahan plays the secondary role of a presumed sportscaster, once again filling in the expositional link that sets up the climax. Nahan would later say that this proximity to one of the seminal moments in sports film history would create a new career for him, leading to persistent offers for sportscaster roles in films.

Of course, the most important offer Nahan received was to appear as the ringside play-by-play broadcaster in *Rocky*. Throughout the *Rocky* series, Nahan's character performs the function a sports reporter would in real life. He explains what is happening in the fight, responds with shock at the violence of blows landed and the punishment the film's hero Rocky Balboa takes, and guides the audience through the climactic moments of the film. The *Rocky* series was never anything close to subtle. So, it is not surprising that the films would include sports reporters to explain actions the audience was seeing on the big screen.

¹⁴ John J. O'Connor, 'Brian's Song is Proving to Be a Film Phenomenon', January 27, 1972, *New York Times* Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/01/28/archives/-brians-song-is-proving-to-be-a-film-phenomenon.html> (accessed April 19, 2020).

There were also two narrative reasons for including commentators in these films. First, the experience of the vast majority of boxing fans in the 1970s came from viewing the sport on television, not from seeing it live. Boxing was immensely popular television viewing during the decade. So much so that NBC developed a primetime boxing series that lasted exactly one night, May 11, 1977, killed by a 58-second knockout of Duane Bobick by Ken Norton. NBC had to fill the remaining 58 minutes of primetime television with awkward replays and commentary. ABC and CBS filled many weekends with boxing matches on their “Wide World of Sports” and “Sports Spectacular” shows. Given that so much of the audience viewed boxing on television, it must have seemed natural to include sportscasters in the film, making the on-screen boxing matches essentially 35mm television broadcasts.

Sportscasters may also have been included because the boxing scenes were essentially silent otherwise. Sound effects of punches landing, occasional musical punctuation, the boxers grunting and, at times, talking to each other left the films with lengthy dialogue free moments. The sportscasters fill in that time with somewhat obvious descriptions of the match.

Significantly, this dialogue reinforces the action and emotion of the boxing scenes. As in *Pride of the Yankees*, the sportscasters fill in narrative exposition, telling us what is happening and how we should feel about it. When Rocky is hit again and again, sweat and blood flying from his face, the shock and, at times, horror in Nahan’s commentary and performance reinforce the audience’s feelings, justifying them as real. The fact that Nahan was a well-known sports reporter fortifies that emotional response. This is not simply an actor registering shock. This is a sportscaster whose reports we are habituated to accept as objective and accurate. Blurring the lines between “real” sports and sports film, the real broadcaster gives the reports a dramatic conviction they would not otherwise have.

Nahan's performance in *Rocky* was good enough to give him repeat work for years in *Rocky* sequels, though he believed that his roles had more to do with Hollywood superstition than with his acting. Nahan claimed that the makers of *Rocky* hoped to catch some of the lightning in a bottle that propelled *Brian's Song*, which was one reason for hiring him. He was quite certain that his repeat performances were because the filmmakers were scared to replace him after the success of the original film. However, much truth there may have been to those ideas, Nahan's performance not only reinforced the emotional dynamics of each film's climax, but they also gave an added sense of authority and realism to some almost comically far-fetched boxing matches. The image of the real sports journalist again reflects our expectations of sports journalists in popular culture. Sitting at the side of the action, the sports journalist explains what is happening and how we should feel about it.

Nahan's success led to roles satirizing his famous movie calls, such as a brief cameo in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982). Comic satires on sports journalists might almost be a subcategory of roles, offering a humorous image of the sports journalist in cinema, often in films having nothing to do with sports. Sportscasters have made cameo appearances in movie satires such *The Naked Gun* (1988), typically making fun of the excesses identified with sports broadcasters' game calls. Notably, these satires only work because sports fans are perceived as accepting these performing quirks as natural parts of reporting on games. Even satire reinforces the image of the sports journalist as the story's expositor, restating and affirming the story's dramatic points.

The Image of the Incidental Sports Journalist

For want of a better term, I have identified this category as "wish fulfillment". This is largely due to the fact that my illustrations have involved wish fulfillment narratives. I noted

these films because they included characters who were sports journalists or writers. In many respects, the fact that they were sports journalists was incidental to the plot. The film with the most clearly defined sports journalist, *Woman of the Year*, did not focus on reporting sports events. In fact, for the most part, sports are not even part of the plot. Sports journalism sets up the film's narrative but is not the focus of it.

Woman of the Year was the first co-starring vehicle for Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Tracy plays a sports reporter at odds with Hepburn, a socialite and political journalist. The film is a typical 1940s Hollywood fantasy. Tracy, the ruffled everyman, falls in love with and finally wins Hepburn, the near perfect "woman of the year." The film purports to satirize and challenge gender assumptions of the day. In doing so, it offers one incident involving sport.

Tracy and Hepburn go to a baseball game so that he can explain it to her. Presumably like any other red-blooded American man, Tracy cannot fathom why anyone would want to ban baseball. The game is such a fundamental rite in men's lives, the idea that anyone would question its value is unthinkable. The game episode is played for humor, Tracy trying to explain the seemingly ludicrous practices of baseball to a woman. While the film would seem to challenge gender assumptions, it largely does so by reinforcing them. Hepburn, a woman, cannot understand either the logic of the game, which seems so apparent to men, or the high value men place on it. In a later episode, Hepburn tries to learn cooking as, it would seem, a woman of the year in 1942 America who could not cook would be unthinkable.

Tracy is never shown engaging in serious sports reporting in the film. As the baseball episode indicates, his job as sports reporter is background for the plot. Being a sports reporter is a signifier, identifying Tracy's character as the most common of common men in the pre-war United States. As the average American male, he loves sports, watches them, understands them

and can explain them. In fact, as a sports lover, his role as a sports reporter is itself a wish fulfillment for the average American man. He does not work for a living. He watches sports. This embodiment of a common man fantasy, of course, makes Tracy the most complete contrast possible for the powerful and connected Hepburn and makes his victory in winning her love all the sweeter. Tracy succeeds in fulfilling two male fantasies of 1940s America, living his life watching sports and winning the ideal mate.

The Sports Journalist in Film

The image of the sports journalist in film, then, largely reflects the image of the sports journalist in public life. The sports journalist typically appears as an expositor, a narrative facilitator. The bulk of movies represent the real or fictional sports journalist as an extension of the storyteller. The sports journalist is not a protagonist but a character who explains, moves forward, and indicates the sentiment of the story. The sports journalist is our link to the sports heroes of our public lore.

In the few instances in which a lead character is or has been a sports reporter their role as reporter has tended to function as a signifier of cultural assumptions regarding men, their interests and values. As an image of the “American male”, the sports reporter recreates an image many sports fans have of sports reporters in real life. Sports reporters are paid to watch and write or talk about the games they love. In popular culture, their image is a wish fulfillment fantasy for sports fans. As such, they make the leap to larger wish fulfillment narratives, ones hardly possible to most people, more reasonable. They give these far-fetched stories greater narrative coherence or probability.¹⁵

¹⁵ Walter Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).