

The Best & Worst Baseball Movies

Written by {ga=mitch}

Sunday, April 05 2009 7:00 PM -

Play Ball! For many of us, especially here at TheClevelandFan, there are few words that can be sweeter to hear. Not only because of the fact that another season of Indians baseball is about to begin, but also because those words indicate something else; the official End of Winter, and the Start of Spring. For some reason, baseball has led to more great movies than any other sport. And in Mitch's latest, he explains why that is ... and also lays out his best and worst baseball movies of all-time.



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For many of us, especially here at TheClevelandFan, there are few words that can be sweeter to hear. Not only because of the fact that another season of Indians baseball is about to begin, but also because those words indicate something else; the official End of Winter, and the Start of Spring.

OK...we'll temporarily gloss over the fact that at least half of the years, there will be snow falling at some point in one of the early Indians games.

So it is with high hopes and a warm heart that we hear those words, with high expectations of another successful season for Grady Sizemore and company.

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In honor of that, let's take a look at some of the best translations of the Grand Old Game to the Silver Screen. More than any other sport, baseball has been able to cross over the bridge from male-dominated athletics to movies; with the results often being films that are just as popular with women as with men. As for why that happens, I'll quote myself, from the very first column I ever wrote for Swerb, focusing on Sports Movies in general.

For some reason, baseball has led to more great movies than any other sport. There are many theories on that, but in my opinion, it's a combination of a few things. First is the James Earl Jones/Terence Mann theory from "Field of Dreams";

"The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time."

Baseball is a great topic for nostalgia; always has been. In addition, the pace of the game itself allows for it to be more in the background, leaving more time to be devoted to characters.

So with that said, let's get to the meat of it all;

Top 25 Baseball Movies

1 - ***Bull Durham*** (1988)

It's been over twenty years since this came out, and it still seems as fresh as ever when you watch it. The best part of this movie is that it looks not at the big stars of baseball, but at the struggling minor leaguer, not surprising since writer/director Ron Shelton was a former minor league player. Adding to that is the pitch perfect performances from all of the characters. Kevin Costner has never been better than he was playing the world-weary, seen-it-all catcher Crash Davis; a man who

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still had it together, and was bound and determined not to let it go. Costner was perfectly complimented by Susan Sarandon as the hottest MILF ever to grace the screen as Annie Savoy, and Tim Robbins as the epitome of the phrase "million dollar arm with a two cent head"; pitcher Nuke LaLoosh. But it's still Crash's "I believe" speech that to this day will make any woman watching it sigh...

"Well, I believe in the soul, the cock, the pussy, the small of a woman's back, the hanging curve ball, high fiber, good scotch, that the novels of Susan Sontag are self-indulgent, overrated crap. I believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. I believe there ought to be a constitutional amendment outlawing AstroTurf and the designated hitter. I believe in the sweet spot, soft-core pornography, opening your presents Christmas morning rather than Christmas Eve and I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days."

2 - **Field of Dreams** (1989)

Costner had quite a two year stretch, didn't he? I still can't for the life of me wrap my hands and mind around the idea of this film being as successful as it was. Nothing was ever really explained as far as why Ray Kinsella started hearing voices saying "If you build it; He will come". But the fairy tale movie just hit all of the right chords. Ray Liotta was incredible as Shoeless Joe Jackson, and screen legends James Earl Jones and Burt Lancaster showed why the word "legend" applied so well to them. I still can't flip channels and turn this off once I see it...and I still tear up every damn time I watch the end, thinking of the minor league baseball catcher who was my father, who I still miss so much 11 years after his passing.

3 - **The Natural** (1984)

Robert Redford may have been a bit old to play the mythical Roy Hobbs, but once he got into it, you never really concerned yourself with it. Like "Field of

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Dreams", this one also has that aura of the supernatural about it, but it still works so well. Like most great movies, there are always scenes that stick out in your mind...and with this film, there is the one that immediately flashes for everyone; Roy hitting that last homerun into the lights, setting off the fireworks display of popping bulbs as he slowly trots around the bases to the sound of Randy Newman's haunting score.

4 - *Eight Men Out* (1988)

Notice a theme so far? All the Top 4 are from the 1980s. Not sure why...it just worked out that way. Another surprise was how great this movie really was. Director John Sayles captured the time perfectly in this study of the infamous 1919 Chicago White Sox as they conspired to throw the World Series. History has always painted these "Black Sox" as despicable scum, but Sayles gets down to the grit of it all. In 1919, pro players were not the spoiled multi-millionaires we now see. In fact, most of them had to work second jobs in the off season to support themselves. The real greed was seen in the owners boxes. A very powerful film that should be watched by any MLB fan.

5 - *61** (2001)

Maybe this technically doesn't belong here as it was never released theatrically, premiering instead on HBO...but I don't care. Billy Crystal has long been known as a baseball fanatic, and this film he put together chronicling the 1961 season when both Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris were chasing Babe Ruth's single season home run record was superb. Thomas Jane as Mantle and Barry Pepper as Maris were spot-on in their portrayal of these two friends and teammates; men who could not have been more different. In light of the recent home run "champions" who got most of their talent from a syringe...this movie points out true sports legends.

6 - *Pride of the Yankees* (1942)

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You know it has to be a good movie when a die-hard Indians fan like myself will put a second Yankees movie into my Top 10. But this portrayal of all around good guy Lou Gehrig certainly qualifies as an All-Time Classic. Gary Cooper was incredible in his performance as the tragic and heroic first baseman.

7 - *A League of Their Own* (1992)

A completely unique movie that still seems quite familiar. The chemistry between Tom Hanks and Gina Davis was fantastic, and the supporting cast superb. Even Madonna and Rosie O'Donnell failed to agitate, playing their parts perfectly.

Jimmy Dugan: *Are you crying? Are you crying? ARE YOU CRYING? There's no crying! THERE'S NO CRYING IN BASEBALL!* ☐

Doris Murphy: *Why don't you give her a break, Jimmy...* ☐

Jimmy Dugan: *Oh, you zip it, Doris! Rogers Hornsby was my manager, and he called me a talking pile of pigsh*t. And that was when my parents drove all the way down from Michigan to see me play the game. And did I cry?* ☐

Evelyn Gardner: *No, no, no.* ☐

Jimmy Dugan: *Yeah! NO. And do you know why?* ☐

Evelyn Gardner: *No...* ☐

Jimmy Dugan: *Because there's no crying in baseball. THERE'S NO CRYING IN BASEBALL! No crying!*

8 - *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973)

Out of all the movies in my Top 10, I would hazard to guess that this is one less that 25% of you have seen. Not your typical baseball film by any means. More of a character study in the relationship between a star pitcher, played by Michael Moriarty, and a mentally challenged catcher played by Robert De Niro, a man facing a terminal illness.

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9 - **Major League** (1989)

What kind of an Indians fan would I be if this wasn't in the Top 10? Twenty years after it was first released, and I'll still stop and watch part of it if I catch it on cable (premium channels only, as the way they edit it on network TV is a travesty). For those of us who remember how bad the Indians used to be, it's a wonderful little look back.

So, here is Rick Vaughn, the one they call the "Wild Thing". So, he sets and deals. ☐

[Vaughn throws a wild pitch] ☐

Just a bit outside, he tried for the corner and missed. ☐

[Vaughn throws another wild pitch] ☐

Ball 4. ☐

[Vaughn throws another wild pitch] ☐

Ball 8. ☐

[Vaughn throws another wild pitch] ☐

Low, and he walks the bases loaded on 12 straight pitches. How can these guys lay off pitches that close?

10 - **The Stratton Story** (1949)

True story about Monty Stratton, a Chicago White Sox pitcher who lost his leg in a hunting accident in 1938. Wanting to leave baseball on his terms, he made a successful minor league comeback in 1946 even with a wooden leg. Well made movie with Jimmy Stewart doing his normal exceptional job as Stratton.

11 - **The Sandlot** (1993)

A special movie that is a homage to times that no longer seem to exist; groups of young kids getting together on a summer afternoon to play pick-up baseball.

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12 - ***Bad News Bears*** (1976)

The original is still the best. Walter Matthau as the beer swilling coach of a team full of misfits, led by Tatum O'Neal as the spunky tomboy pitcher

13 - ***It Happens Every Spring*** (1949)

Another classic that I'd recommend, if for no other reason as it really is so very dated...but amusing. A scientist discovers a formula that makes a baseball which is repelled by wood. And this was years before Gaylord Perry.

14 - ***Bingo Long and the Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings*** (1976)

Billy Dee Williams, a young (and tough looking) James Earl Jones, and Richard Pryor in a story about barnstorming players who no longer were content with completion in the Negro Leagues.

15 - ***Cobb*** (1994)

Great job by Tommy Lee Jones in this biography that pulled no punches in portraying a man who was one of the best players baseball has ever known, but a despicable human being.

16 - ***The Jackie Robinson Story*** (1950)

More noted for the fact that Robinson played himself in this film. In some regards,

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it is a puff piece on him...but there is still much that was 100% true regarding this courageous man's efforts to integrate baseball.

17 - *The Rookie* (2002)

Another true story, with Dennis Quaid playing a former minor league player now working as a coach, who tries out for the pros just because he lost a bet with his players. He's shocked to learn that in his layoff, his arm has healed enough to hit 95 on the radar gun, putting the 37 year old back in the game.

18 - *Pastime* (1991)

Another film focusing on the minor leagues. William Russ plays a veteran pitcher in 1957 tutoring a young African-American phenom. Think "Bull Durham" without the laughs, but still with outstanding performances.

19 - *The Kid from left Field* (1953)

Another "pull the heartstrings" classics, this one about a peanut vendor who is crazy about baseball whose son makes friends with the owner's daughter, leading to the son being made the league's youngest manager (at age 10), with Dad offering the advice.

20 - *Mr. Baseball* (1992)

A true hidden gem, with Tom Selleck playing an aging slugger who is traded to a team in Japan, where he bumps heads with the old-school manager, while wooing the manager's very modern daughter.

21 - ***For Love of the Game*** (1999)

One more Kevin Costner flick, this time as a pitcher on the verge of throwing a perfect game. As the game continues, he flashes back to the instances in his recent life that have led him to this moment.

22 - ***Fear Strikes Out*** (1957)

Bold at its time for taking on a very hush-hush topic; mental illness. Anthony Perkins plays former major league player Jimmy Piersall, who overcame his problems to make it to the Bigs, and then to return after a nervous breakdown. Now more widely recognized on how bad Perkins swing was on-screen.

23 - ***Angels in the Outfield*** (1994)

I'll have to admit that other people find this film much more amusing than I do. But it's got a great cast, a charming script, and enough hooks to make you feel good watching it.

24 - ***Rookie of the Year*** (1993)

In the same line, I'll admit that I may be the only person who would actually have this film in a Top 25. I can't help it, the goofy tale of a 12 year old kid whose arm accident allows him to throw 100+ mph pitches suckers me right in. Maybe it's due to the surprising job Gary Busey pulls off as the Cubs star pitcher.

25 - ***Damn Yankees*** (1958)

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That would be the original...not the stupid remake they plan on making. Quaint story of a middle-aged man selling his soul to the devil to get the Washington Senators into the World Series. Nowadays, they just sell their bodies to their pharmacist.

Worst 10 Baseball Movies

1 - *The Slugger's Wife* (1985)

Neil Simon's awful script about a first baseman for the Atlanta Braves (Michael O'Keefe) juggling his relationship with a pop singer (Rebeca De Mornay) with his chase for Roger Maris's record. The biggest joke was that Atlanta Fulton County Stadium was known as a pitcher's park. The second biggest joke was the script.

2 - *Amazing Grace & Chuck* (1987)

A 12 year old Little League pitcher refuses to play as a protest against nuclear weapons. An NBA star (Alex English) joins him. Terrible on so many levels.

3 - *Ed* (1996)

Joey Tribbianai (Matt LeBlanc) being out-acted by a chimpanzee, who also had more baseball skills.

4 - *The Benchwarmers* (2006)

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David Spade, Rob Schneider and Jon Heder playing three losers who play 3 man baseball against a full team of Little Leaguers. Calling it dumb is giving it more praise than it deserves.

5 - *Mr. 3000* (2004)

Bernie Mac as a former star player who has had three of his 3000 lifetime hits taken away, so at age 47, he makes a brief comeback. Bernie should have skipped this one as well.

6 - *BASEketball* (1998)

Trey Parker and Matt Stone should just stick with making South Park, and forget about trying to act. I know Bob Costas would love to be able to forget about appearing in this crap-fest

7 - *Little Big League* (1994)

A 12 year old kid takes over the ownership of the Minnesota Twins. Given that the real owner at the time was notorious cheapskate Cal Griffith, Twins fans were probably hoping it was a documentary.

8 - *The Fan* (1996)

Wesley Snipes plays a "serious" version of his Willie Mays Hayes character, and Robert DeNiro plays the obsessed fan stalking him. Lame.

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9 - ***Brewsters Millions*** (1985)

I know a lot of people liked this film. I wasn't one of them.

10 - ***The Babe*** (1992)

Babe Ruth may have been fat...but he was not John Goodman fat. This biopic did no favors to the Babe or to Goodman.