In a refresh of his first ever column penned for this site, over a year and a half ago, The Mitch Man takes a look at the best and worst sports movies ever made for us here at TCF. There are plenty of great sports flicks, and Mitch hits on just about all of the good ones, showin' some love for classics such as Bull Durham, Major League, Hoosiers, Caddyshack, and The Raging Bull. Another great column from one of our most popular writers.

The world of athletics and sporting events has long served as inspirations for films. What's not to like? There are all kinds of opportunities to show men (mostly) and women at their best (and worst); striving against long odds, failing early only to rise again, learning important lessons about life, love, and the origins of the universe (which has something to do with all people possessing really bad Karma coming back in life as fans of Cleveland sports…but that is a horse dropping of a different color).

I truly do love sports movies, although my one major complaint is that 99% of the time, screenwriters don't have to work that hard on them. It is easy to figure out the plot lines, the villains, and the struggles that will happen in each of them. Plus, they so often end with THE BIG GAME!!! In football in particular, the odds are about 8:1 that you will see a slow motion play near the goal line with lots of grunting, hitting, and spin moves as the QB/RB/WR avoids 18 players, two assistant coaches, and a mascot before finding the end zone for THE BIG WIN.

But I'll leave (most of) my quibbling aside for now and get to the point of this edition; which will be to write about what I think is the best and worst movies for each sport. I'll also include some honorable mentions, guilty pleasures, and my thoughts on what actors I thought were most realistic and least realistic.

Baseball:

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.

Best Baseball Movie: *Bull Durham* (1988). This was a very tough one for me. I feel *that Field of Dreams* is a better movie, but *Bull Durham* is about baseball, where *Field of Dreams* is about…"ghosts that tell you to build a ball field in a cornfield so you can play catch with your dead daddy while grown men cry in the theater".

So *Bull Durham* it is. Funny, accurate, touching, and featuring some great actors who were truly on their game, and long before they turned a bit wacko (Kevin Costner, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon). Regardless of how they are now, this look at life in the Carolina League is a classic that is just as much fun to watch now as it was when it first came out.

Best of all; it's a great date movie! Take a woman to that movie, and then watch her sigh when Costner delivers his "what I believe" speech. Say "Hell, yeah" right when he's done, and you've earned major brownie points with her. You'll thank me later.

Honorable Mention: *The Natural* (1984) and *Eight Men Out* (1988). Again, *The Natural*
uses baseball more as a background and a metaphor (can metaphors pay?), but it's still a classic, and the last action sequence is one of the best ever filmed. Think about that last home run in your mind, and I guarantee that you are hearing the French horns from Randy Newman's beautiful score.

Eight Men Out is a very underrated movie that I recommend highly. Watching how the players struggled to make ends meet makes you truly understand how different of a world we live in now ("next question", sez Drew Rosenhaus).

Special Mention: *Major League*(1989). I watched it on HBO about a month ago, probably for the first time in 10 years, and was struck on (a) how funny it still is, and (b) how dated it is due to the later success of the Indians and the changes in Cleveland itself.

Worst Baseball Movie: *The Slugger's Wife* (1985). Yech. Neil Simon writes a horrible story about a major league hitter (Michael O'Keefe) in Atlanta (a noted pitchers' ballpark at the time) going after Roger Maris' home run record while

hooking up with a singer (Rebecca De Mornay). The story was conjured up by an undoubtedly coked up Simon after reading a couple of tabloids about 'hot' LA Couple Belinda Carlisle and Dodger Mike Marshall. When the Maria Carey/Derek Jeter version comes out, please put Dr. Kevorkian on speed dial.

Guilty Pleasure: *Mr. Baseball* (1992). Tom Selleck stars as a player on the downside of his career that gets traded to a team in Japan. While there, he of course rediscovers himself, his game, finds love, and we get to laugh at those goofy Japanese and their strange ways! Despite the premise, it's a good popcorn flick. Selleck was never better, and the baseball sequences are excellent.

Most Realistic Performance: Kevin Costner in *Bull Durham*. Great swing from both sides of the plate and very convincing as a catcher. I'm probably prejudiced as I was a catcher, but I still laugh out loud in remembrance when I see him tip off the batter for the pitch after Robbins keeps shaking him off. Another catcher's revelation: my signal for the pitcher to throw a brush back pitch was to extend my middle finger and subtlety (so the base umpires wouldn't see it) point it towards the batter.

Least Realistic Performance: So much bad form, only one award. Anthony Perkins generally gets mentioned by most critics for his awkward right handed swing as loony Jimmy Piersall in *Fear Strikes Out* (Perkins was a lefty)…but that movie was clear back in 1957, and no one remembers it. So let's make it Tim Robbins for a *Bull Durham* trifecta. Even before the comical Fernando Valenzuela eye roll and turn, Robbins' stiff delivery might have resulted in at best a 45 mph fastball.

Football:

Despite the fact that football is the most popular sport in America, it has had trouble translating to the big screen. Perhaps it's because the players' faces can't bee seen clearly with the helmets, or maybe it's just that to the layman, it's just too complicated of a game (see also, hockey).

Best Football Movie: *North Dallas Forty* (1979). Nothing has come close to portraying the world of the NFL as well as this thinly disguised look at the Dallas Cowboys of the 70s, written by former Dallas receiver Peter Gent. Nick Nolte excelled as the fading wide out struggling with pain, drugs, partying, and life on the bench while country star Mac Davis totally surprised me with how well he handled his part as Don Merideth…er…'fictional' QB Seth Maxwell. Special mention to Bo Svenson and John Mutuszak as the deranged offensive linemen.

Honorable Mention: *Friday Night Lights* (2004) Based on a true story regarding the Odessa Texas perennial powerhouse high school team, it's a revealing look at the roll high school football plays in the life of a small, economically depressed town. Like *Remember the Titans*, this works because the focus is primarily on the coach. As a side note, what is it with Billy Bob Thorton and country singers? Both Dwight Yoakam in *Sling Blade* and Tim McGraw in this movie proved themselves to quite capable of making a career of acting if they ever got tired of twanging about their dead dogs and women problems.

Worst Football Movie: *Any Given Sunday* (1999). The video game of this stinker is now being marketed as "Blitz: The League" with Lawrence Taylor pimping a game based upon the antics of the Baltimore Ratbirds. I'm surprised Al Pacino didn't gain 50 pounds with all the scenery he chewed up. Oliver Stone warmed up the motorcycle on "U-Turn" in 1997. He then used it to jump the shark with this mess. Glad to have seen him recover last year with *World Trade Center.*

Guilty Pleasure: *Necessary Roughness* (1991). Scott Bakula, Sinbad, Hector Elizondo, Robert Loggia, Harley Jane Kozak, Larry Miller…all perfectly cast in this fluff piece about a former national champion trying to field a team with castoffs…even Rob Schneider was hilarious as the announcer (fumbleiya!). And then Kathy Ireland shows up at her finest halfway through the movie as the new kicker. HOO-AH!

Most Realistic Performance: Tom Cruise in *All the Right Moves* (1983). He was very convincing as a high school cornerback in one football movie that doesn't end in The Big Game. The movie itself was also very realistic in its portrayal of life in a Western Pennsylvania or Easter Ohio coal/steel town. The first scene of Cruise looking out his window to the overcast skies in a desolate town was eerily similar to my view out my window growing up near Mansfield.

Least Realistic Performance: Adam Sandler in *The Longest Yard* (2005). Tim Couch had more arm strength five minutes after his shoulder surgery was finished than the diminutive Sandler exhibited.

Basketball:

Basketball is like football in terms of not being depicted very well on screen. My completely unscientific research would indicate that it's because they can't find decent actors that can portray basketball players. This is due to all actors being short suckers that went into acting because they were too small and girlish to make it on a sports team in high school. For your proof, you need look no further than Billy Crystal's horrific *My Giant* with Gheorghe Muresan. And all the tall players sucked in *Space Jam*, with only Mugsy Bogues showing any acting ability.

(Spare me your nasty emails…I'm slightly over six feet tall, and also participated in both sports and acting. So what is bubbling up here is just the natural jealously that all critics have against those that made it, while we can only report about it. "Snarky comments: Dirt cheap" to steal a phrase from a friend of mine).

Best Basketball Movie: *Hoosiers* (1986). Once again, the stories centered on the coach are best. Gene Hackman as the coach with the checkered past looking for redemption in a small Indiana town, assisted by town drunk Dennis Hopper. Everyone loves an underdog story, but it's even better when it is inspired by something that really happened (the 1954 Milan High School championship season). Add in superb acting, directing, and screenwriting and you have a Top 100 all-time movie, not just a great sports movie.

Honorable Mention: *He Got Game* (1998). Great expose of college recruiting (of course anything would be better than *On e on One* or *Blue Chips*) with true basketball star Ray Allen holding his own with the always charismatic Denzel Washington. Not much on actual basketball action, which may be one of its strong points.

Worst Basketball Movie: *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh* (1979). Given a choice of watching this movie or chewing on tinfoil…pass the Reynolds Wrap and a Jack Daniels chaser, please. It has the word "Pittsburgh" in the title without the required "SUCKS" that is supposed to immediately follow it, so you know from that alone that it's bad. Add disco music and astrology, and you have the Appalachian Triangle of Suckitude.

Guilty Pleasure: *Fast Break* (1979). Gabe Kaplan, leveraging off his popularity as Mr. Kotter, plays a New York basketball enthusiast with no coaching experience that is hired to improve a team in a small, unknown Western college. So he brings four total clichés from New Yawk to Hickville (including a woman

binding up her boobs to masquerade as a man) and proceeds to kick butt. Stupid. Predictable. Completely unrealistic. But fun.

Most Realistic Performance: Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson in *White Men Can't Jump*
. Snipes looked damn good on the court, and Harrelson had a sneaky smoothness about him that had you believing he could be a street court hustler.

Least Realistic Performance: Robby Benson in *One on One*. Benson was something like five foot four and weighed a buck twenty, and we're supposed to believe he was one of the most highly coveted basketball recruits in the country?

Hockey:

There are no great hockey movies, but there are some decent ones, along with some completely mindless dreck.

Best Hockey Movie: *Slap Shot* (1977). Paul Newman smashes his own leading man stereotype as player coach of a sad-sack minor league hockey team in Charleston WV in this low-brow, hilarious movie. See Paul in a fur pimp coat dropping f-bombs all over the place! See the Hanson Brothers act like they're trying out for the Cincinnati Bengals On Ice! See what actresses looked like in nude scenes in the time before breast implants!

Honorable Mention: *Miracle* (2004). Everyone knows the story, the circumstances, the people, and the outcome, but it's still a treat to watch. Coolest trivia about this movie was having Billy Schneider, a hockey player in his own right, portraying his father, Buzz Schneider.

Worst Hockey Movie: *Mighty Ducks* (1996). Tried to be *The Bad News Bears* of hockey, but with Emilio Estevez instead of Walter Matthau (or Billy Bob Thorton, for that matter). And then they named a real (supposedly) NHL team after them? Where is that barfing emoticon when I need it?

Guilty Pleasure: *Mystery, Alaska* (1999). Russell Crowe before he turned total jerk, Burt Reynolds before he lost his mind, and a great ensemble cast in a film about a local club team in Alaska. It would have been even better if they'd just kept the focus of it on the team and community, rather than adding the ridiculous plot twist of flying in the NY Rangers up to Alaska to play them.

Most Realistic Performance: Tough call, as the action was fantastic in *Miracle*, but it should have been, as almost all of the actors were selected because they were hockey players. So I'll go with Michael Ontkean in *Slap Shot* (who was also a hockey player at a younger age…but not tall).

Least Realistic Performance: Rob Lowe in *Youngblood*. The movie itself was almost as bad as *Might y Ducks*. I could buy Lowe in a movie about figure skating, but he was just a joke as a Gretzky-esque speed player who had to learn to fight on the rink to make it.

Short Version of the Rest:

Boxing:

Best Movie: *Raging Bull* (1980). DeNiro Rules! This film losing the Best Picture to *Ordinary People* was an injustice not seen again until *Shakespeare In Love* beat *Saving Private Ryan* .

Honorable Mention: *Rocky* (1976). I was definitely glad to see Sly Stallone finally go back to the roots of this movie as he closed it out last year with *Rocky Balboa*

Worst Movie: *Play It To the Bone* (1999). Was it a comedy? Drama? Buddy Movie? Who knows? "Awful" is the best word to use.

Guilty Pleasure: *The Main Event* (1979) I know…deduction of 15 macho points for mentioning a Barbra Streisand movie.

Most Realistic Performance: Will Smith in *Ali*

Least Realistic Performance: Clint Eastwood in *Any Which Way But Loose*

Golf:

Best Movie: *Caddyshack* (1980). *"License to kill gophers by the government of the United Nations. Man, free to kill gophers at will. To kill, you must know your enemy, and in this case my enemy is a varmint. And a varmint will never quit -*

ever. They're like the Viet Cong - Varmint Cong. So you have to fall back on superior intelligence and superior firepower. And that's all she wrote." – Carl Spackler (And the American Express commercial they did last year with Tiger Woods playing Carl Spackler was on of the greatest commercials ever).

Honorable Mention: *Tin Cup* (1996). What golfer hasn't wanted to snap every club in his bag (except his favorite one) at some point or another?

Worst Movie: *Caddyshack II* (1988). I normally don't even consider sequels, since most are bad…but this is so bad that once Art Model kicks off, he should have to watch it five times a day for eternity.)

Guilty Pleasure: *Happy Gilmore* (1996). A bare knuckles fist fight with 120 year old Bob Barker? BRILLIANT!!

Most Realistic Performance: Kevin Costner in *Tin Cup*

Least Realistic Performance: Matt Damon in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. My swing on the 18th hole after having 17 drinks is prettier than that.

Auto Racing:

Best Movie: *Bobby Deerfield* (1977). Back when Pacino was a god.

Honorable Mention: *Talladega Nights* (2006). Who know that making fun of NASCAR and rednecks (almost a redundant statement) could be so profitable? And where is my take? "Help me, Tom Cruise!!! I'm on fire!!!"

Worst Movie: So many contenders…*Driven* (2001), *Cannonball Run* (1981) and
Days of Thunder
(1990) are awful; but nothing is as stupid, boring, or inane as
Stroker Ace
(1983)

Guilty Pleasure: *Gumball Rally* (1976). Too bad Burt Reynolds stole the concept a few years later and made
Cannonball Run
. Even worse that he made
Cannonball Run 2
.

Most Realistic Performance: Barry Pepper in *3* (ESPN)

Least Realistic Performance: Tom Cruise in *Days of Thunder*

Womens' Sports:

Best Movie: *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). On my Top Ten List for all movies for 2002.

Honorable Mention: *A League of Their Own* (1992). *"There's no crying in BASEBALL!!!"*

Worst Movie: *Ice Castles* (1978). Robby Benson strikes again.

Guilty Pleasure: *Wimbledon* (2004). So sue me.

Most Realistic Performance: Keira Knightley in *Bend It Like Beckham*

Least Realistic Performance: Mariel Hemmingway in *Personal Best*

Other Sports:

Best Movie: *Chariots of Fire* (1981). One of only three sports based films to win the Oscar for Best Picture (*Rocky* and *Million Dollar Baby* being the others).

Honorable Mention: *Breaking Away* (1979). Who would have thought a film about a bike race would be so charming?

Honorable Mention: *Green Street Hooligans* (2005). More about the gangs that follow the sport in London than about soccer itself, but still an amazing film with Elijah Wood as the outsider drawn into the violence and camaraderie.

Worst Movie: *American Anthem* (1986). This and *Gymkata* should keep all gymnasts off the screen forever…but that didn't happen as we had the horrible *Stick It* last year.

Guilty Pleasure: *Cool Runnings* (1993). My favorite John Candy film.

Most Realistic Performance: Matthew Modine as a high school wrestler in *Vision Quest*.

Least Realistic Performance: Sylvester Stalone as a goalie in *Victory.*

As always, my opinion plus $9.00 will get you into most movie theaters where you can judge for yourself.