

Hysteria never helped anyone

Any Given Sunday, directed by Oliver Stone

David Walsh
12 February 2000

Screen story by Daniel Pyne and John Logan, screenplay by Stone and Logan

This is Oliver Stone's film about professional football. Tony D'Amato (Al Pacino) is the coach of the Miami Sharks, a few years previously a championship franchise, but now on a three-game losing streak. When Cap Rooney (Dennis Quaid), the team's aging quarterback, goes down with an injury, Willie Beamen (Jamie Foxx), his unheralded replacement, makes the most of the opportunity. His showboating and arrogant antics, however, threaten to disrupt the Sharks.

Meanwhile the team's young owner, Christina Pagniaci (Cameron Diaz), who inherited the franchise from her father, is giving D'Amato a difficult time. She wants to turn the team's fortunes around quickly, whatever it takes. She's even considering moving the team to another city. The film follows the Sharks through the last three games of the regular season and the first game of the playoffs in the fictional Association of Football Franchises of America (AFFA).

Any Given Sunday is loud, nervous and violent from beginning to end. Collisions on the football field are lovingly shown and re-shown. There are scenes without cursing and ranting, but not many. When the characters are not screaming at each other, televisions blare in the background, or the film's soundtrack deafens you.

People yell at each other constantly, but, afterward, you can't remember exactly why. There are no principled differences amongst any of them. D'Amato is apparently supposed to represent the "old school," the Vince Lombardi approach: endless self-sacrifice, total submission to the needs of the team. He has ridiculous visions of shadowy men playing football in the glory days of the 1930s, 40s and 50s. He's given up "everything" for the team, he tells Christina Pagniaci—everything, that is, except *an enormous salary and a palatial home by the sea*. The irony obviously never occurred to anyone in the wealthy, complacent crowd involved in the film's production. So much for contemporary Hollywood's vision of self-sacrifice!

Team owner Pagniaci sees sport as big business, without sentimentality or any other concern. Beamen represents the younger generation, media-conscious, selfish, ignorant of history or tradition. (In passing, it's worth noting that when

every character functions rigidly in this manner as a social or cultural Type there is no possibility of spontaneous human activity and therefore any real depth of insight.) Of course, in the end, both Beamen and Pagniaci begin to see the light, and learn something about "character" and "leadership."

In one of the climactic scenes, D'Amato makes an inspirational speech to his team, in which he calls on them to carve out that extra inch that makes the difference, as the chastened Beamen edges forward in the crowd of players, nodding his head. From the life-and-death tone of the performance, you'd think Pacino was performing the Saint Crispin's day speech from *Henry V*. ("We few, we happy few, we band of brothers...") You want to jump up in the movie theater and shout at the screen, "This is about a football game! Are we supposed to take this seriously?"

If we are to believe him, Stone does. He explains, "The spotlight only goes to the stars, but people forget the concept of a team. There is only one winner at the end of the day. The individuals come and go, but a great team is like a great movie—the whole is greater than any part."

The screenplay feels as if it had been written by a committee. Indeed, according to the film's production notes, it was: "Stone's and producer Dan Halsted's intentions to make a movie about pro football began to take shape at Turner Pictures four years ago, when Stone developed a script called 'Monday Night' written by Jamie Williams, a former tight end for the San Francisco 49ers, and Richard Weiner, a sports journalist and co-writer (with Joe Montana) of Joe Montana's *Art and Magic of Quarterbacking*. Stone separately acquired the spec script 'On Any Given Sunday,' by Chicago playwright John Logan. The two stories had remarkable similarities and, when Turner Pictures folded into Warner Bros. in 1996, Stone amalgamated another, third, series of scripts developed by Richard Donner and Lauren Shuler Donner at Warner's over several years, under the title 'Playing Hurt,' which had also been in development for some time." How could a penetrating or insightful script emerge from such a process, which is more than anything else the working out of different financial and corporate arrangements?

In any event, the final result is at once cliched, impersonal and hysterical. Nearly everyone acts detestably throughout.

D'Amato, the most sympathetic figure, is full of himself, self-pitying and endlessly banal. Pagniacchi and her minions are monstrous. The film portrays the players as either out-and-out lunatics or ego-maniacs. The others—the media types, the “party girls,” the hangers-on—are depicted as whores of one variety or another. (Stone's misogyny is never pretty.) All in all, the filmmaker presents a vulgar, unprincipled and corrupt world virtually without a redeeming value.

Unfortunately, Stone (*Platoon*, *Wall Street*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, *Natural Born Killers*) seems incapable at this point in his career of providing an audience the breathing space it needs to consider his subject matter. He has been largely reduced to one tone—a high-pitched screech—and tends to rub the spectator's face over and over in the unpleasant material. This is not the same thing as making a criticism.

In the first place, the social critic is not overawed, or perhaps overwhelmed, by the phenomenon he's ostensibly examining, as Stone is. There is virtually no one who believes so ardently in the omnipotence and invincibility of American institutions as the American “radical” or ex-radical. The genuine critic approaches his or her subject from the point of view of registering a *protest* against the status quo and advancing in some fashion a different *and higher* social principle.

Everything about the film, in both style and substance, makes it clear that the filmmaker cannot find it within himself to oppose the degraded existence he presents. Inevitably, in the absence of *conscious* opposition, such a work becomes merely one more manifestation of the culture. Hence its popularity. Stone can imagine whatever he likes, but most of his audience sees the film as an even noisier and more violent extension of NFL football, ESPN, MTV, etc.

Much could be said at this point about professional sports in America. Two NFL players are currently facing murder charges. The evidence against O. J. Simpson, a retired football star, in the case of his wife's murder, seemed compelling. A professional basketball player recently died after he and a teammate staged a drag race on a public thoroughfare. Assault and rape charges against athletes are relatively commonplace. At the same time, star players now routinely sign contracts for ten million dollars or more a year and the public's adulation seemingly knows no bounds. There is something diseased about the entire situation: individuals with athletic skills and generally little else elevated to the status of gods.

Stone makes visual reference to the parallel between sport in America and in ancient Rome by including clips from the chariot race in *Ben Hur*. The point, although not subtly made, is a legitimate one. But the social and historical content is entirely lost. The supplying of “bread and circuses” to the masses is generally identified with the beginning of the decline of the Roman empire, a period in which political leaders used games—chiefly chariot racing and gladiatorial contests—to divert the population from its economic woes and its exclusion from any role in public affairs. One historian notes, “The more the

citizens of Rome lost their former political role and influence to the emperors the more they were drawn to the races.”

The case might be made that the rise of professional football—a sport at whose skill and violence level only a relative handful actually participate—to its present prominence coincides with certain historical trends in the US, especially the reduction of the mass of the population to the status of a disenfranchised spectator in the political process. There is something telling about millions of fans, passively but all the more ferociously, vicariously living through “their” teams and individual heroes every Sunday. So much of what people feel dissatisfied about pours uselessly one day a week into this substitute life. And because here too they are cheated out of a real role, indeed *by definition* any participation in the action is impossible for the spectator, the fans' frustration and inarticulate anger only build, adding to the general social tension.

Football, as a game, is as valid as any other. Many of today's players have astounding skills. However, much of what surrounds and permeates football at all levels today is repugnant. The game has become the means through which many of the worst aspects of American society enter into daily life: organized brutality, lack of culture, the commercial spirit.

There is also a direct link, which you'd think would have occurred to Stone, between professional sports, especially football, and patriotism and militarism. Football jargon (“blitzes,” “long bombs,” etc.) speaks openly of this connection. Players and supporters alike are whipped into a frenzy. Coaches see themselves, and are treated by the media, as generals preparing to wage battle. The language and attitudes of those in the game become more and more bombastic and bellicose. America holds over the world today its military superiority, and the “Super Bowl.” None of this is hinted at in Stone's shallow film.



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