

Film Feature: HollywoodChicago.com Tackles Pro Football Films

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 10, 2017 - 8:44pm

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CHICAGO – It's the opening Sunday of the NFL, and what better time to celebrate the films that celebrate the sport that celebrate the ballers. Film history has a steroid-free stack of pro football films in all categories. Patrick McDonald, Jon Lennon Espino and Spike Walters of HollywoodChicago.com take on three prime examples.



Da Boyz! James Caan and Billy Dee Williams Bear Down in 'Brian's Song'

Photo credit: Columbia TriStar Home Video

The earliest known footage of a football game was a 1903 match-up between powerhouses Princeton and Yale, filmed by Thomas Edison. The earliest narrative films dealt with the college game, from Harold Lloyd's "The Freshman" (1925) to the Marx Brothers in "Horse Feathers" (1932). An early example of a pro football movie is "The Cowboy Quarterback" (1939), which involves a scout for the "Chicago Packers" (gee, even in olden days screenwriters were lazy as shit).

The backfield in motion and HollywoodChicago.com contributors of Patrick McDonald, Jon Lennon Espino and "Spike" Walters pay tribute to three pro football cinematic treats, and score a touchdown on each.

★ BRIAN'S SONG (1971) by Patrick McDonald



Brian's Song

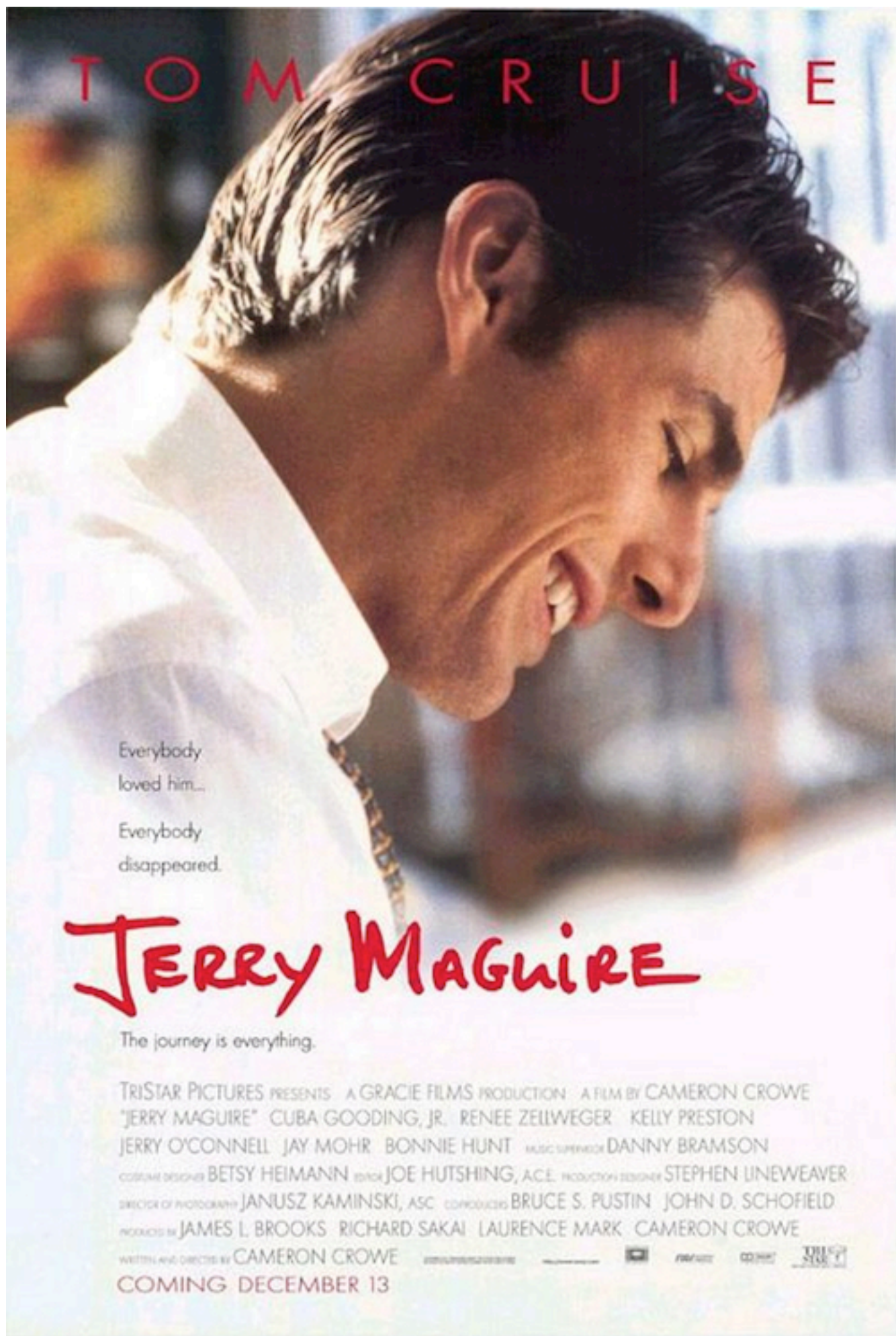
Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

Often called one of the greatest “guy-cry” movies in history, “Brian’s Song” began it’s journey as a real life event. The Chicago Bears drafted both Brian Piccolo (James Caan in the film) and Gale Sayers (Billy Dee Williams) as running backs in 1965. As Sayers broke out as a star, Piccolo had to patiently wait his turn (although he did substitute for an injured Sayers in the 1968 season). They were both starters in 1969 (Piccolo moved to fullback) and became the first mixed race roommates in Bears history. “Brian’s Song” goes over all the history, up to and including a diagnosis of cancer for Piccolo during that 1969 season, and his death less than a year later. Full of authentic 1970s-era NFL bonding – the film was remarkably shot the same year as Piccolo passed away, and premiered as a TV “Movie of the Week” less than a year a half after he died – the movie satisfied the sports angle, racial component and emotional elements in a memorable balance. It’s damned near impossible not to be moved by Williams-as-Sayers (in an exact quote from the real situation), after saying how much he loved Brian Piccolo, pleads to a football banquet audience to get on their knees and “ask God to love him.” Cue the waterworks, dude style.

EXTRA POINT: The film was shot at the Chicago Bears training camp at the time, in Rensselaer, Indiana. Several real Piccolo teammates/coaches had cameos, including quarterback Jack Concannon, the legendary Dick Butkus and Coach Abe Gibron, who possibly gave the worst line reading in recorded film history. The TV Movie was so popular, “Brian’s Song” was also released theatrically... and try and get that theme song (“The Hands of Time”) out of your head once you hear it.



JERRY MAGUIRE (1996) by Jon Lennon Espino



Jerry Maguire

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

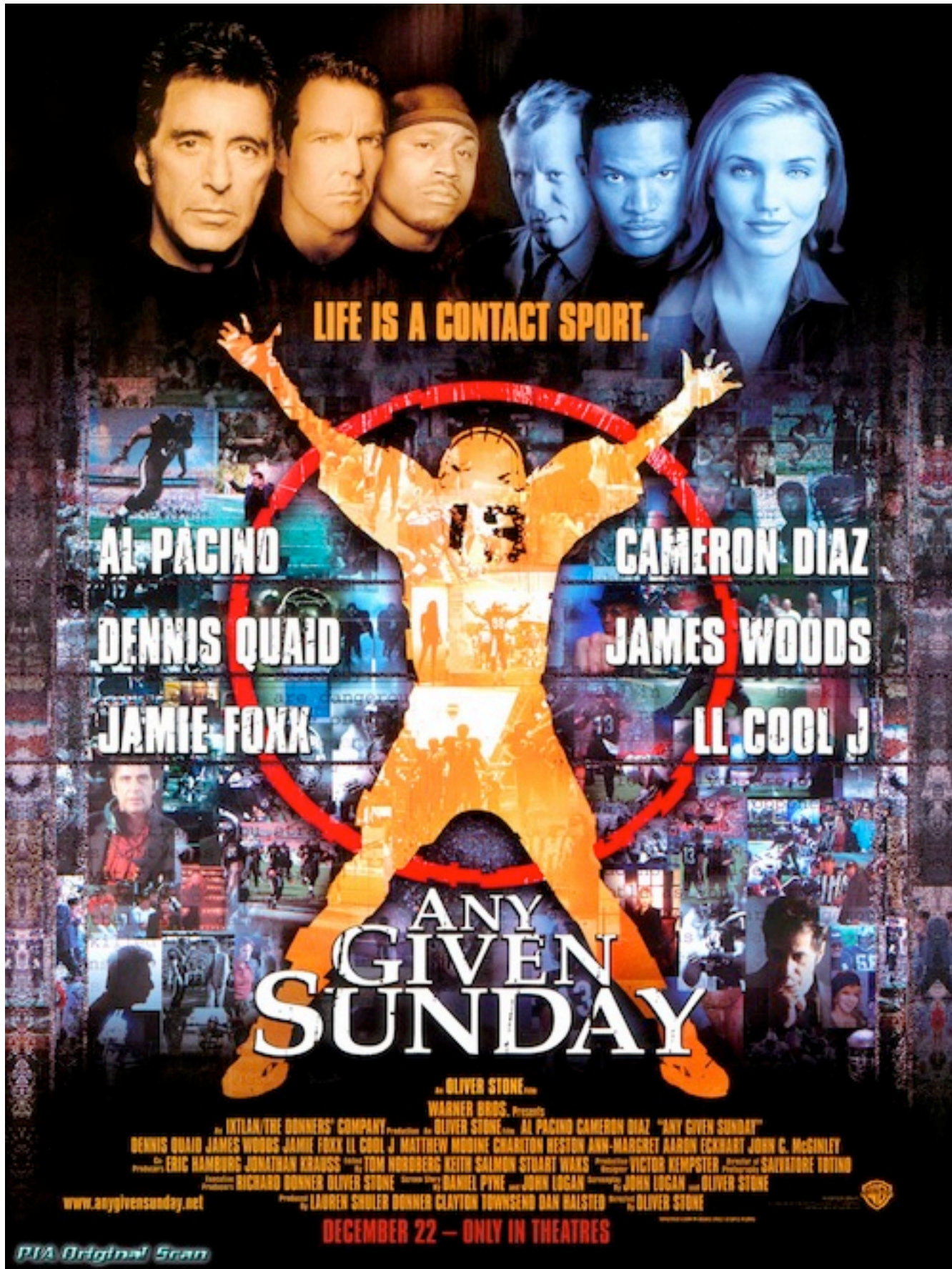
I am admittedly not a sports fan. I get the spirit of camaraderie and perseverance that it elicits, but these displays of hyper-masculinity doesn't work for me... outside of seeing them on film. Even then, it has to be a special film that not only deals with the dynamic of being part of a team, but more importantly the individual that is part of it. There are few sports centered films that I can re-watch on a regular basis, and "Jerry Maguire" makes that very short list. It isn't as much about sports as it is about the people that make up the sports world. The agents, the players and their families. In an eccentric but enjoyable performance from both Tom Cruise and Cuba Gooding Jr., this film proves to be as memorable as it is quotable.

These two career-focused men go on a trip of self-discovery as they discover that their priorities should expand beyond their own self-interest and include their respective "teams" (consisting of family, friends and other athletes). It sounds trite just reading about it, but the film works fantastically on a genuine, emotional level, especially with love interest Renee Zellweger and the adorable Jonathan Lipnicki for added heart. Cameron Crowe creates a story where the sports are constantly in the background, but the human interactions and character development are the focus. With the start of the NFL season, this film might help remind you of the humanity behind the sport (even fictionally), especially when you remember that several team owners each donated over a million dollars to the Donald Trump campaign (Chicago Cubs included), and that Colin Kaepernick is being blacklisted for taking a very American stand against injustice.

EXTRA POINT: Tom Cruise frantically trying to get Cuba Gooding Jr's character to cooperate with him as he follows him through the locker room. We only see him from the waist up for most of the conversation, only to be reminded that Cuba's character has been baring it all the entire time.



ANY GIVEN SUNDAY (1999) by Spike Walters



Any Given Sunday

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

“Any Given Sunday” is a bit of a guilty pleasure football film. The pro game honestly hasn’t lent itself to as many all-time sports classics as other sports, and there are no “Rudy” moments here. Instead we’ve got Al Pacino in full “Hoo-hahhh” mode as a coach of a struggling Miami pro football club. In one early scene Pacino gives a locker room pep talk which sounds like it was written – and then improvised – by people with only a passing awareness of football, much less a knowledge of the game. Coach Al paces the sidelines, he yells, he swears at his players and at opposing coaches... and he’s never not watchable.

Director Oliver Stone does a pseudo-Michael-Bay routine with quick cuts everywhere, that is when he’s not going for heavy handed metaphors involving storm clouds, or cutting to himself doing a cameo as a TV announcer doing game commentary. It’s got a ridiculously overqualified cast including Aaron Eckhart, Cameron Diaz, Jamie Foxx, Dennis Quaid, John McGinley, L.L. Cool J, James Woods (particularly oily), Matthew Modine, Ann-Margaret, and the list goes on, but somehow it works. If you can enjoy the film for the big ball of cheesy popcorn it is, it’ll be due off the bench on “Any Given Sunday.”

EXTRA POINT: The NFL wouldn’t let Oliver Stone use their logos or stadiums, so Stone invented a more successful combination of the old United States Football League (USFL) and World Football League (WFL), both of which competed against the NFL in the 1970s and ’80s. This is made explicit in the screenplay, when ownership is told Miami cannot build a stadiums for the fictional Sharks because the Dolphins own the town.

All three films are available for digital download, and on DVD through Columbia TriStar Home Video (BRIAN’S SONG), Sony Pictures Home Entertainment (JERRY MAGUIRE) and Warner Home Video (ANY GIVEN SUNDAY).



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [23]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [22]

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 19 2024 - 4:30am):
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