

# Home Ice

*"Ever seen a flock of ducks flying in perfect formation? Pretty awesome the way they all stick together... I'm proud to be a duck. And I'd be proud to fly with any of you. So how about it? Who's a duck?"* Emilio Estevez rallies the flock in Disney's

**THE MIGHTY DUCKS**

*"I've got a serious disagreement with CBC programming, and there's going to be a revolution unless something changes."* Brian (Spinner) Spencer's gun-wielding Dad in Atom Egoyan's

**GROSS MISCONDUCT**

## Pre-game Speech

Needing to pad out a hockey gift book I was doing for Penguin Books (*More Slapshots*), I thought wouldn't it be interesting, or at the very least, fun, to compare Canadian and American hockey movies? I reviewed 18 movies – nine American, nine Canadian. Before talking about the films themselves, I should say that the most obvious difference between Canadian and American hockey movies is that the latter are easy to find. *Mighty Ducks* I saw on a plane; *Youngblood* and *Slap Shot* were on TV when I was writing. Most of the others were available at the corner video store. None of the Canadian films are available on tape, nor – except for *Face Off* maybe – are they ever shown on TV. Finding them required real sleuthing. Government agencies and distribution companies were phoned; friends and friends of friends contacted. Eventually I got most of what I was looking for, but not everything. *Cementhead*, a CBC telefilm from the sev-

enties written by former NHLer Erik Nesterenko, seems to have disappeared. Same with Eddie Shack's *Nightmare*, a 1966 short shot for the old CBC arts program *Umbrella*. But that, as they say, is another story. Let us now compare mythologies.

## The Players

**The Cutting Edge** (U.S., 1992)

Washed-up hockey player (D.B. Sweeney) and spoiled rich girl (Maira Kelly) go for the figure-skating gold. Duo knock heads on and off the ice, and with only five months until the Olympics things look glum. Then the kids' eccentric, twinkly eyed coach shows them a new move: teamwork! Dreary and predictable Hollywood fantasy. Terry O'Quinn, the psycho-parent from *The Stepfather*, is the girl's dad, and you hang around half-hoping he'll revert to that character and fill the mansion's crawlspace with everyone involved.



The Hounds of Notre Dame:  
PORRIDGE AND PATRIOTISM

# A Comparative Guide to Hockey Movies, Theirs and Ours

by  
Stephen  
Cole

**The Duke of West Point** (U.S., 1938) Hokey college pic from United Artists, with long-forgotten B-movie idol Louis Hayward playing a West Pointer with a chip on his shoulder the size of a puck. After some initial trouble, Hayward wins over both the girl (Joan Fontaine) and gang by leading the Point past a Canadian college (R.M.C.) in the big game.

**Face-Off** (Canada, 1971) A Canadian *Sid and Nancy*. Art Hindle plays Billy, an angry but uncertain Leafs rookie. *Razzle Dazzle*'s Trudy Young is his girl, a flaxen-haired folk singer hooked on pot ("Summer is a green and yellow rhyme/So sublime..."). Like many characters in Canadian films from this era, the kids brood about their identity and roll around in the snow a lot. Nobody knows who they are. Nobody knows what they want. Nobody Waves Good-bye. Great live hockey footage from the period, with clumsy but entertaining staged scenes

involving real-life Maple Leafs, like a soused Paul Henderson putting the moves on Billy's girl at a team party. SCTV would do a wonderful parody years later.

**Gross Misconduct** (Canada, made-for-TV, 1992) Director Atom Egoyan's take on Brian Spencer's unhappy life is more autopsy than biography. Spinner's career, marriages, even his court case for murder are almost incidental in Egoyan's film, which sets out to prove that the hockey player's psychotic Dad was a freight train destined to flatten the son. As such, it's more consistent with themes found in the director's other films (*Next of Kin*, *Family Viewing*) than Spinner's life. Absorbing, powerful, but at times annoyingly schematic. The film is never more compelling than when we see footage of Spencer in his Leaf rookie year. His haunted face, to quote Warren Zevon, "looks like something death brought with him in his suitcase."

**He Shoots, He Scores** (Canada, TV series, 1986-89) In the late '80s, three million Quebecers tuned in weekly to watch Pierre, a rookie star with the Quebec nationals, make love to beautiful women and score against English goalies. For largely the same reasons, 24 million English Canadians *didn't* watch the bilingual, \$13 million prime-time soap opera. Your enjoyment of the series depended entirely, it seems, on whether you were cheering for Pierre, the goalies or the beautiful women.

**Hockey Night** (Canada, made-for-TV, 1984) Mildly enjoyable story of a spunky gal (Megan Follows) who sets Parry Sound on its ear-muffs by becoming goalie for the town's bantam team. Nice off-ice scenes involving Follows and the stuffy, disapproving locals (including coach Rick Moranis, playing his first movie nerd). Unfortunately, proceedings get a might cartoonish when the puck drops.

**The Hounds of Notre Dame** (Canada, 1980) Thomas Peacocke is Père Athol Murray, hockey-loving headmaster of the famous Saskatchewan boys' school during the Second World War. The film means to be gruff and warmhearted, but an hour into all the porridge and patriotism, you start hoping someone blasts a puck through the chapel's stained-glass window.

**Idol of the Crowds** (U.S., 1938) John Wayne is the ultimate right-wing forward in this creaky B-movie from the Republic Studios. Typical double-bill fodder. Wayne stickhandles through the bad guys with a cheerful, virtuous sweetheart hanging from his arm. Lots of cross-cutting between head-and-shoulder shots of the Duke, his hair blowing in a wind machine, and some stand-in's churning blades.

**King of Hockey** (U.S., 1936) What with his wingers giving him all the past passes and the scriptwriter feeding him the good lines, Dick Purcell is skating on top of the world in this pleasantly corny celebration of youth and vigour.

**The Last Season** (Canada, made-for-TV, 1990) In this most Canadian of all hockey films, Felix Batterinski (Battered Skinny?) is a played-out ex-

hockey star doing a slow dance around an open grave. The relentlessly grim film was based on Roy MacGregor's novel, which had infinitely more colour and life.

**The Mighty Ducks** (U.S., 1993) An almost flawless commercial kid's film, with IMPORTANT LESSONS galore leavened by fart jokes. Emilio Estevez is a gone-wrong lawyer (led astray years ago by an evil peewee hockey coach) sentenced to community service coaching kids. He teaches them about hockey. They teach him about life. There is a wise old skate-sharpener you swear you've met before (you have: Obi-Wan Kenobi in *Star Wars*), and a romantic subplot involving Emilio and one of the kids' Moms that makes you feel like you've got a little extra butter on your popcorn.

**Mighty Ducks 2 (D2)** (U.S., 1994) Less of the same. The first *Ducks* film was well constructed and managed for the most part to capture the goofy spirit of Disney's '60s drive-in fare (*Son of Flubber*, *The Love Bug*). At least it didn't take itself seriously. Here, absent-minded director Simon Weisman mixes the *Ducks* formula with *Rocky IV*, and we get the Ducks battling a vicious crew of Nazi peewees (from Iceland! Germany being too big a movie market to offend). The film tries to soap you with a moral about sports being ruined by money (Emilio is seduced by a Rich Businessman who hopes to strike it rich selling the team's sweaters to kids). In the end, Emilio sees the light, tosses the tainted uniforms away and breaks out "good," "non-exploitative" jerseys for his charges. That's right: the very same Duck sweaters that Disney is now selling in every Wal-Mart store across the country.

**Miracle on Ice** (U.S., made-for-TV, 1981) *Rocky* x 25. Hollywood celebrates team USA's 1980 gold medal upset of the Soviet Union in Lake Placid. Much of the action takes place in the dressing room, where coach Herb Brooks (Karl Malden) lays on the can-do rah-rah so thick that after a while you feel like you're enduring a talk from one of those one of those late-night real estate gurus.

**Paperback Hero** (Canada, 1973) Great premise: gun-toting, small-town Saskatchewan hockey star, who rules the prairie like it was his personal fiefdom (his nickname is Marshall Dillon), cracks up when the team folds. Director (and future Telefilm honcho) Peter Pearson nicely captures the cocoon in which star athletes live. And Elizabeth Ashley is very good as the taken-for-granted girlfriend. The film's one drawback: star Keir Dullea lacks any kind of screen presence. As Noel Coward once said, "Keir Dullea, gone tomorrow."

**Pray for Me Paul Henderson** (Canada, made-for-TV, 1989) Uncharacteristically sunny Canadian film set in Toronto during Team Canada's triumphant march on Moscow in 1972. Cameron (Torquil Campbell) is a high school pinhead who draws inspiration from Paul Henderson's heroics to lead his *Reach for the Top* quiz team to the city championships. Funny and engaging, with knowing satirical flourishes.

**Rookies** (Canada, made-for-TV, 1991) Callow hotshot (Yannick Bisson) with hard life lessons to learn joins junior OHA team. Cross between Scott

Young's juvenile classic *A Boy at the Leafs' Camp* and *Top Gun*. Promising beginning, with good scenes involving the small-town locals whose lives revolve around junior team, but the film dissolves like a flubbed breakaway in the third period when our hotshot inexplicably begins to suffer James Dean-like *East of Eden* mood swings.

**Slap Shot** (U.S., 1977) An odd crowd-pleaser, with slapstick galore, sour feminist politicking, and Paul Newman as old Leaf Coach John Brophy (scriptwriter Nancy Dowd's model for Reggie, the slow-thinking player-coach of the movie's Chiefs). When Reggie learns the Chiefs are folding, he turns the team into a goon show to attract suitors. Eventually, he comes to understand that he's not saving the team, he's killing the sport. With his film's deathbed conversion, director George Roy Hill performs a classic Hollywood cheat: after all, he's entertained us for two hours with elbows to the snoot.

**Youngblood** (U.S., 1986) Hairless pretty boy Rob Lowe plays Dean Youngblood, a New England farmhand who comes to Canada to duke it out with the Molson-swilling yahoos of the OHA. Diverting only as a movie variation of *Where's Waldo?* Scanning the film's extras, you'll find hockey players Steve Thomas and Eric Nesterenko (as Lowe's Dad), along with Patrick Swayze and Keanu Reeves (as a pea soup goalie).

## Game Summary

Heroes abound in American hockey movies, while victims pile up like cordwood in ours. More significantly, there is an unseen hero in virtually every Yank Hockey film: the team. In *The Cutting Edge*, *The Duke of West Point*, *The Mighty Ducks 1 & 2*, *Miracle on Ice* and *Youngblood*, the lead character only truly becomes a hero when he surrenders himself to the team. That is, when he finally understands that he's just one of the lugs.

In Canadian hockey films, the whole concept of team is seen to be a scam. Billy in *Face-Off* loses himself as soon as he joins the Leafs. Even if he were to toe the line and become a team guy, he'd only end up like poor Felix Batterinski in *The Last Season*. And why should he even bother trying to maintain some sense of self or become a star? Then he'd only end his playing days like Marshall Dillon in *Paperback*

*Hero*, facing a hail of bullets from a town that no longer needs him. Either way he'd lose. In fact, Canadian hockey movies are about losing, just as American hockey films are about winning. In American films, the hero beats the odds. In Canadian films the odds beat the hero to a bloody pulp ●  
Stephen Cole is a Canadian freelance writer living in Brooklyn, New York.

**Canadian hockey movies are about losing, just as American hockey films are about winning**



from top, Paul Newman in *Slap Shot*: AN ODD CROWD-  
PLEASER; *Paperback Hero*:  
"KEIR DULLEA, GONE  
TOMORROW"; *D2 The Mighty  
Ducks*: LESS OF THE SAME

