

Basketball's Great White Hope and Ronald Reagan's America: *Hoosiers* (1986)

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In 1986, first-time feature director David Anspaugh and Orion Pictures released the commercially successful basketball film, *Hoosiers*. The popular film has remained a staple for video rentals and cable television, leading *Sports Illustrated* to tap *Hoosiers* as the sixth best sports movie of all time.¹ Based upon a screenplay by Angelo Pizzo who met Anspaugh at the basketball-infatuated University of Indiana, *Hoosiers* attempts to reconstruct the so-called “Milan Miracle” of 1954 in which the Milan Indians, a school of only 161 students, defeated Muncie Central, with an enrollment of over 2,000 students, for the one-class Indiana boys’ state basketball championship. Milan’s victory was a classic David and Goliath story in which the underdog, through hard work, virtue, and cunning, defeats the seemingly invincible adversary.

This story line resonated well with audiences during the 1980s as President Ronald Reagan attempted to return America to a mythical patriarchal 1950s in which divisions of race, gender, and class did not exist for a homogeneous middle class nation. In an effort to restore the simplistic certainties of the post World War II liberal consensus, Reagan reinvigorated the Cold War with the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union and assumed that issues of inequality could be addressed through sustained economic growth spurred by tax cuts and supply side economics.²

For contemporary Americans beset by recession, loss of jobs, a divisive conflict in Iraq, and the threat of international terrorism, the exploits of the Milan basketball squad continue to evoke a nostalgic yearning for a mythical garden in which life was easier and simpler. In February 2004, therefore, ESPN Classic provided cable subscribers with a telecast of the 1954 Indiana state basketball championship. According to National Public Radio commentator Bob Cook, Milan represented the “triumph of the small-town-way of life and perhaps the pull-up-your bootstraps ideal, that no matter where you are from and what disadvantage you may have, if you work hard, you’ll succeed.”³ This is the imagery employed by Reagan in asserting that America must be restored to a city upon a hill where all things are possible; a concept rendered in less oratorical splendor in 2004 by President George W. Bush. But it is questionable whether such

rhetoric reflects the realities of contemporary American life or the more recent past of the 1980s and 1950s.

For example, the “Milan Miracle” was achieved against the background of school consolidation. In 1954, there were 754 high schools in the state of Indiana. Consolidation has reduced this number to 383 schools, while seven of the eight schools Milan beat in the 1954 tournament no longer exist. In addition, the last time that a school with an enrollment of under a thousand students won the Indiana state basketball tournament was 1982. With the small schools increasingly being dominated in tournament games, school principals from around the state split the 1998 championship into four classes based upon school size. As radio commentator Cook concluded, “The small-town ideal, it seemed, didn’t meet reality.”⁴

The film version of the “Milan Miracle” also took considerable liberties with the actual story. Hollywood placed even more obstacles to the team’s success, providing an even more Cinderella story, than the considerable challenges confronted by the 1954 Milan basketball squad. Despite its small size, Milan, led by young local coach Marvin Wood, was a basketball power, having reached the final four of the 1953 state tournament and had most of the players from that team returning for the following season. In the 1954 championship contest with Muncie Central, the ten-man team from Milan played a slow-down stalling strategy against a more athletic opponent. The tying and winning shots were made by Milan guard Bobby Plump, who held the ball for agonizing minutes before attempting a basket. With the shot clock employed in modern basketball, Coach Wood would be unable to employ the strategy that resulted in a 32-30 victory for Milan. Holding the ball provides an opportunity for undermanned teams, but this approach to the game tends to bore spectators and undermines the athleticism of basketball. Needless to say, holding a basketball for four to five minutes is not the material from which Hollywood drama is fashioned.⁵

Instead, *Hoosiers* tells the story of Norman Dale (Gene Hackman), who gets a second chance at coaching after his noted collegiate career was terminated following the coach’s striking of a player. After a stint in the Navy, Dale is hired by his friend

Cletus (Sheb Wooley) to coach the Hickory High School Huskers. The school's beloved former coach is deceased, and the small Indiana town resents the outsider taking his place. Seeking to impose discipline upon his recalcitrant players (who are portrayed by nonprofessional Indiana actors to provide the film with a touch of authenticity), Dale is left with only six team members; including the less than athletic team manager Ollie (Wade Schenck). The season gets off to a rocky start, and at a town meeting held at the local church, Dale is about to be ousted as coach by the local townspeople whose identity is attached to the success of the local high school team. Dale's job is saved, however, when reluctant basketball star Jimmy Chitwood (Maris Valainis) agrees to play only if Coach Dale is retained by the Hickory community. Jimmy, whose father is dead and mother is an invalid, viewed the former coach as a father figure. He lives with English teacher and assistant principal Myra Fleener (Barbara Hershey), who is convinced that Jimmy should forego basketball and concentrate upon his academics. Of course, Dale is able to convince Jimmy that basketball has something to offer, while at the same time commencing a romance with Fleener, whose reserve is broken as she becomes an enthusiastic supporter of the Hickory basketball program.

Meanwhile, with the addition of Jimmy's pure and accurate jump shot, the Huskers begin to coalesce and advance through the state tournament, reaching the state finals in Indianapolis. Here for the first time in the film they encounter a racially integrated team. The young men and their coach comment upon the size of the arena and city buildings, but the racial theme is never mentioned by any character in the film. The small town boys from Hickory are triumphant over South Bend Central—representing Muncie Central who opposed Milan in the historical 1954 championship contest. When the game ends on Jimmy's true jump shot, whites jump and shout in exhilaration while black players and fans slump to their knees in shock and disbelief. Ironically, the African American coach of South Bend Central is played by Ray Crow, who coached Indiana's first all-black high school basketball champions, Crispus Attucks High School, in 1955.

An important subplot of the film involves the theme of second chances. One of the Hickory athletes, Everett (David Neidorf), has a father, Shooter (portrayed by Dennis Hopper in an Academy Award-nominated performance), who is the town drunk. Shooter is an outstanding former high school basketball



Coach Norman Dale (Gene Hackman) gets a second chance at coaching.

Courtesy of Film Archive

player who has succumbed to drink. However, he has an encyclopedic knowledge of Indiana high school basketball. Coach Dale decides to provide Shooter with an opportunity to serve as an assistant coach. While Shooter does digress back into the bottle, by the film's end, he is seeking medical help and has regained the respect of his son. And Myra Fleener is impressed by Coach Dale's noble experiment and voices her support.⁶

Audiences echoed the sentiments of Fleener, although Orion Pictures initially seemed to lack confidence in *Hoosiers*. The film was released in the West and Midwest before appearing in theaters on the East Coast. In fact, *Hoosiers* did not premiere in New York City until after the film garnered Academy Award nominations for Hopper as Best Supporting Actor and Jerry Goldsmith's musical

score. Eastern audiences, however, were not callous to the film's sentimentality. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* described *Hoosiers* as "irresistible" and "admirable," concluding that Anspaugh's theatrical film debut was "about as sweetly unselfconscious as a film can be."⁷

Film critics generally shared Maslin's enthusiastic response to the film. Roger Ebert identified with the purity of high school athletics as exemplified by *Hoosiers*. Acknowledging that the story line of *Hoosiers* was predictable, Ebert, nevertheless, insisted that the film worked a magic by getting the audience to "really care about the fate of the team and the people depending upon it." In a similar vein, Richard Schickel of *Time* credited *Hoosiers* with accurately portraying the values of small town America during the 1950s; a time "when there was nothing better to chew on than last week's game and nothing better to savor than next Friday's." The idea that *Hoosiers* exhibited the fundamental positive values of American society was echoed by David Edelstein of the *Village Voice*, who found that Angelo Pizzo's script displayed "an immigrant's innocence about the backbone of America." Rob Barker of *Women's Wear Daily* concluded that *Hoosiers* touched "a chord that is honest, basic and true to the small-town dreams it depicts."⁸

Other reviewers, however, found the film to be overly simplistic and banal in its description of the American experience. Mike McGrady of *Newsday* considered *Hoosiers* as derivative; drawing upon clichés from such films as *Rocky* (1976) and *The Karate Kid* (1984) as well as the work of Frank Capra. McGrady observed that the *Hoosiers* script was "heavy-handed" and unwilling to "let maudlin enough alone." Nigel Floyd, writing for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, agreed with the sentiments expressed

by McGrady, asserting, "The rural setting, the alleged innocence of the pre-teen 50s, and the aura of naïve high-school enthusiasm rule out any troubling considerations of professionalism and gamesmanship, leaving the film rather soft at the centre."⁹

While some critics questioned the film's originality and assumptions regarding American innocence in the 1950s, few challenged the absence of blacks in *Hoosiers*. As Ralph Ellison noted in his epic novel *Invisible Man*, the whiteness of middle class and small town America was simply assumed. Stanley Kauffmann of *The New Republic* and Robert B. Frederick, writing for *Films in Review*, noticed that African Americans, who played a crucial role in college and professional basketball during the 1980s, were missing from the film. Frederick, however, dismissed any charges of racism against the filmmakers by observing that the exclusion of black athletes from scenes in rural Indiana may have been "diplomatically uncouth but historically correct."¹⁰

This statement is misleading in a number of ways. It assumes that the 1950s were years of consensus rather than a period of paradox and ambiguity in which complacency was challenged by such events as the civil rights movement. Indeed, *Hoosiers* completely ignores the existence of one of the most profound moments of social change in American history. For perhaps the Brown v. Board decision of 1954 was of greater historical significance than the "Milan Miracle." And in the arena of sports, the civil rights movement had a considerable impact which it would have been difficult for young basketball players in the 1950s to ignore. In 1947, Jackie Robinson shattered major league baseball's color line, while the National Basketball Association (NBA) drafted its first African-American players in 1951. In addition, the troubled history of race relations in the state of Indiana, where the Ku Klux Klan dominated state politics during the 1920s, makes it difficult to believe that the coach and players from the all-white Hickory community would comment upon the intimidating size of Indianapolis but fail to notice that for the first time they would be playing against African-American athletes.¹¹

In fact, the film's scenario of having the boys from Hickory confront no black competition until South Bend Central in the finals is historically inaccurate. In the semi-state stage of the 1954 tournament, the Milan Indians defeated Crispus Attucks High School, with its star sophomore guard Oscar Robertson, 65-52. Crispus Attucks, named after the mulatto martyr of the Boston Massacre, was an all-black Indianapolis school founded in 1927 during the heyday of Klan influence. According to Nelson George in his study of black impact upon the game of basketball, "The city fathers were both proud and fearful of Attucks's chances for the title. These were men only a generation or so removed from the Klan-dominated state government of the twenties. At one point Attucks's principal, Russell Lane, was summoned to City Hall, here he had to reassure a mayoral deputy and the board of education, as well as the fire and police chiefs, that an Attucks champi-

onship would not incite an antiwhite riot."¹²

But Robertson and his Attucks teammates would not be denied, winning the 1955 and 1956 Indiana state championships. Indianapolis city officials, fearing the exuberance of Attucks supporters, rerouted the 1955 celebratory motorcade away from the downtown business district into the Indianapolis African-America community. The lads from Milan, however, suffered no such slights from city officials. In fact, Pat Stark, an Indianapolis policeman assigned to provide security for the Milan team, led a procession of player-carrying Cadillacs from Butler Fieldhouse, where the championship game was played, to the heart of the city. The impromptu motorcade snarled traffic as the Milan heroes were hailed by delighted admirers.¹³ A similar outburst by supporters of Crispus Attucks might have appeared a bit more threatening to the white citizens of downtown Indianapolis.

Just as *Hoosiers* ignores the issue of race, so apparently did the boys of Milan, where no African Americans resided. Even in a fifty-year retrospective on the "Milan Miracle," the immortal Bobby Plump made no mention of the race question. He did, however, observe that Oscar Robertson was "pretty fluid and a heck of a basketball player."¹⁴ The significance of a five-on-five white against black basketball contest seemed lost upon the Milan players and many observers; at least as long as the white athletes were triumphant. Yet, in 1966, the basketball world would sit up and take notice when five black players from tiny Texas Western University (now UTEP) toppled the mighty all-white squad from Adolph Rupp's University of Kentucky.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the filmmakers of *Hoosiers*, working with the hindsight of the civil rights movement and ostensibly worldlier than the boys from Milan, attempted to render invisible the racial context of black basketball in Indiana. Of course by the time *Hoosiers* was made, African Americans dominated the NBA. Basketball historian Ron Thomas reports that by the 2000-2001 season, African Americans filled ten out of every twelve slots on a NBA roster, while eight head coaches were black. In addition, the internationalization of the game was personified by Michael Jordan. It is estimated that in 1998 Jordan enjoyed at least a ten billion dollar impact on the American economy. The basketball star became the embodiment of what historian Walter LaFeber terms an American of world culture which "has become a powerful, tempting and frequently destabilizing force, challenging every traditional society."¹⁶

This success of African Americans on and off the basketball court might lead one to assume that the exclusion of race from *Hoosiers* simply does not matter. On the other hand, in a world primarily populated by people of color, Jordan, or any other NBA athlete for that matter, is hardly representative. Nor has sport proven to be a model avenue for black social mobility. Focusing on balls rather than books has not been the answer for black Americans as is so well exemplified by the experiences of Arthur Agee and William Gates in the 1996 documentary *Hoop*

Dreams. In reference to Jordan and other multi-millionaire black athletes, Nelson George insists that their visibility has “not made white Americans more tolerant of the average Black man. Nor has it, in any measurable way, overturned the tide of low self-esteem that has overwhelmed the mortality of too many of their brothers. In fact, the triumph of a gifted elite has only bred a frustrated fatalism in those left behind.”¹⁷

Thus, race mattered in both the 1950s and 1980s, just as it does today. In his study of post World War II American sport and society, Richard O. Davies concludes, “The truth remains inescapable: the American dream of equality for all remains as elusive as ever in the world of America sport.” In the larger national social arena, the Reagan economic policies did little to foster a more level racial playing field. In the 1980s conditions grew worse, not better for African Americans as over one-third of the black population fell below the poverty line. High drop out rates in the inner cities of America exceeded fifty percent, while the number of black female-headed households jumped to approximately sixty percent. Nearly ninety percent of black female heads of household under the age of twenty-five lived below the official poverty line.¹⁸

These grim statistics indicate that race in Reagan’s America was an exceedingly significant issue even if ignored by the President, white Americans who attempted to avoid the inner cities, and filmmakers such as Anspaugh, who provided 1980s film audiences with a nostalgic vision of a nation based on meritocracy in which race and color did not matter. This is not to suggest that the filmmakers of *Hoosiers* were necessarily perpetuating a conscious racism. Rather, as Alan Nadel observes in his critical study of what he terms the films of Reagan’s America, the issues of race, gender, and class were exposed in the 1980s through the medium of cinema; revealing the societal reservations often hidden behind the clichés of boosterism and optimism. Nadel writes, “Films are particularly useful in analyzing that subtext in that they are commercial products that represent a large collaborative consensus about ways to commodify a culture’s values, to which commercial success lends affirmation.” Nadel asserts that the middle class was destabilized economically and demographically by the Reagan economic policies of reductions in government spending accompanied by record deficits, which, in turn, were fueled by tax cuts for the wealthy which increased social stratification. Yet, through nostalgic films about a mythical American garden or past, often situated in the 1950s, the middle class “maintained its ostensive status through its ability to consume narratives about itself.” Nadel concludes that the nostalgic back-to-the past films of the 1980s, such as *Hoosiers*, were especially insidious in their “attempts to erase blacks from American history.”¹⁹

Thus, Deborah V. Tudor’s analysis of *Hoosiers* maintains that the filmmakers were quite aware of the film’s racial implications and subtext. Ostensibly, *Hoosiers* makes the case for

historical realism as a reason for black exclusion, but, in fact, through dialogue, sound, and framing the film establishes the black players from South Bend Central as a threat to the harmony and stability found in the small white town of Hickory. The seven players from Hickory represent rural values under assault from the black urban centers which threaten not only the homogeneity of the small town but also white control of a sport such as basketball. The climatic black-white confrontation between South Bend Central and Hickory is dominated by an extremely percussive music track, while the crowd noise is distorted, creating a menacing sound. A long shot of the South Bend Central team entering the court establishes a sense of size and power, while a reaction shot of Coach Dale displays a sense of apprehension and foreboding. The Hickory team at this point becomes the equivalent of the great white hopes combating black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson in the early twentieth century (who also sought to restore white order and tame blackness).

Initially, the boys from Hickory are intimidated by the athleticism of the black players. One shot especially makes this point. A jumper from a Hickory player bounces off the front rim which is framed in the shot. Then two black hands enter the frame and aggressively pull down the rebound. Viewers are certain who has the ball. However, the Huskers rally, and with their ingenuity and work ethic are able to subdue the black menace. Tudor concludes that the film text suppresses the race issue “at its manifest level. This strategy denies any importance to the issue of race with sports. However, analysis reveals that the text creates an image of the opposition as menace and threat to the values with which the Huskers are associated.”²⁰

And what are these values which the Huskers must defend? These are the ideas of small-town America rooted in the heartland of the American Midwest. The positive values of rural Indiana are embodied in the seven Hickory athletes whose decency, innocence, hard work, ingenuity, discipline, and sense of team or community allow them to slay the urban serpent which stands in the way of their miracle. This mythical Midwestern garden reflects a longing for an America free from racial and class division. And, of course, it is in Midwestern Iowa that Ronald Reagan came of age.²¹

Thus, David W. Zang argues that the popularity of *Hoosiers* was due to the fact that the film transported “viewers back to a pre-Vietnam period and place of lost innocence.” *Hoosiers*, Zang concludes, “appeared to stress all of the aspects of character and value that modern sport seemed to have ceded in the name of dollars, image, and media hype in post-sixties culture.”²² It is ironic that in his Hollywood career, as well as the excesses of 1980s deregulated capitalism typified by the Savings and Loan scandal, Reagan and his administration were often the antithesis of the simplistic agrarian values which the President appeared to embrace in his rhetoric. The Reagan Presidency fostered a growing class divide in America in which the inter-

section between race and class was most apparent. The Reagan economic policies created more jobs for Americans; however, the problem was that relatively well paying industrial jobs were being replaced by employment which paid wages well below the poverty level for a family of four. Accordingly, wrote William Chafe, "The number of low wage earners increased substantially during the 1980s at the expense of high wage jobs that either disappeared or moved overseas. Given existing conditions, some economists predicted, every new job created in America for the foreseeable future would be in the service sector of the economy."²³

Confronted with these economic realities, it is no wonder that the shrinking middle class sought solace in the cultural embrace of such films as *Hoosiers* or the popular *Field of Dreams* (1989). In this baseball drama featuring Kevin Costner, an Iowa cornfield becomes a metaphor for reconciliation in which a deceased father returns to reaffirm the domestic security of an earlier more innocent America. In a similar fashion, the benevolent Reagan rhetoric and policies would absolve America of the divisiveness of the 1960s and restore a sense of community and consensus. In reality, the Reagan administration reduced farm subsidies, resulting in the foreclosure of family farms and the growth of agribusiness. The plight of the family farm in the 1980s was addressed in such Hollywood films as *Country* (1984) and *The River* (1984), which challenged the mythical nature of *Hoosiers*.²⁴

Furthermore, there are discordant factors in the Anspaugh film and the historical story of the "Milan Miracle" which undermine the narrative of a lost sense of community. For contained within this sense of group identity are troubling issues of conformity and loss of individualism. *Hoosiers* opens with a shot of Coach Dale driving down the winding roads of rural Hickory into a beautiful sunrise. It is, in the words of President Reagan, morning again in America. Hickory is a town in which the residents own small businesses such as a diner, barbershop, feed store, and family farm. These people are portrayed as self-reliant, industrious individuals who believe in democracy and God. In short, as Deborah Tudor suggests, "It is a well-ordered totally white universe."²⁵ In fact, the seven Hickory athletes are so homogeneous, white, and clean cut that it is often difficult for the viewer to distinguish among them.

Nor are the locals particularly welcoming to Coach Dale, whom they initially perceive as an Eastern outsider. At a town meeting held in the local church they attempt to get rid of Dale, whose job is saved by Jimmy Chitwood's intervention. The town meeting scene is also interesting in that the homogeneity of Hickory is evident in that there is apparently only one church in town, and no resident appears concerned with issues regarding separation of church and state. The meeting and vote regarding the public school employee are held in the church, while before games a local pastor leads the team in prayer. Although the minister's son, Strap, is more devout in his pregame rituals than the other boys, he is not a subject of derision.

In addition to religion, *Hoosiers* addresses the complex interaction between team and individual which is a staple for sport films.²⁶ In order to succeed, the individuals must learn to work as a team and suppress their egos. Thus, Coach Dale is willing to accept defeat in some early games in order to instill the discipline the boys will later rely upon during the pressures of the state tournament. An excellent example that hard work pays off, in the best tradition of Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack*, is the equipment manager turned player, Ollie. While limited athletically, Ollie never misses a practice and is willing to do whatever Coach Dale asks. In the semifinals, the starters foul out, and Dale is forced to insert Ollie in the game's last crucial seconds. The opposition fouls Ollie, assuming that he will be unable to handle the pressure of making critical free throws. But all the long practice hours in the gym culminate in Ollie making his shots, and Milan moves into the state finals. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of Hickory advancing without the gifted natural athletic talent of Jimmy Chitwood. It is the coach's job to see that this natural athleticism is used in the service of the team or community.

The film, therefore, ultimately seems to embrace the values of conformity which are present within small town America.²⁷ It is supposedly heart warming to observe a caravan of cars from Hickory, outlined against the beautiful Indiana sky line, following the team bus on a journey to do battle against the neighboring communities. Of course, what is really going on here, as Deborah Tudor suggests, is that school athletic programs are being used as socializing institutions that "channel the students into structured activities that reproduce dominant cultural values."²⁸ Sport divides the community into participants and spectators, with the majority being prepared to assume their roles as more passive consumers of American culture. On the other hand, Coach Dale assures Jimmy that success on the athletic field allows a young man to become a god.

Yet, adulation can quickly turn to recrimination when a community's sense of self worth becomes invested in a high school athletic contest. The high profile of a high school athlete in a small town places tremendous pressure upon young people. In a recent profile of high school sports for *Sports Illustrated*, reporter Alexander Wolff writes that an adult obsession with winning is stealing the joy of athletic competition as well as their youth from adolescents. Historian Richard O. Davies asserts that rather than building character, as adherents of high school athletics maintain, the social pressures of performing up to parental and community standards lead many young people to abandon their athletic pursuits. He concludes that "school sport has become something much more than a game played for fun."²⁹

Of course, in the case of the 1954 "Milan Miracle," the young basketball players achieved the immortality of a state championship and did not disappoint the community. The aftermath of the championship, however, suggests a degree of

ambivalence for the players as well as the town. While providing tremendous civic pride—the town’s prominent water tower still proudly proclaims the 1954 basketball title—the “Milan Miracle” did little to promote economic growth in the small community. Fifty years after the championship, Greg Guffey describes Milan as a town of approximately a thousand residents that has changed little since the 1950s. Like many small towns, the downtown stores are now mostly boarded up, for interstates, bypasses, and suburbanization have left Milan increasingly isolated. Yet, Guffey concludes, “The town remains locked in the fifties as the twenty-first century approaches. The prospects are grim for revival, but when you’ve had the greatest moment in the greatest game in the greatest sport the state has ever known, does anything else matter?”³⁰

Guffey’s statement is a rather depressing one for Milan residents and represents the limitations of sport for the more passive consuming public. For the players on the championship squad, however, success on the basketball court did result in a degree of social mobility. The boys used their fame to parlay basketball scholarships and a ticket out of Milan, indicating a degree of ambivalence regarding ones prospects in rural America during the 1950s. Perhaps the reality of provincial life was not quite as appealing as cultural narratives such as *Hoosiers* would have us believe.

The celebrated Bobby Plump used the legacy of the “Milan Miracle” to foster a life and career. The athlete received a basketball scholarship to Indiana’s Butler University, where he enjoyed a solid if unspectacular collegiate career. Following college, Plump entered the insurance profession where he drew upon his athletic fame to develop business contacts. He frequently speaks to civic groups around the state of Indiana and provides commentary for high school basketball games. Some may perceive it as depressing that Plump has spent most of his adult life reliving and recounting a brief moment of adolescent glory during a high school basketball game—reminiscent of the bitter-sweet memories evoked by Bruce Springsteen’s “Glory Days.” Plump, nevertheless, insists that the “Milan Miracle” and the “shot” were the highlights of his life.

The Indianapolis insurance agent defended the film which focused the spotlight on Plump in the persona of Jimmy Chitwood. Plump failed to understand why residents of Milan disliked *Hoosiers* and its celebration of the town’s greatest moment. Townspeople were upset that *Hoosiers* was set in the fictional locale of Hickory, while the film was shot in neighboring communities that, according to director Anspaugh, displayed a more rustic look than Milan. Speaking of *Hoosiers*, Plump asserted, “I loved it. I thought it was great. The emotions that the movie portrayed caught what the fifties were really all about. Everybody knows the movie was about Milan. I don’t care whether you’re talking about the state of Washington, the Denver papers, or the Los Angeles papers. To me that’s pretty sig-

nificant. I disagree with the people of Milan on this. I’m very gratified that somebody would even use Milan loosely to make a movie. I think if the people in Milan are disappointed, they’re being a little unrealistic in their expectations.”³¹

Of course, those who continued to live in rural Indiana, rather than Indianapolis, were perhaps less nostalgic about the era. Nor did the much ballyhooed tax cuts of the Reagan administration offer much relief for the residents of towns like Milan. They knew better than to be hoodwinked by a cultural narrative which maintained that issues of racial and class divisions could be addressed by returning to a mythical garden of small town America during the 1950s.

Hoosiers also raises some troubling issues regarding gender. The story line is about a masculine world in which the patriarchy must be restored in order to assure a sense of stability. The film is ultimately about redemption and second chances for its male characters. A position as assistant coach, and finally hospital rehabilitation, provide the alcoholic Shooter an opportunity to reconnect with his son Everett. He visits his father in the hospital, observing that when his father is released he will rejoin the family in their home. The presence of Everett’s mother is assumed, but she is never shown on the screen. *Hoosiers* is concerned with taking us back to a more mythical time in which women supposedly posed no threat to the hierarchy of the patriarchy.

This is most evident in the character of Jimmy, whose father is deceased. His disabled mother—who never appears in the film—is unable to raise Jimmy, so he lives with assistant principal and English teacher Myra Fleener. According to the ideology of the film what Jimmy really needs is a father figure. Alan Nadel notes that middle-class audiences of the 1980s consumed film narratives, such as *Hoosiers*, which told the story of fathers who were “protector, provider, and, as it now appears dead. But surely it cannot be death, just a death rehearsal. Our founding fathers cannot have abandoned us; we cannot be subject to the poverty, homelessness, economic and emotional scarcity that exists elsewhere, that we know about only through television.”³²

If on the political scene it is Ronald Reagan who will assume the symbolic role of father and make us whole again, in *Hoosiers* it is Coach Dale whose leadership can restore Jimmy to his rightful place on the team. But Jimmy’s restoration to the masculine world and competition is blocked by Fleener, who insists that Jimmy’s future would be better served through concentration upon academics. Fleener encourages Jimmy to embrace the more feminine values of the English classroom rather than the masculine preserve of the basketball court. Although based upon the type of instruction Jimmy is receiving in his history class—Coach Dale has also been hired to teach history and government but he appears to devote little of his time to lesson planning or correcting papers—basketball probably provides a little more realistic avenue for his social mobility.

Fleener's independence clearly poses a menace to the masculine order. She left Hickory for college, but returned to take care of her mother following the death of her father. In assuming such masculine duties, as well as serving as school principal after Cletus's heart attack, Fleener is undermining the patriarchy. As Deborah Tudor maintains in *Hollywood's Vision of Team Sports*, Fleener is blocking Jimmy's relationship with a surrogate father in Dale. The coach must tame Fleener and create a family unit, which he accomplishes through a courting of the English teacher. After Dale kisses Fleener, Tudor writes, "Myra's face displays her gradual change. The hard lines around her mouth vanish; her face becomes softer in expression. At the climactic state championship game, Myra becomes the supportive woman in the bleachers, nervous over the game's progress."³³ By the film's conclusion, Myra Fleener is no longer an active character. She has assumed the 1950s stereotypical female role of the consumer, who will sit on the sidelines rooting her men, Dale and Jimmy, on to victory in the harsh competitive world of basketball. Fleener beams at Dale in a fashion reminiscent of Nancy Reagan's gift of the gaze for her man. Like Reagan, Dale has banished the forces of racial, class, and gender divisiveness by restoring the white patriarchy to power.

This politicized reading of *Hoosiers* should not detract from the outstanding performances and entertaining nature of the film. Anspaugh directed a film which, no matter how manipulative the text, pulls at the heartstrings and makes one want to stand up and cheer for the boys of Milan. After all, it is the stuff of *Man of La Mancha's* "Impossible Dream." On a more analytical level, however, it is important to note that film narratives, such as the nostalgic *Hoosiers*, helped pave the way for the middle class acceptance of Reaganism. While objectively class, racial, and gender—including the feminization of poverty—divisions were growing in America during the 1980s, they were often masked by cultural narratives and Presidential rhetoric which emphasized a longing for a mythical past—usually in the 1950s—in which Americans were united in a consensus based upon sustained economic growth and whose security was threatened by the evil Soviet Union. If only life were as simple as the movies.

Notes

1. "The 50 Greatest Sports Movies of All Time!," *Sports Illustrated* 4 August 2003: 62-71.
2. For the post World War II liberal consensus see Geoffrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).
3. Bob Cook, "Commentary: Enduring Memory of Milan High's Winning of the 1954 Indiana State Basketball Championship," National Public Radio, 18 February 2004.
4. Cook; for a discussion of basketball in Indiana see William Gilden, *Where the Game Matters Most: A Last Championship Season in Indiana High School Basketball* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997); and Todd Gould, *Pioneers of the Hardwood: Indiana and the Birth of Professional Basketball* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
5. For the 1954 Indiana state basketball tournament see Greg Guffey, *The Greatest Basketball Story Ever Told* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 74-96.
6. *Hoosiers*, dir. David Anspaugh (Orion Pictures, 1986), videocassette; and Frank Magill, ed., *Magill's Cinema Annual, 1987* (Pasadena CA: Salem Press, 1987) 245-249.
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