

The Best Baseball Movies - aka the baseball undergrad and masters plan

(Note: This first appeared online with Talking Baseball Australia back in 2013. The idea was to give my Australia mates a way to learn more about the game than the balls and strikes. I have done the same thing to learn more about Australian sports like cricket and footy that I did not grow up playing or following. I have since updated this list in December of 2023 and this list was used with the Sioux City Explorers in the American Association for our 2023 Christmas Special airing on Facebook Live)

6/25/13 and edited 12/6/23 - I started to think about this list way back in November. We would be sitting around the media tent in Perth and cracking up on something that happened and I would toss out "hey just like that scene from" or I would quote a line like "Lolligaggers" or "just a bit outside" as Harry Doyle (Bob Uecker). Most of the time these were met with looks from my Aussie mates of them thinking with a bubble over their head, "what is this crazy Texan talking about? Too many pints?"

Now I will defend my mate Paul Morgan as he is well versed in the baseball cinema and along with the lovely and talented other half are even more versed than I am in baseball writings. Me being the lazy fast food American I am well versed in the cinematic arts and get almost all my history from the TV. Now I have read some baseball books which may merit a list somewhere down the line but my dealings have always been film and forget the books. All of my dear and underpaid literature teachers from my youth would cringe and my talented friend and school mate GMWK I am sure would nod with disapproval at my lack of understanding of great literature. My argument although missed guided was that why read it when I can watch it? and with that you have your typical under achieving rotten brained TV mind.

So, with that out of the way some explanation on my reasoning. What makes this fun is that this is purely one cowboy hat wearing Texan in shorts opinion and as my grandfather would say "we all know about opinions....". I also have included a list of documentaries at the bottom which will really make you a student of the game. While the list is mine, I believe that these flicks are a must for any baseball fan a for those good mates who thought I was clueless with my quotes from baseball movies these are required viewing until we meet again!

Let's call the top 20 Baseball 101 and the undergraduate degree in baseball. So here is the curriculum.

#20 *The Babe- (1992)* Like several on this list over time I have gone back to watch it and it has grown on me for sure. It is no master piece and as a stand alone film it is not that great but there is a lot of Babe Ruth stuff out there some including the real deal but this does tell the story of the things we really don't hear as much about. The early childhood and some of the game history are factual and as over the top as John Goodman is it seems fitting since the real Ruth was as over the top as any modern day athlete. A good remake would be welcome. Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZ7oYotA7qU>

#19 Fever Pitch- (2005) From the Farrelly Brothers this Jimmy Fallon and Drew Barrymore romantic comedy shows us how baseball allegiance and in this case the Red Sox can be a challenge and an addiction as well. Set during the Red Sox actually 2004 run it is my understanding that they had to re-shoot the ending in St. Louis after shooting wrapped up. I need a women like that! Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNns4YlyRvQ>

#18 Bang the Drum Slowly- (1973) Warning might need tissues here but stars Michael Moriarty and an early pre fame Robert De Niro. A fictional story of the New York Mammoths and the theme of loss, pain and change of perspective. This is a serious as serious gets and some early modern day trends with a nod to some of the Yankees days of old. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xa3EdS3l1zs>

#17 Cobb - (1994) Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Wuhl are in this bio pic of the raging later in life Ty Cobb the first player elected to the Hall of Fame. Historical and pulls the curtain back on how things were in the great game back in "the day". Cobb was as bitter as a man ever and as gifted too. Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPUi9WYL5zo>

#16 61- (2001) Billy Crystal brought this solid film to the masses with the story of Roger Maris played by Barry Pepper and the incredible dynamics of the 1961 New York Yankees season. One of the strengths is Pepper who gives us the Maris that I believe so many did not know. In fact not much was ever really known about him unlike the more personable Mickey Mantle played by Thomas Jane. I actually can tell you that I have shared a pint a time or two with one of Mantles sons and while I cannot tell you if the family liked the portrayal I can tell you that he was one of the first to have his image run by a third party later in life due to his popularity. Both efforts by Pepper and Jane carried the film. Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1po8PgfJU_Q

#15 Mr. Baseball- (1992) Tom Selleck stars as an American player trying to hang on in Japan. The cross of cultures also crossed into the game and some funny scenes where the game just does not always translate. I would love to see a new version perhaps an Aussie version? Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jywTtvKbTOo>

#14 Pride of the Yankees-(1942) Gary Cooper plays the great Lou Gehrig and yep you guessed it is the story of Gehrig who died the year before the release. Look for Babe Ruth who makes an appearance as well as other Yankees of that time. Also black and white!

#13 The Rookie - (2002) Filmed almost entirely in Texas with some factual errors which is almost always the case in real life stories is the story of Jim Morris. Morris would go on the pitch parts of two season in the big leagues for Tampa Bay despite being away from the game for years. At 35 and coaching and teaching in a small west Texas town the Disney like tale made by surprise the good folks at Disney is in fact a real life fairy tale. Dennis Quaid is Jim Morris and Aussie Rachel Griffiths plays his wife. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aceWXcvFOvI>

#12 *Eight Men Out* - (1988) I might have rated this higher if the portrayal of Joe Jackson would have been better but the producers clearly missed out on background on him something that also was left out of *Field of Dreams*. I have actually read and can recommend several books on Jackson and I just have never liked the way he was portrayed. There are always liberties taken on these historical pieces and this is no exception. It still remains one of the great mistold stories and it does not tell the complete and full story but the basics are here. It features good young cast with John Cusak, Charlie Sheen and DB Sweeney to name a few. Also the use of the old park in Indianapolis looked great despite old Comiskey being around when this film came out. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSHQw85pvek>

#11 *For The Love of The Game* - (1999) This ranks as one of my all time favorite movies but for the discussion of pure baseball it sits here. I am a romantic at heart and love the fictional tale of the aging Billy Chapel of the Tigers as he works on a perfect game at Yankee Stadium late in the season. Kevin Costner is good and I always have loved Kelly Preston even if she married crazy. I also liked John C. Reilly who plays the loveable catcher Gus who seems headed to the minors at any minute or the waiver wire. Vince Scully sounds like he always does pure greatness. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSz1KqZZvpc>

#10 *Money Ball* - (2011) I regret only seeing this one time and much like 42 it might in time jump up the list the more I see it. I still am not sure I bought Brad Pitt but the story is true and despite my dislike for the A's what they do to assemble a team in that toilet of a situation is amazing. It is a concept that appears to work to a degree. How about part II this year? Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AiAHlZVgXjk>

#9 *Sand Lot* - (1993) The good kids version of Bad News Bears. I might rate it higher over time as Bad News Bears has done that slowly climbing my list over the years. Most kids stateside especially those of us born late 70's on back can all relate to this story of when it was a part of our being a kid in the states. I was lucky to live on a cul-de-sac and we had a great street ball diamond including a roof that slanted in left that our tennis ball could play off of like a green monster. We had a side yard on our street that also was our grass field and it played like a band box but all neighborhoods had their own "lot". Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QDq-e1GbjE>

#8 *42* - (2013) See my review for more but Harrison Ford was awesome and a story just like most of the true ones takes some liberties but I thought it was well done all around thanks to Hollywood 2012. For review it is the story of Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. The efforts of Branch Rickey played by Ford have to go down as some of the most forward thinking efforts of the 20th century.

#7 *Natural* - (1984) The more I see Robert Redford as this almost Shoeless Joe, Babe Ruth hybrid character the more I appreciate it. At the same time the story is also so unrealistic that at times I chuckle at the folly of it. Yet it has all the things that make baseball movies so romanticized in life. Love, tragedy, redemption, over coming yourself and the fallen hero returns. It is a pure romantic version of the game in a time and place that for me I have always longed for. It is a fictitious account of a time when we got our game in the papers, in person or on the radio. The music of the home run sequence is played after every Rangers bomb in Texas. Trailer:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DST3ZCnRgfw>

#6 *League of Their Own* - This all-star cast with many real story lines combines the greatest generation of the USA those during war time of the 40's and the theme that the show must go on. There are so many great stories of war time baseball and this is one of the best war films or at least period pieces of the time. It is a war period piece without a shot being fired. We only see it touch the lives of those by first playing the game and then with soldiers in the stands and the loss of a loved one overseas. The theme of the time is there loud and clear of a united time with baseball as our theme and I still think it is the best war pic made that never fired a shot. Trailer:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcN392H2jx0>

#5 *Sugar* - (2008) This one along with #1 touch home to me. In my time in the minors I have seen this story play out. It is the story of a kid getting off the island playing ball anyway he can. Puerto Rico, Dominican and more recently Cuba have seen these kids, pitch, run, hit and field their way off the island. It examines the culture differences and the challenges that these imports stateside do. Most don't speak the language and all they know of the US is from movies and how the experience ends for most of these kids is the norm not the way we see it end with the few who reach the big leagues. The movie was filmed in the Midwest League and Burlington, Iowa where I served as GM for two seasons is one of the back drops complete with legendary ballpark figure "Dancing Bobby." Ask Steve Fish who managed the Heat last year about Bobby. If you ever played, coached or broadcast in the MWL you met him. Also the ballpark in the Quad Cities and the bridge over the Mississippi River are things I saw time and time again in the broadcast booth and are in this movie. It is a really great film of the realities of the game for most. I could see a great Aussie version too and think all of us ABL fans could relate either way on the story. Trailer:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwnxz kutQ3k>

#4 *Major League* - (1989) This along with #1 give us about half the baseball movie quotes of all time. "You may run like Mayes but you hit like BLEEP". The movie is littered with them and it is laughs a minute. We see all the stereotypes of the ball players and their place on most teams and in a way society in general. It also shows some of the have's and have nots of the great game as it is played theses days. Of course a comedy but some of the humor is that fact that it was not the Yankees but the Indians. Side note the film actually was shot in old County Stadium in Milwaukee not Cleveland.

Major League II -1994) gets a mention here as there are some hilarious moments in the second and you almost have to watch them back to back. It is not the classic the first is but it is great bonus material if you loved the first one. I say why not cue them both up? Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_ILz9bC-VU

#3 Field Of Dreams -(1989) Is there a more spiritual movie of the great game? Kevin Costner is in every baseball movie or at least it seems that way. James Earle Jones is great and his speech about people coming for baseball is classic. The only issue I have is with Ray Liotta as Shoeless Joe. It is the only thing I don't like about it and Liotta is actually good in it but he is not Jackson. Liotta does not sound like the Jackson from South Carolina but one from somewhere back east. Jackson was very southern and yet we don't hear that. But then again it is a fantasy and romantic version so I guess I am nit-picking. It takes the romance of the Natural and blows it up a modern notch. "Ease his pain" and the other voices lend to the feeling that the game really is heaven on earth. Maybe it is as there is never a bad day at the ballpark but the life metaphors are everywhere in this film and in baseball. It might also be as American and baseball as any film while not ramming it down your throat. The game is the same everywhere from Iowa to the big city and we all have our stories and connections to our own dreams and those dreams like the game are our heaven. It is that having a catch where for a minute we are in a better place. The game does that to us all no matter what country he live in. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHTsQ9qePrQ>

#2 Bad New Bears - (1976) 10 or 15 years ago this would have been 15 or so but it has aged well. Maybe it was the Billy Bob Thorton remake that helped me realize just how great this original movie was. I actually saw this in the theatre as a little kid as my mother took me! I don't remember it but she did take me that is how young I was. lol It as ground breaking then especially kids acting well like the kids we knew here and there. The loveable losers get their shot and I cannot watch my nephews games without seeing some play that would conjure up memories of this movie with a smile and the music plays in my head as I watch. The sequels were all fun and could be a great back to back to back with **Breaking Training (1977) and Goes to Japan (1978)** but the first is the classic. Trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF6De-XP7x4>

#1 Bull Durham - (1988) Combine romance, the reality of the game, the reality of life, comedy and plenty of real life experiences to make it believable and to me THE baseball movie for me hands down. Maybe because of the countless bus rides and characters I met along the way remind me of this place. The characters are fiction but the parks, teams and league are not. I recall in the mid 90's after a long game in Ashville showering for a long bus ride home to West Virginia. If I could grab a quick one I would as who wanted to stink up the bus even after calling a game? I look at the wall of the dressing area and there I am standing in the same place that Crash stood after he broke the home run mark in the movie. It was kind of cool. This was the golden age of the minors and right before it took off to be as popular as it is today. Somewhere I have a pic of me calling a game in old Greensboro when Derek Jeter was in A ball one of the parks they are seen playing in and leaving on the bus. This world only exists in a few places these days and the minors I started in had it everywhere. Over time the minors has become more corporate and more big time even at that level. The "mom and pop"

operations have been replaced and this world has gone away just a bit. There is at the same time the innocent of the game at this level and all the learning of everyone involved from player to fan is unique in the game. This is a world while made up is still very real and while a bit different the life at that level is every bit as interesting today with nicer ballparks. I carry a copy of this in my travel bag when I am on any baseball trip and would watch the my old tape copy before every road trip my first time in the game. This is also at the same time is a love story of life. Baseball is the most romantic game and I will save that for another time. Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqqdEwFz4mU>

The Docs

OK so now you have completed the core courses for baseball 101 and have your undergrad diploma but why stop there? How about a master's degree in baseball? Your first stop will be the 1994 Ken Burns documentary called **Baseball**. In 18 parts this thing is long but is a must baseball history class for anyone who wants to be a student of the game.

Also, part of the masters plan is my favorite of all the movies listed except maybe **Bull Durham** and **For The Love of The Game**. It is the three-part HBO series called **When it Was A Game**. There is nothing else out there that is even close to this. They have dug through countless old 8mm and 16mm movies of three periods to put together a great story and history of the game. The nostalgia alone in color is unreal especially the early up until the mid 60's. There is a rare combination of great celebrity voices many are excerpts of baseball poems that combine for a real education and take you back feeling.

Then these additional flicks will round out our education.

Life and Times of Hank Greenberg- (1998) This documentary is a good history lesson of one of the greats that the casual fan may not know about. If Ted Williams was the guy just behind the Gehrig, Ruths and DiMaggio's of the time then this was the guy that was on par with all that few ever heard of.ed

Ballplayer: Pelotero - (2011) Almost like a part of the movie **Sugar** this doc takes a look at getting off the island and in this case the Dominican Republic. It is a world of money, lies, sure shots and long shots that are exploited almost like a crop. In recent years baseball has had to take a long hard look at what it has done on the island and this film puts so much of that into place. At the same time many MLB teams have academies on the island as the talent is that good. It is a great film. Trailer:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr7VOPdZ6A4>

The Curious Case Of Curt Flood - (2011) This HBO piece is the story of Curt Flood fighting how the game did business with regards to free agency and the reverse clause. He did for baseball something historical the likes not seen since 1947 and it resonates today. Trailer: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3D_8-BKlgy8

Catching Hell - (2011) The ESPN 30 for 30 story of Steve Bartman who is believed to have cursed the Cubs when he interfered with a foul ball during the 2003 National League Championship Series. Exert: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4aoxIYgd64>

Jordan Rides The Bus - (2010) Also part of the 30 for 30 series hits close to me. I was at my first year in AA Jacksonville and that was one crazy summer when MJ came to the Southern League.

Fernando Nation - (2010) 30 for 30 does it again with the story of 1981 and the Fernando Mania that gripped Los Angeles with Fernando Valenzuela.

Knuckleball - (2012) Showtime brings the story of the mystery pitch while bringing all the living pitchers who have thrown that pitch together in what is the smallest and most exclusive club in baseball. It also may be the most interesting?

The Curse of the Bambino/Reverse of the Curse of the Bambino - (2003)/(2004) This HBO film examines the long Boston curse of Babe Ruth and it's effect on society there. It was re-written following the 2004 season with the reversed edition.

Nine Innings From Ground Zero - (2004) Following the attacks on 9-11 this HBO film looks at the 2001 World Series between the Yankees and D-Backs. It is a real examination into the game and it's healing power and for a three games in New York most of us did not hate the Yankees for a change. It was a strange world we lived in stateside and world wide that fall and it was changing right before our eyes. We would never be the same but just like in the 40's the great game healed our wounds and seeing it still conjures up emotions that I think are universal to us all from that time.

Now with all of these under your belt you have a masters in baseball! Or is that enough for a doctorate?

2023 Update:

The League – (2023)

<https://www.theleaguedocumentary.com/>

The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars & Motor Kings (1976)

This period piece about a group of Negro League stars putting together a traveling team that takes the country by storm in the 1930s has an almost cartoonishly awesome cast: Billy Dee Williams, James Earl Jones and Richard Pryor.

The Saint Of Second Chance – (2023)

Facing Nolan – (2022)

Eastbound & Down (2009 - 2013)

Brockmire (2017 - 2020)

A League of Their Own (2022)