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Knowing Sports: The Logic of the Contemporary Sports Documentary

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This article analyzes the mutually supportive confluence of sports and documentary by explaining how this dynamic informs assertions contemporary documentary makes about sport. Focusing on ESPN’s 30 for 30 series, it identifies five such claims: that it is imbricated with capital, that it is visually spectacular, that it celebrates individual expression, that it is always already narrativized, and that thinking about sport always entails thinking about and through media. The article concludes by developing in detail the final claim—that sports in the contemporary age, articulated through documentary film and video, always entails thinking about media itself—noting how this creates a logic whereby trying to “know sports” without the guidance of ESPN becomes an impossibility.

DURING THE PAST HALF-DECADE, THE SPORTS DOCUMENTARY has achieved a heightened level of recognition in American sports culture and the broader American public imaginary. Networks such as NBA TV, NFL Network, Golf Channel and others have joined the established producers of television documentaries like HBO, PBS, and ESPN in proliferating and expanding the production of this media form. Sports documentary

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filmmakers, videomakers, and producers have responded to and in turn informed the documentary boom of the last three decades, when we have seen dramatic changes in the amount, kind, and channels of documentary production. But it is ESPN’s 30 for 30 series, more than any other development, that has shaped this recent transformation.

In 2009 ESPN launched the 30 for 30 series—thirty documentary films made by thirty celebrated filmmakers that call attention to events that took place in the thirty years since ESPN’s 1979 founding. In part, ESPN continued the longstanding tradition of attempting to import the prestige of cinema—bringing in directors such as Barry Levinson and John Singleton, for example—to the stereotypically lower cultural form of television. But they also did so by bringing in—and identifying—documentary filmmakers as film authors, a fairly new strategy. Steve James (Hoop Dreams [1994]), Barbara Kopple (Harlan County, USA [1976]), and Albert Maysles (Gimme Shelter [1970], Grey Gardens [1975]), to name a few, were commissioned to make films focused on topics in which they were personally invested. They were celebrated as auteurs and “filmmaking originals,” and the films were marketed as having their personal, authorial stamps. The directors often “introduce” the films and provided additional commentary in short testimonies that lead into and out of advertising breaks. In this way ESPN doubly confronts what Travis Vogan describes as its “key institutional and cultural problem,” i.e., that despite its incredible visibility and profitability, the media outlet “is steeped in sports television’s low cultural status.”1

The network called upon and highlighted directors’ associations with film by continually referencing their authorial status and by visibly marking the documentaries with cinematic signifiers, such as filmstrips and movie tickets. This association with cinema as an art form aims to provide cultural distinction. But the network countered its relatively low status with reference to the documentary form as well. By promoting the series as a documentary series—one that takes a new look at historical events—with documentary authors, ESPN could exploit the cultural cachet of documentary as a relatively serious (and, at times, artistic) discursive form that, in this case, highlights a personal perspective. The balance between the entertaining, artistic vision of the filmic/cinematic and the artistic yet thoughtful and rational associations of documentary has become one of the foremost ways ESPN works to raise the cultural status of its brand identity.2

But if documentary works to support ESPN by raising its cultural capital and thus building and strengthening its brand, sport as an object of documentary analysis in turn supports documentary’s commercial viability. The most commercially successful documentary genres—the star-driven, timely political documentary; the music documentary; and the nature documentary—have established television and, more recently theatrical, traditions, and they make considerable use of visual attractions. The sports documentary is rapidly becoming a subgenre we can add to this group. In this article, I analyze the mutually supportive confluence of sports and documentary by explaining how this dynamic informs assertions contemporary documentary makes about sport. I identify five claims: that sport is imbricated with capital, that it is visually spectacular, that it celebrates individual expression, that it is always already narrativized, and that thinking about sport always entails thinking about and through media. These assertions provide the basis not just for a more rigorous understanding of sport but declare documentaries’ uniqueness as

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Answering the question “How does contemporary documentary shape how we talk and think about sport?” requires a much more thorough analysis of documentary as a particular historiographic practice and requires considering a large body of films. I will pay closest attention to ESPN’s 30 for 30 series, but I will also at times reference documentaries produced for other networks in the last half-decade. I do so to call attention to the cultural influence of both the series and to ESPN as an institution that supports it.

**Sport As Imbricated with Capital**

Jeff Zimbalist and Michael Zimbalist’s *The Two Escobars* (2010) details how integral the drug lord Pablo Escobar was to the rise and fall of Colombian soccer in the 1980s and 1990s. The Zimbalists present a nuanced, and perhaps ambivalent, attitude towards his role. Their documentary celebrates Escobar’s efforts to provide soccer fields, better housing, and general financial support for the poor. Yet it condemns the violence, chaos, and illegality to which he contributed and from which he derived his power. What is plain, however, is that the rise of Colombian soccer to international prominence depended upon the capital he contributed at all levels—from early development to keeping established stars from moving to Europe. Once his investments were removed, the national team sunk in the world rankings.

Another documentary that locates the success of a sporting enterprise directly in relation to capital investment is Thaddeus D. Matula’s *Pony Excess* (2010). The film documents the rise to prominence (and eventual collapse) of the traditionally struggling Southern Methodist University (SMU) football program through a series of bribes and payments to recruits and players. Matula lays out the broad and more interpersonal socio-economic conditions that encouraged this behavior. The Texas oil boom provided many of the resources boosters needed to build a new football tradition at SMU while the cultural climate (the need to “make it big”) drove the impulse. The emergence of Dallas as the center of the new Texas economy during this period—which brought business leaders from a number of Southwest Conference universities into the city—fostered interpersonal competition that prompted many wealthy boosters to do whatever it took to create success at their alma maters.

The film opens with a rapidly-edited, rhythmically-accelerating three-minute montage that encapsulates SMU’s “rise,” achieved by a culture of cheating, from doormat to the best team in college football. The story is framed by testimony from sportscasters (Brent Musberger, Verne Lundquist) and some of those involved directly with the team (players Eric Dickerson and Craig James, Coach Ron Meyer, etc.). The rapidity of the editing aims to communicate a sense of lack of control, or excess: more titles, more money, more stars. The need to win created a need to win more spectacularly. The system was a beast gorging, with the montage conveying both the experiences of those running the program and the economic system governing it. Although the blame can be placed on the excesses of capitalism manifested in this particular case rather than a condemnation of the system as a whole, the montage opens to analysis of a more profound critique of capitalism.
The Two Escobars and Pony Excess are not distinct in their focus on the interrelation of sport and capital. Almost all contemporary sports documentaries address this theme. Some examples locate sport within a larger network of Western, “late,” or global capitalism. Others begrudgingly accept it as “a business like any other.” Still others point to the business of sports media as shaping the direction of sport itself. Moreover, the fact that documentaries tackle this theme is important. Documentary’s status as a stereotypically rational endeavor that addresses issues related to the public sphere make it not just appropriate but practically obligatory at a time when the economic seems to have superseded the political and the cultural as the dominant framework through which social change is explicated.

Sport As Visually Spectacular

Whereas the associations of documentary with rational, sober argumentation make it an appropriate vehicle through which to consider sport’s imbrication with capital, documentary forms have also consistently sought to exploit its potential as a visual medium. In other words, if locating documentary within what documentary scholar Bill Nichols describes as the “discourses of sobriety”—those nonfictional systems that claim “they can and should alter the world itself”—distinguishes it from fiction film’s connection with the imagination and the avant-garde’s commitment to form and philosophy, its status as visual register marks it as distinct from other sober discourses, such as economics, hard sciences, and even disciplined historical writing.³

Sporting events are privileged objects through which to exploit this register and documentaries therefore highlight their visually spectacular qualities. They do so by operating within the representational regime of display, one in which “the visual realm is maximized as the field of exhibitionistic, expressionistic, and excessive attractions.”⁴ Sports documentaries emphasize the performing body as spectacular attraction; they employ image enlargement through magnification; they highlight images that demonstrate sensational bodily affect; and they stress the qualities of kinetic movement and stillness within the frame. Whether it’s Michael Jordan dunking or Tiger Woods teeing off, sports documentaries make use of evocation, sensory affect, and even poetic allusion as ways of knowing through nonfiction sounds and images.

This is another way sport and documentaries become mutually supportive. Documentaries can call on the visual qualities inherent in sport (and it is much more visual than aural) to counter its association with sobriety and concerns over its excessive informational speech. And sports can call on documentary’s cultural capital to imbue them (and the people and institutions associated with them) with seriousness and cachet.

Sport As Individual Expression

Sport as a vehicle for individual expression connects with the notion of sport as visually spectacular in that it calls attention to sport’s capacity for non-verbal expression. But the power of sport’s visuality is not always called upon to highlight individuals. Rather, the point in this section is that the power of its visuality offers sport the potential to celebrate individuals and their uniqueness in non-verbal terms—a quality that documentaries consistently, and perhaps uniquely, celebrate.
I want to distinguish what I am arguing here from Ian McDonald’s contention that sports documentaries in the first decade of the new millennium lack the “political ethic” and rigor of the documentaries from what he describes as the “pre-Michael Moore moment.” This is in part, he contends, because these recent documentaries have embraced fiction film narrative structures and strategies. This new model of documentary narrative, he argues, increasingly focuses on individuals as individuals rather than primarily as metonyms for larger social groups. The goal guiding these productions is to become more viable as entertainment rather than serving as social and political critique.

Documentary, however, has a long tradition of doing the kind of narrative work McDonald describes. Bill Nichols even argues that the adaptation of newly developed fiction film narrative strategies to nonfiction topics in the 1920s was one of the four major factors that shaped the rise of documentary as a distinct form. McDonald is probably correct that sports documentaries are more likely than other documentary genres to focus on individuals for an examination of their individual qualities and pursuits. The 30 for 30 series films Unmatched (2010), Once Brothers (2010), and the HBO documentary Magic and Bird: A Courtship of Rivals (2010) all articulate the position that these sports figures are both very much like us and completely distinct from us. They mark the athletes’ experiences as wholly unique and yet make them utterly human in what they care about—friendship, camaraderie, and relating to someone with comparable experiences.

But in addition to communicating a notion of sports figures as certain types of social individuals and locating them within narrative structures that imbue them with personal meaning, sports documentaries address individuality in another way. They present a promise that the documentary form is suitable for capturing and describing individual expression through sport. In other words, they go to great pains to develop forms of expression that call attention to how the body speaks the self. There are numerous strategies that attempt to do so, but what they have in common is an effort to help viewers see in ways unavailable when viewed live or even in the retrospective highlight reel. Strategies include repetition of a performance, often from a different angle; isolation in slow motion or image magnification; and multiple image contrasts that demonstrate how the featured athlete performs differently from his or her peers. These aesthetic strategies offer the opportunity to reconsider, to interrogate an often already-familiar sports performance. Expert testimony frames that performance, but often by pointing to something that cannot be fully described in verbal terms. In other words, Roger Federer’s creativity, Rafael Nadal’s will, Muhammad Ali’s sociality, and Annika Sorenstam’s poise are qualities communicated in visual terms that express something unique about that athlete. Documentaries offer the promise of going deeper, of mining the meanings of audio-visual material rather than just presenting them as such. Documentaries locate visual documents within larger arguments and stories about the historical world. But these visual documents often resist full incorporation into the documentary argument or narrative. Sports documentaries make use of this tension, or gap, between document and documentary to provide a space for individual expression, the idea of which is not knowable in the same way without the attention the documentary affords it.
Sport As Always Already Narrativized

In recording personal interactions, documentary filmmakers transform them into texts. In extracting pieces of footage from already-existing audiovisual texts, they isolate material from their original contexts of production. In each case, documentary filmmakers decontextualize, entextualize (i.e., produce bounded, isolable interactions distinct from—and hence potentially separable from—their cultural contexts of production), and recontextualize utterances, texts, and interactions. In this way, as Philip Rosen argues, documentary filmmakers’ practice of locating “real” documents within a larger sequential or narrative structure is akin to how professional historiographers write history.9

As readers of Journal of Sport History are well aware, there has been considerable debate about the role of narrative in the historical text. Although these arguments have been primarily constructed in relation to written texts, they are applicable to documentary films. Frank Ankersmit, David Carr, and Hayden White, to name a few scholars of historiography, have theorized the process by which historical events are organized into stories. Ankersmit contends that all events are already narratives because that is how they occur; Carr claims that human experience itself encodes that event in narrative form; and White avers that it is the articulation, the act of telling, that narrativizes historical events. Conventional narrative, for White, is not the only way of representing a series of events but is the dominant way.11

Sports documentaries take this a step further in that so much of the material with which they are working—the sporting events themselves—comes to us as already entextualized narratives. In other words, the events themselves are always already part of a sporting event that has taken narrative form. Much of the labor of sports documentaries, therefore, is to index these initial narratives and mine them for new meanings. Sometimes this involves reconsidering a single sporting event. Other times it involves longer career trajectories. The 30 for 30 film Jordan Rides the Bus (2010), for example, prompts us to reconsider the meaning of the 1993 National Basketball Association championship within the framework of Jordan’s career and brief foray into professional baseball. Director Ron Shelton presents a case in which baseball and all of its associations for Jordan—its connection to his recently deceased father, to the South, to rurality, and to a slower-paced life—become a solution to the problem of celebrity and urban hyper-modernity. Although sports documentaries do not require knowledge of the original events, they do reward familiarity with them. Knowing the original narrative, the original text, prompts viewers to engage more deeply with the subsequent recontextualization, investing them within the documentary argument.

Thinking about Sports Always Entails Thinking about Media

Calling attention to the laborious processes by which documentary filmmakers present arguments and stories about the historical world remind us that documentaries are not reproductions of reality. Instead, they offer interpretive frames on real historical events. Documentaries are “voiced,” they present an interpretation of the world using material that, most often, comes directly from that world. The authoring “voice” of the documentary need not be an individual; it can be an institution or some other authoring agency. As
producer, marketer, and exhibitor of so many documentary series—including, but not limited to 30 for 30—ESPN partakes in authorial agency.

But ESPN documentaries also reinforce ESPN’s brand by sharing authority in an additional way. Both the SportsCentury documentary series and 30 for 30 offer numerous examples of films in which “experts”—sports journalists, sports reporters, sports announcers, many of whom are employed by ESPN—testify to the meaning of a sporting event or to the chronology of events. This is, of course, common practice in many documentary genres, especially those closely related to journalism. The broad organizing voice of the documentary temporarily cedes authority to those talking heads. Often they discuss something about which they have had firsthand knowledge or have researched in depth. But many times these experts have little expertise (to the extent we are used to when watching documentaries) about the topic at hand. Their work in these films establishes them as authority figures to be trusted to talk about the world of sports—however expansive that sometimes becomes. In other words, these documentaries do not just make use of already established experts, often ones that are more professionally credentialed. They also establish the credentials of those that speak on the network.

Implicit in the idea that contemporary sports documentaries celebrate a new authority that speaks about sports is the notion that sports always come to us mediated. Even most live sporting events, as we well know, are highly mediated (scoreboards, stadium announcers, music, large screen video displays, and so forth). That is not to say that all contemporary sports documentaries seek to draw attention to their own enunciations. Rather, through their use of various media formats and in the way they index historical experience of our own mediated histories, contemporary sports documentaries continually assert that knowing about sport requires knowing about and through media.

As I discussed above, documentary is a historiographical practice in which filmmakers organize historical documents into historical narratives. But what happens when those documents are themselves already mediated? I do not mean to suggest that they are already entextualized or already narrativized. My point is more prosaic (though I hope the implication is not)—that the contemporary sports documentary’s primary documents are typically found footage of major sporting events, media material with which we are often familiar. This does not lead inevitably to an embrace of a simulacrum whereby images are references with no referents. Documentary is always already pre-packaged. It has always been about shaping consciousness, and it has rarely denied, textually or extra-textually, that this is what it does. It does not rely, therefore, on an unproblematic “capturing of the real” in such a way that Jean Baudrilliard’s theorization of postmodernity would undermine its meaningfulness.12

Instead, we have to think about what these moments index. Here I am understanding indexicality in its meaning as trace, as physical imprint of the material world, in this case, on celluloid, videotape, or through digital binary reference. But I am also understanding indexicality as deixis, a shifter such as “this,” “here,” “now,” “I,” “you” that signifies spatio-temporal presence even as it remains hollow (i.e., it is only meaningful once the referent is supplied). If the index as trace speaks to the historicity of the photographic image, the index as deixis marks the enunciative moment itself as critical to the establishment of spatial and temporal context.13 What these sports documentary examples index, therefore,
is the historical experience of our own mediated histories. They offer evidentiary traces of the past, reworking them and signaling their articulation in the process.

The 30 for 30 series film The U (2009) locates the emergence of the University of Miami Hurricanes as the dominant program in 1980s college football within the larger racial and cultural shifts occurring in Miami, Florida. It does so by means of an array of 1980s aesthetic material, both audio and visual. The soundtrack offers 1980s hip-hop tracks and the visuals channel the stylized, highly colorized (in Miami’s green and orange colors) videotape aesthetics of the period. It is rapidly edited, reflecting the influence of music video on the style of the period, and it makes use of considerable original television footage from local and national broadcasts. But in addition to these choices, director Billy Corben stylizes the contemporary interviews. They are shot in front of black screens with some combination of green and orange light projected on the screen and framing the interviewees’ titles. Most documentaries that seek to intensify the experience of the historical moment—as Corben does by means of his 1980s aesthetics—contrast that immersion with the critical distance of the present, evidenced in the current interviews (shot in current style). The U offers no such distance. Rather, it aims to communicate what Reinhardt Koselleck describes as a space of experience, one that is “specified by the fact that it has processed past occurrence, that it can make it present, that it is drenched with reality, and that it binds together fulfilled or missed possibilities within one’s own behavior.”

By drenching us in the past in this way, The U indexes our own experiences with Miami football and media coverage of it. It locates those experiences within a larger critical framework—sociopolitical in subject and unapologetic in tone. And it reminds us that our memories with sports are aesthetic memories, shaped by the media environment from which they came. They are referents with reference. The object to which they refer, the thing they index, is our individual and collective media experiences.

In The U, it is video—specifically video within a 1980s visual style—that is mobilized for these ends. But if contemporary sports documentaries insist that knowing about sports means knowing about and through media it also matters what type of media format is being referenced. Many contemporary sports documentaries make use of home video or amateur video. It is most often set up in opposition to major broadcast or cable/satellite footage. Shaky cameras, extensive takes, awkward looks, nonprofessional editing, and synchronized low-quality sound are called upon to connote authenticity, challenging the professionalism of mainstream media forms. In this way they are part of documentary’s promise to look deeply, to take us inside the story and, in so doing, to urge us to challenge the self-evident nature of many broadcast media forms. Jordan Rides the Bus provides an interesting example by interspersing home video footage of Jordan at the height of his celebrity with broadcast footage from the same period. The home video both offers and prompts a look inside, another take that refuses to sensationalize Jordan even as he remains perhaps the world’s most elusive and silent sports superstar.

The use of film likewise calls upon dominant medium ideologies though it is often less historically specific in reference than the two previous examples. Whereas low-quality video is associated in sports documentaries with the repeatable, the live, the instantaneous, film takes on different associations. The Best That Never Was (2010) looks at the life of the Philadelphia, Mississippi, star running back Marcus Dupree, a high school legend who,
because of injuries and poor mentorship from shady acquaintances, never realized the level of success so many had forecast for him. *The Best That Never Was* follows a common logic in documentaries. It opens with the present moment—Dupree as a truck driver in Mississippi—and explains the events that led him to this relatively mundane point. Such a narrative logic is more akin to scientific or social scientific forms than to fiction film, where knowledge of the “result” is commonly deferred. Later in the film, Dupree sits down in front of a computer monitor to watch film of himself as a high school star. This is footage we have seen earlier in the film, but it is presented as the first time he has seen it. The camera alternates between close-ups of Dupree emotionally moved by the footage and full screen images of the black-and-white film footage itself. Dupree remarks, “I can’t believe that’s me. I know it’s me, but it’s hard to believe I was doing all this stuff.” His identity is both defined by and removed from that period. It is as though he has psychologically moved on from that era—the “never was” has overridden “the best.” As such, we see the joy in running, in youthful movement, grace, and physical power channeled through Dupree’s experience. But we simultaneously watch Dupree watching and we see and know, more than anything, loss. It is Dupree’s loss and the registration of our loss, both of which are experienced through an engagement with film.

The film medium in this example is mobilized to index the past in ways other forms cannot. Like the others, it offers a particular experience of the past, locating the moment in a specific time and place. And it encourages us to probe that material for its medium-specific meanings. But it also reminds us that meaningful experiences of history often call attention to the gap between what we see and what we can know.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have sought to explain how the contemporary confluence of sports and documentary results in mutual benefits for and shapes our understanding of each category. Documentary’s associations with seriousness, rigorous analysis, and topics of public importance provide cultural capital and brand strengthening to sponsoring institutions, in this case ESPN. Sport’s associations with entertainment and visual attraction aid documentary’s commercial viability. But thinking about sport and documentary together also reveals the ways that documentary, as a mode of historiography, speaks about sport. It asserts sport’s imbrication with capital, its visually spectacular quality, its capacity for expressing individuality nonverbally, and its narrative nature. In addition, it urges viewers to understand sport through its mediation. In asserting that sport is only truly knowable by accounting for its mediation, the sports documentary transforms the meaning of its reference. It creates a world in which knowing sports without the contributions of ESPN, the so-called and strategically branded “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” is unimaginable.

**KEYWORDS:** DOCUMENTARY, INDEXICALITY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, BRANDING, ESPN’S *30 FOR 30*

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1Travis Vogan, review, “*30 for 30*,” *Journal of Sport History* 38 (2011): 125-127, 126 [QUOTATION].

2Documentary elements emerge, at times with cinematic associations, throughout ESPN’s broadcasts as a way of providing an in-depth, sober, often analytical, but humanistic look at the world of sports.
This is visible not just in distinct programs (the program Outside the Lines, for example) and in collaborations with established documentary broadcast programs like PBS's Frontline but in longer form reporting segments within SportsCenter and other news programs. For more on how television institutions use documentary to help build respectable, profitable identities, see Travis Vogan, “Chronicling Sport, Branding Institutions,” in Handbook of Sport Communication, ed. Paul M. Pedersen (New York: Routledge, 2013), 128-136.

7I am not convinced, however, of the historical point McDonald makes—that in the “post Michael-Moore moment” this focus on individuals for entertainment purposes becomes increasingly the case in the sports documentary. We need attention on a far larger body of films than the six he selects to make such an argument convincing.

8There is a difference, though, between sports that allow for the face to be seen, either by spectators at the game or on television, and those that do not. Helmets, visors, pulled down caps, and sunglasses, temper, to a point, the possibilities of articulation.