

There is perhaps no greater embodiment of the mythical quality of sport to uplift, inspire and lead than that of the sports film genre. The Olympic spirit is just one version of the same story; that sport can make better men and women of all of us.

From the Oscar winning tale of Rocky (possibly the greatest underdog story of all time), to the proud British sentiment of the Olympic-themed Chariots of Fire, British and world cinema regularly passes the sporting torch from one hero to another, always retaining a positive and tenacious message that the road to glory can only be obtained by those who are accompanied by the sidekicks of morality, hard work, and mental and physical discipline. What many might not be aware of is that many of these blockbuster celluloid tales are actually based on true stories.

This case study presents the heart warming and amazing story of Sean Porter, whose instrumentalism and tenacity in creating an American football team for the LA County juvenile detainees in his care both inspired a generation of cinemagoers, and changed, year on year, the lives of many of the boys that passed through his programme.

The Real Gridiron Gang

Sean Porter was instrumental in starting the Mustangs, an 8-man American football team, at the LA County Probation Department's juvenile detention centre named Camp Vernon Kilpatrick, located in San Fernando Valley. Sean Porter did not think that his team would win games, and instead focused on developing his athletes via an

ideology that stressed accepting the challenge to play over winning.



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Building Character through Sport

Coach Porter faced a very real concern that many schools would refuse to play them, given the many felony counts possessed by their team. He stated: "We always had a difficulty scheduling people, getting real people out there to play us... We were lucky we had some good schools that would play us and believed in what we did. And after that first year and they saw the quality not just of football, but the character, that was the question. People were always concerned with the character that would be there. We had them [the schools] requesting to play us after the first year because they liked what we did."

Learning to Manage Negative Emotions

In the film, Mustang players cry when they experience their first loss. This was an actual reconstruction of real events, and served as a touching indication of how much the football team meant to them. It is even more touching when one considers that many of these young men were hardened gang members incarcerated for violent crime, including gun violence, so to be reduced to

tears over this sent a valuable message to audiences. A decision was also made to intersperse clips of the real Porter and Mustangs during the film credits to allow audiences to see how well the film reflected real life.

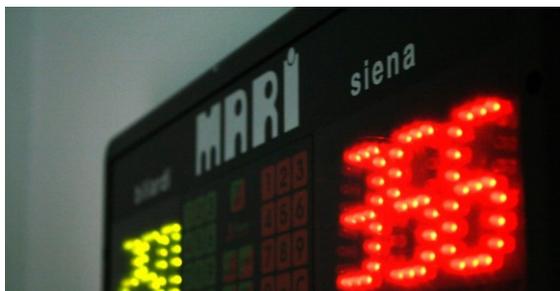


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Interestingly, many of the key speeches in the film were real. Sean Porter explained that "I've had people who have seen the screenings with me go, 'That's my favourite one of yours.' Yet the Rocky-esque quality of much of what was said could easily be perceived to have been fabricated for emotional effect. Clearly there is a strong and real presence of morality and charisma in the words, actions and portrayal of Porter in his interactions with the Camp Kilpatrick Mustangs team, and serves as an indication of what a moral leader, a role model, and a sport team, can really achieve.

Touchingly, and despite expressions of interest from Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis and Nicolas Cage to portray him on screen, Porter was at first resistant for the film to be made in case it jeopardised the lives of the youngsters in the film (many of whom had gone on to adulthood to lead successful and happy lives; something that they were statistically unlikely to do before this type of intervention). However, the Emmy winning producer Lee Stanley was eventually able to move the project forward after finding an actor that

would truly honour the spirit of the film. Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson was chosen because of his similarities to, and ability to sympathise with, the background of the kids in the film.

Johnson already worked with underprivileged kids for organisations such as AfterSchool AllStars, his own eponymously self-titled Rock Foundation, and the Make a Wish Foundation. He said that: "What this movie did was reaffirm the fact that there are people out there who really care. Guys like Sean Porter, working a thankless job, a selfless guy, still working at a prison for kids as a probation officer, who's a person that just really wanted to change their lives... One of the reasons I really warmed to the material is that I had my own Sean Porter. I had been arrested about 9 times by the time I was 17 and I had a guy, my arresting officer, who said, "You're gonna stop f***ing up right now. You're gonna go on and play football." So, I had that guy in my life. What I realized while playing football for 10 years, from age 14 to 24, is what an invaluable tool comes from having great teachers.

Success Stories

One of the young men under Porter's care – Michael Black – was portrayed as a character named Willie Weathers in the film. His cousin was shot and killed during gang violence, and as an inmate of Kilpatrick, Black appeared to be at risk of the same. But he excelled as a member of the Mustang's and went on to become a successful NFL player for both the Dallas Cowboys and the Seattle Seahawks.

As a team, the Mustang's made it to the Championships in their first season of play. This is

an amazing achievement and a true testament to how much positive spirit and talent the team possessed, and how the effects of a strong role model can transform the lives of others by believing in them, helping them to believe in themselves, and by bringing out the best in them.

Many credit the Mustang's programme with changing their lives. For example, Jason Lamb, a car thief, was a habitual offender, but never re-offended after his experience with the Mustangs, and credits it with changing his life.

Another, Joseph Lucero, now works full time with gang members in a rehabilitative role. During the filming of the movie, two of the real characters from the film paid a visit to the actors and directors on set, and voiced their feelings that, at the time, they hated their coach because he was so strict, but that "it (the football) was the greatest thing for us" – and that it had turned their lives around.

It is clear from observing this case study that sport – couple with positive and strong role models – can transform lives. This concept is as applicable to the founding values of the Olympic Movement as it is by the legion of sports movies that grace our screens on a regular basis.

As the great man Barack Obama observes: "[We] reach for a dream - a dream that no matter who we are, where we come from; no matter what we look like or what hand life has dealt us; with hard work, and discipline and dedication, we can make it if we try. That's not just the American dream.

That is the Olympic Spirit. It's the essence of the Olympic Spirit.'



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Summary

For those interested in Gridiron Gang and other stories of triumph through sport, but who prefer the turning of the page to celluloidic delights; you are encouraged to seek out two books. The first is entitled *The Power of One*, and is perhaps the most evocative and inspiring sports-based book of all time. *Friday Night Lights*, Sports Illustrated's greatest sports book of all time, is also a great read, and offers a fascinating insight into the pressures of high school football.

START THE DISCUSSION

- Consider the parallels and differences between Gridiron Gang and the Olympics, in terms of their ideology and use of sport to build character, to extend human rights and to promote the concept of fair play.
- Research the concepts of charismatic, transformational and authentic leadership. Which type of leaders do you think that Sean Porter and Dwayne Johnson are?

- Do you believe that sport can change people's lives and characters?
- Camp Kilpatrick Mustangs bought together rival gang members (often incarcerated for injuring, or shooting and killing each other), yet still went on to reach the finals in their inaugural year. Clearly the team work was excellent – between individuals who had previously hated each other. How did Porter make this happen?
- Do the Olympic and Paralympic Games still possess the values highlighted in this series of examples?

FIND OUT MORE**The Real Camp Kilpatrick Mustangs**

<http://lang.dailynews.com/socal/flash/GridironGang/index.asp>

Gridiron Gang Official Site

<http://www.sonypictures.com/homevideo/gridirongang/index.html>

The Olympic Spirit

<http://www.olympicspirit.org/>

CREDITS

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