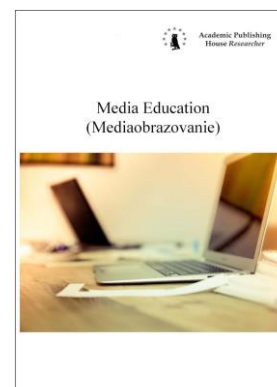




Published in the Slovak Republic
Media Education (Mediaobrazovanie)
Has been issued since 2005
ISSN 1994-4160
E-ISSN 2729-8132
2021. 17(3): 435-442

DOI: 10.13187/me.2021.3.435
www.ejournal53.com



Moral and Existential Dilemmas in American Sports Feature Films of 2019–2020

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Abstract

Contemporary sports films discuss various moral and existential themes. They present how athletes struggle with their own weaknesses and also motivate the audience to excel not only in the physical dimension but also spiritually. This is particularly clear in contemporary US sports cinematography. Eight American sports feature films from 2019–2020 were selected for this analysis. Most of them are dramas, three are based on biographical plots – *Safety* (directed by Reginald Hudlin), *Brian Banks* (by Tom Shadyac) and *The Brawler* (by Ken Kushner), and one explicitly refers to religious faith – *Overcomer* by Alex Kendrick. This study uses the method of film analysis where films are regarded according to Grzegorz Łęcicki's concept of media message, with particular focus on ethical issues. The analysis posed three questions: 1) how do the events depicted in film narration relate to historical facts? 2) how are the existential struggles of the athletes captured in the symbolic message, 3) what moral dilemmas do the athletes experience? Above all, the researchers searched for Christian references relevant to American film culture, both directly and naturalized in semiotic and narrative references. As a result, the study succeeded in establishing the main categories of contemporary sports moral and existential dilemmas from a religious perspective. The thesis on Christian inspirations of contemporary American sports cinema has been confirmed.

Keywords: film analysis, media messages, American feature sports film, moral and existential dilemmas, athletes, Christianity, sports media studies.

1. Introduction

One could argue that experiencing moral and existential dilemmas is an inherent part of sports. The athlete firstly struggles with his/her own weaknesses and limitations. These take various forms, physical injury, addiction or loss of mental motivation. Secondly, the athlete wants to excel in the discipline he or she practices. He or she struggles not only to overcome his or her difficulties and achieve the desired sporting success but also to become a good person in relation to other people. Sometimes there is also a dissonance between physical fitness and spiritual perfection. The heroes of sports films are tormented by various existential fears, their actions have an important moral dimension, in which “the border between good and evil is determined not by the sash at the finish line, but by the quality of the heart and conscience” (Łęcicki, 2013: 373).

These existential and moral experiences of sports are present in many national film cultures. In our study we analyse contemporary US cinema, with focus on the last two years of the second decade of the 21st century. There were vast ethical themes primarily inspired by American Christian spirituality. Reference to Christianity has become an enduring feature of sports films,

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either through direct references in the narrative or the cultural naturalisation of religious practices and icons (Crosson, 2017; Watson, Parker, 2012), which is sometimes met with criticism in the context of issues of colonisation and decolonisation, among others (Osman, 2019).

In the analysis of American sports feature films from 2019–2020, we attempt to answer the following three questions: 1) how do the events depicted in the film narrative relate to historical facts, to biographical plots or to the social and cultural context of a given era? 2) how are the existential struggles of the athletes – heroes of the individual films – portrayed in the symbolic message? 3) what moral dilemmas do the athletes experience?

2. Materials and methods

For the analysis, four American sports feature films from 2019 and four from 2020 were selected, with a total of eight pictures. In the course of the search, the list published in the sports category on the Movie Insider® website was used which presents previews of the latest Hollywood productions and discussions of premieres. The 2019 films analysed are: *Brian Banks* directed by Tom Shadyac, *Overcomer* directed by Alex Kendrick, *Trading Paint* directed by Karzan Kader and *The Brawler* directed by Ken Kushner. The 2020 films selected for the study are: *Safety* by Reginald Hudlin, *Jungleland* by Max Winkler, *The Main Event* by Jay Karas and *The Way Back* by Gavin O'Connor. Three of them address biographical themes, namely *Safety*, *Brian Banks* and *The Brawler*. Seven of the films can be categorised as sports drama, including one as Christian drama (*Overcomer*) and one as drama action film (*Trading Paint*). *The Main Event*, on the other hand, can be described as a sports comedy.

The study used the method of analysis of films based on their media message (Łęciński, 2017a, 2017b). The aim is (through repeated viewing) to grasp the meaning and fundamental message of a given film. A characteristic feature of this approach is focus on the historical context, attention to film symbolism, and existential and moral problems, especially from the Christian perspective.

3. Discussion

When discussing US sports film, it is difficult not to consider the contemporary literature in the field. Current research in this area focuses mainly on race-related themes (Descamps, Vivier, 2020; Pearson et al., 2019), including on Native American population (Bauer, Delsahut, 2020; Bauer et al., 2021; Durbin, 2020; Green, 2017), however, it concerns older productions. Such continuous search for personal, community and nation-level identity is characteristic in the case of research of sports-related American film culture. On the one hand, American society seems to be exceptionally ethnically diverse, which makes it a model of a modern multicultural community. On the other hand, we are dealing with exceptional social tensions, above all with the problem of discrimination against African Americans in public life. These themes are clearly present in contemporary American sports films, they constitute an important political and social background for the adventures of the heroes (Englert, 2018). Thus, other issues, including ethical or moral are presented in the background. It can be said that contemporary American sports cinematography is primarily a historical settlement.

Other analyses deal with the phenomenon of 'sportainment', the merging of contemporary sport with the space of entertainment, as it has been taking on increasingly spectacular and emotional forms and is primarily observed in Hollywood-origin sports cinema. Contemporary sports media culture is to convey socially useful myths by creating a cult of sports stars, which is to lead to an increase in sales of specific marketing products. An audiovisual performance often uses an illusion to strengthen dominant social attitudes (Muniowski, Jacheć, 2017), contains hidden ideological narratives, and is supposed to foster the economic development of the free market. Contemporary sporting events have become even more mediatized and subjected to the logic of an audiovisual spectacle. Instead of sports information, we primarily have entertainment built around sports news. Major sports events, such as Super Bowl, have become primarily a commercial, media and advertising venture. The sports fan has turned into a consumer. This phenomenon also applies to contemporary American sports films, which covertly strengthen the processes of the ideological economization of culture (Radošinská, 2018).

It remains relevant the evergreen philosophy of American films where one overcomes own limitations. It has a psychological dimension, it contains a motivational message, an incentive to overcome weaknesses. Often, heroes' stories are told according to this American success logic, from a small local team to a state victory (Christesen, 2017). The psychological and motivational trend

seems to be particularly attractive in contemporary research on American sports film, although political aspects - the problem of discrimination against ethnic groups – as well as economic and cultural aspects still dominate. However, there is no analysis of the content of film messages in the existential and moral aspect, also taking into account the latest sports films from 2015–2020.

4. Results

Historical references

Three of the films analysed remind biographies of specific fighters. *The Brawler* is a fiction story about Chuck Wepner who was born in 1938 and was an American heavyweight boxer. In 1975, he fought the legendary Muhammad Ali (Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr.). He managed to knock his opponent down in the ring in the 9th round, but the entire 15-round fight ended in a technical knockout. It took only a few seconds to win the fight, but the very fact of knocking down the champion brought Wepner international fame. The fight became an inspiration for Sylvester Stallone to work on the script of *Rocky*. The screenwriter and actor admitted many times that the premiere of the 1976 film would not have been possible without Wepner's sports duel with Ali. It encouraged him to play an episode in *Rocky II*, the 1979 sequel, but Chuck already had serious alcohol and drug problems by then. The film also featured a 1976 losing fight with wrestling champion André the Giant, which in turn became inspiration for one of the scenes in 1982's *Rocky III*. Stallone later waived these statements, which led to a legal dispute with Wepner. In 2016, the first biographical sports drama inspired by Wepner's story, *Chuck*, directed by Philippe Falardeau, premiered.

Brian Banks is also based on an authentic story. The title character is a 1985-born, American football player who was a successful high school senior at Polytechnic High School (Poly) in Long Beach, California. Unfortunately, his career was interrupted by a false accusation of rape by classmate Wanetta Gibson in 2002. He spent nearly six years in prison and five years on parole, and his conviction was not overturned until 2012. This is because when he agreed to the plea deal with Gibson, he was unaware of the consequences of the agreement. It was only through working with the California Innocence Project – a non-governmental organisation dealing with wrongful convictions – and most importantly its founder, lawyer Justin Brooks, that he was able to exonerate himself. Following his acquittal, Banks sought to resume his football career, as part of now defunct United Football League (UFL). He enlisted the help of, among others, coach Peter Clay Carroll, who had offered Banks a spot on the University of South Carolina team even before his conviction and now invited him to train with Seattle Seahawks. But a decade-long hiatus from competition has prevented him from taking up regular sporting activity. However, Banks made an intense effort, allowing him to sign a professional contract with Atlanta Falcons in 2013, fulfilling his National Football League (NFL) dream.

Safety is a fact-based story of Ramon "Ray Ray" McElrathbey, another US football player who was born in 1986 and joined Clemson Tigers team of Clemson University, South Carolina. In 2006, after his mother Tonya McElrathbey was sent to forced drug treatment, he took custody of his 11-year-old brother Fahmarr. However, by then Ramon was already a sophomore student living in a dormitory and actively participating in training. For some time he supposedly illegally hid the boy in the student house, however it rather more a storytelling plot than an actual fact in the film. Just like the story of his relationship with a student and a sports journalist named Kaycee. It is true, however, that in order to take care of his brother he had to provide for his housing needs and upkeep him while fulfilling own academic and sports duties. Likewise true is that National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) alleged community helped him, however that fact happily led to an exceptional precedent for Ramon due to his family situation. Also true was coach Tommy Bowden who served as the caretaker of Clemson Tigers from 1999 to 2008. Ray Ray's story was made famous by one of the episodes in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2006. Ray Ray's history has been highlighted in 2006 when he and his brother appeared in Oprah Winfrey Show as well as some prior interviews for *The Clemson Insider* and *The New York Times*. Ramon was also one of the film consultants during the production of *Safety*.

The other feature films analysed refer not so much to biographical themes as to contemporary American social and cultural contexts, although here too we can point to authentic historical figures or real tournaments. In *The Main Event*, the main character (teenager Leo) is passionate about US games called World Wrestling Entertainment Inc. (WWE). The film features professional wrestlers such as Kofi Nahaje Sarkodie–Mensah (Kofi Kingston), Stephen Farrelly (Sheamus) and Michael Gregory Mizanin (The Miz). In *Trading Paint*, on the other hand, we have

the main characters competing at Talladega Short Track racetrack in Alabama. The track is part of Talladega Superspeedway motorsports complex where NASCAR competition runs every year. It seems relevant to include in the film messages certain American social problems, such as collective lay-offs resulting from factory relocation to another city (*The Overcomer*) or the job situation of people involved in simple manual labour who dream of a sports career, arts or own business (*Jungleland*). As for the cultural context, firstly there is the image of the US school system which is clearly marked in five of the pictures analysed (*Safety*, *The Way Back*, *The Main Event*, *Brain Banks* and *The Overcomer*). The importance of Christian churches for the local community is also highlighted (*Overcomer*, *Safety*). The social effects of alcoholism (*The Way Back*) as well as organised crime (*Jungleland*) are addressed. However, these issues will be discussed primarily from an existential and moral perspective.

Symbolism of athlete's existential struggle

In the films analysed, we see not so much athlete stories as rather universal tales of human struggle and difficulties of the world. American sports cinema clearly has didactic and moralistic inclinations. It fits into cultural patterns of meaning, from downfall through struggle, through another downfall, and then uprising up to victory. In fact, there is a Christian dimension to it in the form of naturalisation of the evangelical story in culture. Sport itself also seems to be a platform and a method of overcoming weaknesses and improving oneself. It is worth noting that in contemporary sports films, existential themes are mainly presented in a symbolic way. When we watch them, we focus mainly on the plot, but in these images there are specific objects that play an important role in building the message. Sometimes it is a physical thing, e.g. a rock, a mask, sometimes it is a metaphysical thing, e.g. the title of a book, a biblical quotation. Their use in the plot builds new external cultural references.

In *The Way Back*, there is an important symbolic charge even in the title itself. Jack Cunningham is an alcoholic and a manual labourer. He was a high school basketball star in his youth and now gets an offer to coach the team at his former Catholic high school – the fictional Bishop Hayes. A board is placed in the sports hall showing his name along with significant achievements: Basketball CIF (California Interscholastic Federation) Player of Year 1993, 1994. However, he cannot overcome his drinking weakness. His marriage to Angela falls apart when they both painfully try to survive the cancer-related death of their nine-year-old son named Michael. Together they lay flowers and pray at his grave. We watch Jack as he drinks beer while driving home, or as he reaches for it in the fridge while watching basketball on TV, or as he exhausted returns from a bar, or as he drunken leads training sessions. But his journey also includes meetings with his wife, help for players in difficult family situations, especially Brandon, conversations with clergy and teachers. Jack leaves school cosseting the ball, playing basketball alone against the backdrop of the sunlit ocean. This is how the journey ends, this is how the return begins. These are Christian symbols of life, based on the innate ability to move, universal metaphors for inner drive to be a good person, for discovering the right path and own direction.

In *The Main Event*, we have another specific symbolic object, namely a mask. 11-year-old Leo is failing at school, being bullied by his peers, and is shy around girls. He is passionate about wrestling, supported by his grandmother Denise, and together they watch WWE competitions on TV. His father Steve is left alone after his mother leaves the family. He is unable to talk to his son openly about his difficulties. They have a \$ 20,000 mortgage to pay, otherwise they could lose their home. One day Leo, escaping from his school bullies together with a group of faithful friends, hides in one of the for-sale mansions. There he finds a mysterious wrestling mask and the owner of the house lets him take it. When he puts it on in his room, his voice suddenly changes and he feels physically strong. Thanks to the mask, he overcomes the school bullies and impresses Erika, a friend he is particularly fond of. Above all, to save his father's and grandmother's house, he decides to take part in a local wrestling tournament. He beats all the competitors, making it all the way to the final. Here, however, his secret is discovered by his main rival Samson. Despite this, he manages to win. Taking on a mask is symbolic of the desire to assume superhuman qualities, to overcome one's limitations by acquiring special powers. It is telling that the main character in the final showdown does not need this supernatural support. Leo wins, not thanks to the mask, but thanks to his faith in his own strength and the support of those close to him.

The specific symbolic object in *Safety* is, in turn, a rock. As Ray McElrathbey begins his tenure with Clemson Tigers, the coach points to the Howard's Rock statue that stands in front of the college stadium. "We honor values like honor, sacrifice and tradition. And here, for us,

tradition is not an empty word. You've probably all seen our memorial at the stadium. Those who finish the training camp, certainly not all of them, will pass it on their way to the plate. And I promise you, it will be one of the most beautiful moments of your life. Because Howard's Rock is sacred to the players and the people of the city, by stepping onto the field we are touching it for luck, the coach motivates the players. Mounted on a pedestal originating from Death Valley in California, the rock was actually given to coach Frank Howard by a friend in the 1960s. The symbolism of the rock has significant Christian references, pointing to the foundation of all values and the martyrdom undertaken in their defence. The biography-based story of the main character (as already mentioned in the analysis of historical contexts) indeed points to the importance of Howard's Rock as a symbol of the unity of the local and academic community of Clemson. It is thanks to the determination of the entire community that Ray receives permission from the sports authorities to receive material support in caring for his younger brother Fahmarr and to continue training at the same time.

A completely different symbolic object is found in *Trading Paint*, a white 1970 Ford Mustang. Sam Munroe and his son Cam compete on a racetrack. Years ago Sam bought his wife this very special car after one of his victories, unfortunately there was a fatal accident. Both he and his son lost the woman of their lives. Cam at some point decides to go his own way as a racer, joining the team of Sam's biggest rival – Linsky. The father is devastated by his son's decision, abuses alcohol, and constantly recalls his wife's death. He repeatedly warns his son about Linsky's dishonesty in sports. Eventually, an accident occurs on the track. Still during in the competition, Sam hits Cam's car. The son survives the crash but faces a long rehab procedure. This is a turning point for the father. He decides to sell the souvenir car to Linsky for 80 thousand dollars. Thanks to the sale, he can buy a new racing car for his son. He returns to the longed-for car racing and wins against the eternal rival of the Munroe family. The Ford Mustang in American pop culture is a symbol of freedom, liberty and strength. In *Trading Paint*, it gains additional meaning, namely that of victory over one's fate, of overcoming the mourning of a lost loved one, of family reconciliation, of following a sports tradition.

At times, however, we are not dealing with any physical symbol used in a film but rather, one might say, a metaphysical one. In *The Overcomer*, a quotation from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, chapters 1–2, plays an pivotal role. Hannah Scott is a student at a Christian high school, raised alone by her grandmother, after the death of her mother and the passing of their father. She takes up cross-country training despite the asthma she suffers from. Her coach John Harrison is initially reluctant to care for the talented athlete. Once in hospital he meets a patient, Thomas Hill, who turns out to be Hannah's father and a former cross-country champion. He has lost his sight due to complications from drug abuse. Hannah doesn't even know he exists. With the support of her coach, his teacher wife Amy, and school principal Olivia Brooks, Hannah decides to turn her life around, reconcile with her father, and compete in a state cross-country competition. She writes down passages from the letter of St. Paul, especially about redemption and forgiveness of sins, and becomes a Christian. Through this reading and prayer she manages to win the final race. Hannah also has with her a motivational video of her father's words, which she listens to while competing.

A similar metaphysical object is the book that the eponymous *Brian Banks* receives from prison tutor Jerome Johnson. It is a copy of James Allen's 1903 motivational manual *As a Man Thinketh*. Johnson includes a dedication with the words: all you can control in life is how you respond to it. This makes the player take up the fight for his release from prison and return to professional football. In *Jungleland*, such a metaphysical symbol is the flyer for his own dry-cleaning business, which Walter "Lion" Kaminski dreams of after ending his illegal fistfights. Unfortunately, he is persuaded to follow a toxic sports career by his brother Stanley. They travel across America dreaming of a stable life and a good job, along with dancer Mary "Sky" McGinty, who is on the run from a mob boss. In *The Brawler* we deal primarily with the cultural symbolism of historical figures. Muhammad Ali is one of the most famous boxers, Sylvester Stallone is the author of the script and the actor playing the role of *Rocky*. The less popular Chuck Wepner, beats them both, one in the ring, the other in a legal dispute.

Many of the symbols analysed above have a Christian dimension, they refer directly to religion – such as St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians – or through cultural naturalisation to Christian symbolism, such as the rock. We are also dealing with myth-making processes in American culture – for example, the Ford Mustang car or Muhammad Ali becomes a symbol. Watching contemporary American sports films we notice, therefore, apart from the narrative itself,

a clearly present semiotic layer of the athletes' existential struggles, manifested through the aforementioned symbols used in the films.

Athlete's moral dilemmas

The heroes of the analysed sports films experience difficult life situations, moral choices sometimes between two unpleasant possibilities. Most of these dilemmas concern personal relationships with loved ones. The drama itself seems to take place in the psyche of the protagonists, assuming different forms e.g. shyness, fear or addiction.

Family problems are the main motif of these struggles. First, the source of the athletes' moral dilemmas is the loss of a loved one. In *The Way Back* Jack loses his 9-year-old son to cancer, which is the cause of his alcoholism. He tries to fight his addiction and rekindle his relationship with his separated wife. However, his addiction returns when they both learn about the case of another terminally ill child. In *The Main Event*, teenage Leo is abandoned by his mother, left alone with his grandmother and father, who is trying to raise money to pay the mortgage. In *Safety* Ray loses his addicted mother for several years, feeling obliged to take legal custody of his brother Fahmarr. In *Overcomer* Hannah suffers the loss of her parents. They both appear to be dead, but it turns out that a patient the coach accidentally met in hospital is her missing father, and that drugs were the cause of all her family's woes. In *Trading Paint*, on the other hand, we have Sam's suffering after losing his wife in a car accident.

Secondly, the moral struggles seem to be motivated by complicated family relationships, such as father-son or brotherhood. In *Trading Paint* Sam wants his son Cam to continue his passion for car racing with him. He is painfully aware of his son's departure to join a rival team, Lynsky. In *Jungleland*, there is a toxic relationship between brothers. Walter "Lion" Kaminski wants to give up illegal fist-fighting and start his dream dry-cleaning business. His brother and manager Stanley prevents him from fulfilling these desires, seeing their future very differently as successful sports siblings together. Also Mary "Sky" McGinty, another character in this film, cannot forgive her mother for her new partner and, above all, for the way she refers to her dreams of a dance career.

Thirdly, in the catalogue of family relations, it is worth paying attention to marital relations. In *The Brawler*, despite his betrayals, Chuck can still count on the help of Phyllis Wepner. However, when his marriage finally falls apart, he bonds with his second wife Linda. New love seems to heal his sense of loss. His spouse inspires him to file a lawsuit against Stallone. In *The Way Back*, Jack apologises for past mistakes and renews his marriage to Angela, even though she is already dating another man. In *Overcomer*, coach John and teacher Alex Harrison form a compatible marriage. Religious faith plays an important role in their family life, they pray together and raise their sons in this spirit. There is therefore not always an elevated level of family complications.

We can also point to another plane of athletes' moral dilemmas, more related to their personal experience, primarily the search for their own identity. Here, drug and alcohol addictions are often the cause – and not the effect, as in the aftermath of losing a loved one in *The Way Back*. Such a protagonist is Chuck Wepner in *The Brawler*. A successful professional boxer, he doesn't really know who he is. He indulges in entertainment, casual sexual encounters and drug abuse. The personal struggles of athletes often result in their entanglement in the criminal world. This is the case in *Jungleland*, where the brothers take on a mafia job in exchange for paying off their debts and a contract for a high-paying fight. Sky – who they are to transport from Massachusetts to Nevada – is expecting the child of one of the bosses, Colonel Yates. She wants to get away from him and start life as a single but free mother. We also have other criminal entanglements in *The Brawler*, when several times Chuck returns to drug deals or becomes an accomplice in the trade of counterfeit sports memorabilia. The situation is completely different for Hannah in *Overcomer*, who tries to find her family roots, but also her cultural identity as a Christian. She too struggles with a kind of behavioural addiction. She steals valuable personal items from other students, but also from her coach. A yet different kind of personal struggle is encountered in *Brian Banks*. The protagonist struggles not with addiction, but with a wrongful rape accusation. His career breaks down, his life plans are thwarted, and he loses faith in his own worth. It is only with the help of prison tutor Jerome Johnson, lawyer Justin Brooks and artist Karina Cooper that he is able to shake off the false sense of guilt.

The above analyses reveal the non-sports moral struggles of the protagonists. We can also point to those related to athletic competition itself. In *The Main Event*, when Leo learns that his power mask was switched in the final fight, he nevertheless decides to finish the wrestling match.

He accomplishes this, not through physical superiority, but through personal cleverness. He finally believes in his own strength, the support of friends and loved ones proving to be the key motivator here. In *The Way Back* we see a fulfilled Jack as a victorious coach. His lonely struggle ends in a family, educational and, above all, sporting success. In *Safety* we watch Ray McElrathbey and his brother Fahmarr during the winning games of the Clemson Tigers team. The titular *Brian Banks* returns to active training with the help of coach Pete Carroll, and eventually – despite a significant drop in athletic form after years in prison – manages to play in his dream NFL game. Cam competing on Sam's team in the final competition in *Trading Paint* beats Linsky. At *Overcomer*, Hannah becomes a state champion in cross-country thanks to motivational recordings from her father Thomas, also a former champion in the sport. A slightly different kind of sporting victory is that in *Jungleland*. One could say that the fight won by "Lion" Kaminski is not so much the beginning of his career, as the end of sports-related compulsive behaviour and the beginning of own path without the imposing conditions of the older brother.

When analysing the moral dilemmas of athletes in contemporary American films, it is also worth noting the important role of social institutions in resolving them. In *Safety* Ray, he wins thanks to the Clemson community, the support of his school, church, welfare, friendly sports decision-makers or the local media. The victory of the titular *Brian Banks* would not have been possible without the attitude of Justin Brooks, founder of the California Innocence Project, who also had to make a brave moral choice about whether to ultimately take on such a difficult legal contest in court. In Hannah's struggle in *Overcomer*, the Christian high school, the support of the teachers and the headmistress, plays an important role. Jack receives similar support in *The Way Back*, thanks to the wise attitude of the high school authorities he manages to overcome his addiction. In *The Main Event*, Leo experiences not only the help of his family and peers, but also professional wrestling players. In *Trading Paint*, the success of Cam Munroe and his father Sam would not have been possible without the friendship of the local racing community.

It can be said that in the American sports films analysed above, what is important is not so much the plot of the competitors' rivalry on the field or racetrack, but their internal struggle with themselves, overcoming family difficulties, establishing new relationships and renewing the existing ones, struggling with pain after the loss of loved ones or with their own identity. It is important that in this process of victory, the athletes do not remain alone experiencing the love of friends and concrete help from social institutions.

5. Conclusion

Contemporary American sports films have an important motivational value. Analysing both the historical, semiotic and moral aspects of the narratives about the protagonists, we see above all their internal struggles, their search for their own identity, their experienced family difficulties. To a lesser extent, it is a story about the sport competition itself, and more about building psychological support, also for us as an audience.

Religious symbolism plays an important role here. The very metaphor of a road or a rock, as well as the biblical references directly evoked, confirm the special presence of the moral and existential Christian message. The heroes fall, try to get back up, experience defeat again, until the final victory. The sporting competition itself is only an emanation of this process. The more important game takes place in the personal and family lives of the characters. There is a largely implicit religious message, naturalised by American culture, but essentially having to do with a religious foundation.

It is also possible to see a completely different image of sport from the one we often deal with in mass media messages. It is not just about entertainment, marketing, gaining TV ratings or celebrity popularity. Contemporary American film shifts the problem of the mediatisation of sport from a discussion of material or financial aspects back to the spiritual dimension. Thus, we are still confronted with media messages of a higher order – sometimes perhaps saturated with didacticism and moralising – but which are culturally significant and touch on the fundamental meaning of sport and life.

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