

Power Play: Nine Women Sports Film Classics

By Sandi Sonnenfeld

The recent front-page news story about members of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team filing a federal wage discrimination complaint against the U.S. Soccer Association for paying them 40 percent less than their male counterparts, despite the fact that the women players have won more World Cup games, more Olympic medals and sell more tickets to their games, got me thinking about my favorite women sports movies.

Even if not an athlete yourself, show some solidarity for these hard-working, hard-playing women, and spend an enjoyable and inspiring weekend bingeing on these classic sports films:

Pat and Mike (1952), Not Rated

College gym instructor Pat Pemberton (Katherine Hepburn) is a women's sports sensation at golf, tennis and whatever else she puts her mind to except when her fiancé is around. Her new shady manager Mike Conovan (Spencer Tracy) keeps them apart supposedly for her own good, but doesn't want to admit that he has developed feelings for her. Classic Tracy/Hepburn wit, comedy and sexual tension. Hepburn prided herself on being a great athlete and this film gives her the chance to strut her stuff. Despite its age, it holds up surprisingly well, thanks to famed husband and wife writing duo Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin, who actually created far more complex and self-empowered female characters in the films of the 1940s and 50s than do many of the mostly male screenwriters working today. Directed by George Cukor (Google Play, Amazon, iTunes);

Wilma (1977), PG

This too long-forgotten made-for-tv drama about the African-American track sprinter Wilma Rudolph (Shirley Jo Finney), who overcame physical handicaps to win three gold medals in the 1960s Olympics, is both inspirational and exciting. Written and directed by Bud Greenspan. Also starring the incomparable Cicely Tyson and a very young, but hunky, Denzel Washington. Directed by Bud Greenspan. (Amazon).

Hockey Night (1984), PG

This made-for-tv movie may be new to American audiences but remains a favorite among Canadians, and not just because it is about their national pastime. The plot focuses around the teenage Cathy Yarrow (Megan Follows of *Anne of Green Gables* fame), who, after her parents separate, winds up living in a small rural town which takes great pride in its junior hockey team. Because the town lacks a girls team, Cathy tries out for and makes the boys team as a goalie, which distresses not only the team sponsor and many local fans, but forces the team's fifteen-year-old captain and best player Spear Kozak (Yannick Bisson, years before he became the sexy, but always proper, Detective William Murdoch) to re-examine who he is as athlete and friend. A sweet coming of age movie that's ideal for the entire family, it's also fun to watch two of Canada's most beloved actors (if you haven't yet seen *Murdoch Mysteries* on Netflix, you are missing out on one of TV's greatest pleasures) as children. Directed by Paul Shapiro, written by Jack Blum and Paul Shapiro. (Amazon).

A League of Their Own (1992), PG

Of all the movies on this list, this is clearly the most commercially successful, ranking #1 in the box office for several weeks in the summer it premiered. A fictionalized account of the real-life All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) which was formed by Midwest MLB team owners looking to keep professional baseball alive during World War II, the plot centers around two sisters from Oregon, Dotty Hinson (Geena Davis) and Kit Keller (Lori Petty), who vie to win a place on one of the newly formed women's teams. They both make the Rockford Peaches team, only to encounter a skeptical and mocking fan base and Coach Jimmy Duggan (Tom Hanks), a drunken and embittered former MLB All-Star who initially views the idea of girls playing professional ball as nothing more than a publicity stunt. Sibling rivalry, locker room humor, dramatic tension during the battle to win the World Series and a simple but resonating theme makes this the ultimate "girl power" film. Also starring Madonna, Rosie O'Donnell and the much under-rated David Strathairn. Directed by Penny Marshall and written by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel. (Netflix)

Love & Basketball (2000), PG-13

In 1981 in L.A., Monica (Sanaa Lathan) and Quincy (Omar Epps) grow up next door to each other and both want to play basketball in the NBA. Their love-hate relationship lasts into high school, but ends when Monica puts her basketball career at USC ahead of Quincy, when he suffers a family crisis and drops out of college. Some years later, both their pro careers at a crossroads, they meet again. It's time for a final game of one-on-one with high stakes. Also starring the always luminescent Alfre Woodward, this movie defies stereotypes in more ways

than one. Winner of the 2001 Independent Spirit Award for Best First Screenplay; 2001 BET Award for Best Actress; and 2000-Humanitas Award for writer/director Gina Prince-Bythewood. (Vudu, iTunes),

When Billie Met Bobby (2001), PG

An immensely enjoyable and instructive docudrama about the historic 1973 tennis match between middle-aged champion Bobby Riggs (Ron Silver) and young feminist Billie Jean King (Holly Hunter). Engaging, funny, poignant and still relevant when it comes to the struggle of female professional athletes getting the same respect and salaries as their male counterparts, Nominated for two Primetime Emmy Awards, including Outstanding Lead Actress in a Miniseries or a Movie Written and directed by Jane Anderson. (Netflix, Vudu)

Bend It Like Beckham (2002), PG-13

British high schooler Jess (Parminder Nagra) is the daughter of Punjabi Sikhs who forbid her from playing soccer for cultural and religious reasons, when she meets Jules (Keira Knightly), who, much to her mother's dismay, dreams of winning a soccer scholarship to an American university because Great Britain doesn't have any top-winning women's college teams. The two of them quickly become best friends on and off the field despite parental expectations that pressures them to conform to societal norms. Throw in some romance, some laughs and some lightly handled gender-bending confusion and you've got the perfect uplifting and family-friendly movie. Also starring Jonathan Rhys-Meyers. Directed by Gurinder Chadha. Winner of the 2003 ESPY Award for Best Sports Movie; also nominated for a Golden Globe Award: Best Picture (Musical or Comedy). (Vudu, iTunes, Google Play)

Chalet Girl (2011), R

Kim Matthews (Felicity Jones), 19, used to be a champion skateboarder until a family tragedy ended her career. Now she's stuck in a dead end job trying to support her unemployed father. Opportunity comes knocking in the form of a catering job in the one of the most exclusive chalets in the Alps. At first, Kim's baffled by this bizarre new world of wealthy snow bunnies and corporate ski parties, until she discovers snowboarding, and how she can win some much-needed prize money at the big end-of-season competition. Light-hearted British romp with likeable, believable characters and some beautiful scenery of the German and Austrian alps. Ed Westwick, Bill Nighy and a wry Brooke Shields also star. Directed by Phil Traill. (Netflix)