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Remember the Titans, Historical Fact or Fiction?

Amy S. Tate

In the late 1990s, screen writer Gregory A. Howard wrote a screen play called *Remember the Titans*, based on the true story of T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia. Jerry Bruckheimer and Walt Disney Pictures bought the script based on the fact that it is a true story, but much of the film's content is fictional. Gregory Howard admitted to ESPN writer Jeff Merron that "he made some big assumptions when writing his script" (qtd. in Merron 5). Though the film is not entirely historically accurate, it is successful because it appeals to Americans through its intense emotional drama, its powerful music and its strong characterization.

1971 was a turbulent year in Alexandria, Virginia. Although the school system desegregated in 1963, the school board elected to merge three high schools into one school, T.C. Williams High School. While racial tensions mounted between citizens, T.C. Williams' newly integrated football players were more concerned with securing a starting position on the team. To further complicate matters, Williams' Head Coach, Bill Yoast was forced to take the assistant coaching position to make room for the new African-American Head Coach, Herman Boone. In a twist of fate, the two coaches were able to work together and led the Titans to victory in the Virginia State Championship. While the rest of the nation struggled for peace, the student body of T.C. Williams High School overcame their differences and set the example for the surrounding community. What began as a risky experiment resulted in T.C. Williams "becoming the model for every high school in the United States" (Merron 3).

The movie capitalizes on America's love of football. Assistant Coach Bill Yoast's daughter, Sheryl, narrates the opening scene, saying "Virginia football is a way of life. But in 1971 we were forced to integrate the all black school into the all white school." The next scene portrays a high school football practice. When a student announces that a racial skirmish is going on in the streets, the team stops practice and races toward it. The theme of racial conflict continues to the end of the film, but Howard exaggerates much of that truth. By exaggerating racial tensions, Howard creates more drama. In reality, T.C. Williams was made up of three high schools. The class size tripled, resulting in a larger talent pool. Its success was more attributed to consolidation than integration (IMDb).

Virginia school systems actually integrated in 1963. Mary Blanton, now an attorney in Salisbury, North Carolina, attended T.C. Williams during those turbulent years. She disagrees with how the film depicts the racial struggles and wrote about her experience in the Salisbury Post. According to Blanton,

While the newly released Disney movie, "Remember the Titans," makes good viewing, it bears little resemblance to the true story of 1971 or those earlier first years at my high school. In presenting its salutary message of racial understanding and human compassion, the movie plays fast and loose with history. The movie depicts Alexandria as a Hollywood-stereotypical Southern town, circa 1950s. But by the late '60s and early '70s, Alexandria was a cosmopolitan bedroom community for the rapidly expanding federal establishment, both military and civilian, in and around Washington D.C.

The film exaggerated the Titan's game records too. In the final game, where the Titans played Marshall for the state championship, the film portrayed the Titans trailing Marshall by seven at the half. In reality, the Titans played Andrew Lewis and dominated the field the entire game with a winning score of 27-0 (Merron 8). In the film, All-American player Gerry Bertier had a car accident before the championship game and was paralyzed as a result. The team mourned his injury and vowed to win the title for him. In reality, Bertier played in the championship game and was not injured until months later. The film's added drama fuels the audience's emotional need for the Titans to win.

Chris Crowe, editor for *The English Journal* states,

I realize now that I shouldn't have been surprised by the general popularity of *Remember the Titans* because Americans love sports, and we're predisposed to like movies, stories, and books that deal with sports in interesting or creative ways. Sports culture permeates almost every aspect of contemporary society. (129)

In addition to the intense emotional drama, the producers were very selective in choosing music for the film. The songs that were chosen invoke the standard genre of the sports movie. Music producer Trevor Rabin crafted the musical score so that "whenever the Titans complete a key play or turn the game in their favor, the music changes to upbeat rock." (IMDb) The emotional result is much like the feeling one experiences after watching *The Karate Kid* or any of the *Rocky* movies. The lyrical meaning also contributes to bringing the two races together. As Jocelyn Neal states in *Musical Quarterly*, "songs like Ain't No Mountain High Enough, break down the division between black and white Americans" (555). For example, in the film two players who are roommates at football camp discover that they share a love for the same music. There is a locker room scene where this African American player and the White player sing Ain't No Mountain High Enough together. They laugh and sing like they have been friends for years.

Along with a strong emotional theme and powerful music, producers created characters in the film with whom the audience could identify. At the beginning of the film, All-American linebacker Gerry Bertier is portrayed fighting with Julius, an African-American linebacker. In reality, the two never fought and remained close friends until Bertier's death in 1981, but the film dramatizes this close bond by depicting the boys as enemies before they become friends. The added layer of conflict makes the story that much more enthralling.

Although the film is full of exaggerations, most of it mirrors historical events. The part of the film where the white members of the team threaten to boycott T.C. Williams as a result of Coach Yoast's demotion is historically accurate, although according to Blanton, more parents worried about the increase in class size at the new high school than about race. Furthermore, there is another scene in which members of the community throw a brick through Coach Boone's living room window after he replaces Coach Yoast as the head coach. In reality, members of the community threw a toilet through Coach Boone's window. Walt Disney Pictures worried that some viewers would find the toilet offensive and therefore chose to write the scene with a brick. However, the threads of truth interwoven throughout the story provide the backbone for an emotional, fulfilling story. Those exaggerated elements are what makes the film so appealing to the audience. Film producer, Jerry Bruckheimer says it best: "This isn't a slick Hollywood project, — we put out something very real and that's what we wanted to do."

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