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## ***From Pigskins to Sheepskins***

The role of masculinity in achieving the American dream

**pig-skin** /'pɪg,skɪn/ Noun<sup>i</sup>  
*Informal* A football.

**sheep-skin** /'ʃi:p,skɪn/ Noun<sup>ii</sup>  
*Informal* A diploma.

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## **Introduction**

Sports films have found various degrees of popularity throughout the past few decades. Popular sports usually end up with some form of film as either a setting for the story of a hero or to show the viewer the passion and type of culture that develops around a sport. Not all of the films assessed here are based on true events, such as *Varsity Blues* (1999), but their subjects are very real.

In this essay football films will be looked at – specifically American Football. More so than other sports football films have been strongly tied to true stories of teams overcoming hurdles rather than individuals. Like being an underdog facing up to a stronger team, or overcoming racial segregation and prejudice or in some cases allowing the portrayed individuals to better themselves with promises of success through their participation and triumph as a team member in the sport.

A whole culture developing around the sport is something that different filmmakers that have tackled the subject of football have all tried to show. Looking at one the chosen films - *Friday Night Lights* (2004) - the players on the team are venerated as heroes of their hometown and we see this in one scene where a man asks the star quarterback – a mere teenager - for a photo. With their increasing success the fervor of the fans only grows stronger. In so doing the stakes only grow higher, failure not only incurs the wrath and disappointment of zealous fans but also risks pushing rewards away like scholarships and their special status as winners.

For many of the players being part of the football team has been a huge investment of time and for many it is the means to attain their goal of securing an athletic scholarship to a university.<sup>1</sup> With a scholarship a new wealth of opportunities are afforded to their recipients. They are able to gain a higher education, which in the United States is a significant reward due to University fees. They are able to leave their towns, a place they might have previously been trapped in due to the poor social mobility found in the types of places where Football is taken most seriously. The rare few college players that truly distinguish themselves are able to declare as professionals and reap financial benefits into the range of millions playing for the National Football League.

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<sup>1</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. Page 15

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The chosen films each focus on different themes and influences that impact the lives of the characters. One of the themes that is prevalent in nearly all of the selected films is the idea of social mobility. By way of their sport and their skills in the sport players will be able to advance to a new social strata or maintain their presence in that social strata. This may not always be the case after their careers as football players in high school, but for a time they are exposed to what its like being placed in an elite and selective social group. They are no longer just regular teenagers; instead they have been elevated into heroes, role models and in some cases nostalgic manifestations of a long gone youth. For some of the audience of these films it is a familiar situation, since many of them have had the same history with the sport and its players during their formative years.

Perhaps the cinema and other popular culture arenas allow us to perform and enact movement across class and afford us a class-passing space where audiences can vicariously and safely experience a shared subjectivity with the class-passer. Our collective fantasies not only seemingly allow us a place of class mobility but also reinforce the idea that class is both mutable and rigid. Change is possible. Upward mobility is performed.<sup>2</sup>

The players' successes become everyone else's successes. The whole town takes part in the fame, celebrating the players and the coach, because with each step forward everyone is able to relive the previous successes they once felt or have missed out on. An interesting example of this can be seen in both the *Friday Night Light* film and television series (2006 -2011). In both cases we, the viewer, are provided with a glimpse into the background of the characters and their relationship with the sport. The film and series do not put focus on the idea of "what comes after" high school. We are given a chance to see that there are opportunities for the players. First with each player being interviewed by reporters during a practice and then later when Mike Winchell (Lucas Black) speaks to recruiters from a university. With the television series we are able to see more time focused on the achievement of scholarships and the opportunities provided through the sport, though this is because the show is spread out over more time so it is brought up as an ongoing plot point.

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<sup>2</sup> Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Class-passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. Print. page 8

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From the series, an interesting example of the idea of social mobility when we look at the life of the character Vince Howard (Michael B. Jordan). In season four he is introduced to us as a juvenile delinquent, shown running from the police, he is given a chance to clean up his act by way of football. Throughout the season and into season five we see him develop as a character and grow into his new role, he goes from being a criminal and develops into a responsible individual who is looked up to. A few episodes into season five we also get to see that because of his prowess on the field he has been given offers for university scholarships, had he continued to live the life he had before the sport he would have ended up in prison rather than possibly getting a university degree.

### **Aim & Method**

The aim of this essay is to look at the relationship that exists between the ability to be socially mobile and the existence of an ideal masculinity that comprises the upper strata of the hegemony. That is to say that without performing in the roles of masculinity these individuals are unable to advance socially or economically. It is because of this I chose films that deal football in a high school setting. These films look at the mix of students that make up the teams who come from a variety of different backgrounds and private lives to show how they are able to come together and excel as a team. Ultimately their combined efforts do not allow everyone to advance up the social ladder, but rather a select few who stand out are given that opportunity. It is, generally, this select few that make up the hegemonic ideal that is placed in a position of power and leadership over the teams in the selected films. I want to look at how the sport and how it relates to the American dream. Specifically how the possibility and promise of the American dream is only shown to the characters that fall into a type of masculinity that is understood to be the hegemonic ideal.

I am also interested in how this structure allows for the creation of a sort of brotherhood amongst the players, which is what brings them together and allows them to work together as a team. The successes of the team are the successes of each individual player, but the cumulative successes become the successes of the minority that are the hegemonic masculinity. So it is by way of Jim Cullen's explanation of the

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American dream, R.W. Connell's study on masculinities and a classic understanding of brotherhood as explained by Klaus Oschema that I want to achieve this. My analysis will come from qualitative observations of filmic examples.

With this as my basis I chose films that are about high school football teams. For all the players, especially true for the few star players, there is a promise of rewards down the line that will permit them to advance the social ladder. This promise is presented to everyone, but is only ever awarded to small minority of individuals. Though this is not main focus of the films since these promised rewards fall outside of the time frame of the films, they are still presented and shown as a strong force for why some players choose to play.

In one of the chosen films *Friday Night Lights* as well as the television series of the same name there are scenes that specifically touch on the subject of scholarships and the future of players. These themes are not explicitly shown in the other films, but are still brought up as a reason why the team has to succeed, why going to the state championship game is important. Their present success is translated into future opportunities and future successes, like escaping their hometowns, going to college and eventually making a career.

Along with the film and television series of *Friday Night Lights*, I have chosen to look at *Varsity Blues*, *Remember the Titans* (1999), *The Gridiron Gang* (2006), and lastly *The Blind Side* (2009). The last of which focuses on the life of an individual player rather than the whole team, but shows a clear relationship between the successes of the team and how they are translated to the successes of an individual.

### **Summary of Films**

*Friday Night Lights* – Is based on a book of the same title, tells the story about a football team, the 1988 Permian panthers, in Odessa, Texas. The story is focused on one season and their attempt to become state champions. For many of the players it will be their last year playing football and winning the state championship would be meaningful for them and their futures. They also have to carry the weight of the expectations of the rest of town that live and die by their wins and losses.

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*Friday Night Lights* (television series) – Loosely based on the film and book, it follows a similar team to the Permian Panthers, called the Dillon Panthers. The series takes up larger themes about the players' roles in their community and the influence the community has on the team. The cast differs from the film and is more focused on the Coach and his role since he is the only static character.

*Remember the Titans* – Is about a football team and in turn a whole town struggling with racism. It shows how the players and the town are negative and stubbornly stand against the integration of the team, school and town. Finally the people are able to come to terms and see the value of the new members of their community.

*Varsity Blues* – Follows Jonathan Moxon and his last year playing high school football. The film shows his rise from being a loner who spends his time sitting on the bench to becoming quarterback and leading the team. As the new leader of the team he stands against the tyrannical coach Bud Kilmer, who is eventually deposed by the team.

*The Blind Side* – Is about Michael Oher who is a homeless and undereducated boy that is brought to an upper-class school where the coach sees football potential in him and pushes for his acceptance to the school. Later the Tuohy family comes across him walking around outside of campus and decides to take him into their home; eventually he becomes a member of the family. They push him to perform better in school and help him with getting into the University of Mississippi on a football scholarship.

*The Gridiron Gang* – Is about a group of teenagers who were all arrested and convicted of their crimes. They all find themselves at a juvenile detention center, Camp Kilpatrick, and under the supervision of Sean Porter become a football team.

## **The American Dream**

One idea that must be brought up in the discussion of these films and their subject matter is the idea of an “American Dream”. This is an idea about the possibilities in American life and that with the right stuff, as Jim Cullen phrases it “pluck and ingenuity” are able to become successful individuals in society.<sup>3</sup> Though many of those goals will have changed in accordance with the ways in which the American society has changed over time. Early in the nation’s life succeeding at life most of the time meant working from the bottom all the way to the top.<sup>4</sup> Though at the time this “top” could often have meant some kind of position in politics.<sup>5</sup> This promise still exists but rather than this dream pointing towards the political career path it branches out into many different options. It is all up to the individual to decide which direction they want to move through the different social strata. It is important to note that though the American Dream is only an idea that has an incredibly strong grip on the American people. Cullen points out that the country is formed on the idea of there being a dream, the “pursuit of happiness” as stated in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>6</sup>

An interesting example of this is shown in the film *The Blind Side*. Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron) is brought into the family at first as a charity case and eventually becomes part of the family. What makes Oher’s case a bit special is that the American dream that he eventually reaches for was not even shown to have crossed his at any point. Coach Burt Cotton (Ray McKinnon) sees some potential in Oher based only on his physical capabilities and then selfishly petitions to have him brought into the school despite protests regarding his social and academic background. At a later point in the film we see a moment where we see Oher not succeeding at the sport of football and Coach Cotton quietly voices his regret for bringing the boy to the school – and the team. The Tuohys, as mentioned, accept him into their family, but at the same time push their ideals onto him. The idea of

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<sup>3</sup> Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: a Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: England: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. page 60

<sup>4</sup> *ibid* page 60

<sup>5</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. page 10

<sup>6</sup> Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: a Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: England: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. page 38



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attending college, let alone completing high school had barely crossed Oher's mind. He is more or less pushed through school with the Tuohys behind him every step of the way, paying for a tutor to raise his grades, helping him with football and giving him anything else he needs. When Oher selects the college scholarship bid to the University of Mississippi his reasons for doing so are brought into question. The NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) claims the Tuohy family has essentially controlled his choices in order to benefit the university. This is because of the Tuohys strong relationship with the university, which even involves financial support being provided to the institution. Following this we see a scene where Leigh Anne Tuohy (Sandra Bullock), Oher's adoptive mother, realizes that she has more or less dictated Oher's choices. She takes a step back and asks what Oher wants to do; she decides to let him chose his own path.

Oher is given the opportunities and ultimately takes them. Rather than ending up in a gang like the other youths in his neighborhood he goes to college. Gerhard Falk also shows an example of this possibility of success through the sport and goes as far as to say, "... football can be the catalyst for success in American politics, business and industry".<sup>7</sup> Falk shows examples of this success with Jack Kemp, who makes it all the way into a career in American politics thanks to football giving him the resources to advance in life.<sup>8</sup> Returning to Michael Oher in *The Blind Side* we can see that he chooses to pursue a professional career in football but he also finished his degree at the University of Mississippi, allowing him to have a career other than football. Despite Oher's origins, he is able to advance to a point in life as well as to a social position that he would have only been able to dream about. He becomes an example of what can happen, and therefore he becomes an example of the dream coming true. People will not be afraid of dreaming and working, trying to work towards it. The example of Michael Oher as shown in *The Blind Side* is similar but still very different to a later example that is examined regarding the relationship between Don Billingsley (Garrett Hedlund) and his father Charles (Tim McGraw). Oher's adoptive parents remove their guiding hand and stop pushing him in direction of what their version of the American dream is. He makes his own choice.

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<sup>7</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. page 10

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* page 9

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The dream tells people what they are able to climb to the top no matter where they come from.<sup>9</sup> So long as they are willing to take the opportunities that are presented to them they can one day climb the social strata and become a powerful individual.<sup>10</sup> This may not be the actual situation for everyone, but the ones who show promise or that they are able to excel at something are more often than not provided with the chances they need.

If we return to looking at the type of characters that make up the teams in some of the chosen films, there is a rather wide selection of individuals. People, who are portrayed as being some of the poorest members of society or as some of the richest, but they are all presented with the chance to take part in the team. Their talent is fostered and they are provided with the resources they need to develop. We see that despite their backgrounds, poor or rich, they are expected to take the presented opportunities and therefore expected to succeed. Everyone may not be treated equally in practice, but in theory each of these young men are just that, young men with talent and potential. They are awarded for their physical prowess, their ability to run, throw, catch and tackle. On their road to trying to reach the American Dream the youths become physical embodiments of what is required to succeed. Not all men are able to make it, nor are they all expected to try their hand at the sport. Though in the case of the sport being socially mobile becomes a trait that is tied to the player's masculinity and the performance of masculinity.

For many of the players on the team, for many people in general, achieving the American dream is not a certainty. It is at times a reward that is dangled in front of the eyes of the players. The road to achieve it is not one that is clearly mapped out and along the way many things can keep the players from reaching goal of success. In the film and television series *Friday Night Lights*, *Remember the Titans* and to some extent *Varsity Blues* there is some evidence that the dream is not as easily attainable and that it may even be tainted by the perils that may be lying along the way. For example an injury, which is a common theme in these films, destroying whatever chances that player may have had.

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<sup>9</sup> Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: a Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: England: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. Page 60

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* page 60

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Looking at Boobie Miles in *Friday Night Lights* we see a young man who is an incredible player and is extremely talented at the sport, he suffers a severe knee injury during a game. Rather than allowing his knee to heal, he returns to the game against the advice of his doctor, which only exacerbates the damage to his knee. In cruel irony his ability to play is ruined, all because he needed to be on the field in order for college recruiters to see him play. He goes from having his dreams within reach to having them pulled a way from him. There is no longer college in his future or a career in football or in anything for that matter. At the end of the film we are given a glimpse of what each of the main characters were able to do with their lives and Boobie Miles never went as far as his teammates.

We also have to make note that during these glimpses presented at the end of the films based on true stories, only a few players are ever mentioned. The vast majority of the team are never even brought up. It can be explained that there was not enough space for it. Though at it is understood that not many players are able to achieve anything close to the American dream, or whatever their own versions might be. For many of them the same lives that their parents have await them. A life of living vicariously through the successes of their sons and the team, going to the games and reliving their lost glories.

## **Types of Masculinities**

The male characters portrayed in these football films are generally of a specific kind of male ideal. A lot of their identities are tied to their portrayed masculinities, both physical and social sides of it. Many of the characters that are football players in films that do not focus on the sport as a central part of its story have a tendency of having the football players be a negative force, that they are undereducated “jocks” who are ignorant bullies that will pick on any one they consider to be subordinate to them, usually as antagonists to the films protagonist. However in the analyzed films a different type of football player is presented, rather, many different types of football players are presented that break the stereotype that exists in other cinema. Players who will uphold a stereotypical “jock” type of behavior as well as those players who will decidedly go against those presented norms. Looking at the film and television series *Friday Night Lights* there are several different kinds of male characters that make up the football film. Since the show spans over a larger amount of time and has larger pool of characters we able to clearly see the mix of the different masculinities being presented through the viewed performances. Masculinity is performed, the actors enter into its traits are repeated in order to form a gender.<sup>11</sup> That is to say that there are specific things that each of these characters does allow us to understand them as masculine.

The role of gender has inherent role to play in the world of football. Women are not able to take part in the sport, except for in a supporting role, as cheerleaders or parents like in the *Friday Night Lights* series. Cheerleading especially forms its own subculture similar to football – separate from but related to the sport. Examples of this can be seen in films and television shows like *Bring it On* (2000) and *Hellcats* (2010). In some ways the cheerleaders face the same struggles as the football players in the examples that this essay assesses. Returning to the sport of football we are shown how an ideal of masculinity is presented and then recreated through the players.<sup>12</sup> Gwendolyn Foster writes about how through traditionally defined gender roles the man is expected to provide for his family; not only monetarily but also ensure their

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print page 191

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* page 191

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ability to move through the social strata.<sup>13</sup> Being unable to succeed as a male paints them as failures. The sport allows the practitioners to create their own success, to define their own masculinities for both themselves and the people who are observing from the sidelines.

R.W. Connell establishes that there are specific kinds of masculinities that form a kind of hierarchical relationship to one and other.<sup>14</sup> Each of these masculinity types have defined positions in society and are generally attributed to specific aspects of the patriarchic control of institutions and other organized bodies of people.<sup>15</sup> The masculinity that is ranked the highest is the hegemonic masculinity.<sup>16</sup> This applies to institutions like high schools, not only the school's leadership but also amongst the student body and even within the specified groups that make up the student body. Connell writes about other types of masculinities that make up this power relationship and their positions, related to the hegemony and to one and other: the subordinate, the complicit and the marginalized.<sup>17</sup> They are all presented with a specified role in the power structure that orders the different types of masculinities. Some will assume the different roles whereas others will have the roles forced upon them. Each of these roles will be parroted within the different organizations on both a micro and macro level. In relation to the school the football team would be a subculture and within its own boundaries a hierarchy exists, players move up and down within the organization and are able to elevate their role and status.<sup>18</sup> Players are organized into ranks, with a captain who acts as a leader on the field and at times off the field. Entering into the sport of football and becoming a member of a team also, as Falk explains, carries a certain status.<sup>19</sup>

The football team makes up part of the hegemony at the front of the student body but within the team's organization we will see similar power structure, which is

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<sup>13</sup> Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. *Class-passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2005. Print. page 43

<sup>14</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 77

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>16</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* page 77-81

<sup>18</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. page 27

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* page 27

all governed by another organization that holds power over the team. These different types of masculinities form based on what is considered to be the hegemonic masculinity, as Connell posits groups that hold the hegemonic position will not always do so.<sup>20</sup> This is to say that there can be shifts in the structure of the patriarchy based on a consensus and can therefore have its legitimacy put to question.<sup>21</sup> These new types of masculinity can fit into a type that has become idealized and replaces whatever may have come before it. An example of this could be that on the school campus the football team makes up an idealized type of masculinity and therefore hold the power, Whereas in the larger world outside of the high school campus those types of masculinities that were once considered to be subordinates may be placed in positions of power based on their intelligence and other abilities rather than their physical prowess. That is to say that the hegemonic position is never static and therefore none of the other positions are static either.

### **A Reluctant Leader**

During the premier episode of *Friday Night Lights* we are already presented with two characters that seem to be of rather contradicting types of masculinities being placed in the same position of the team, the quarterback. Much like in the film of the same title the team's star player is injured in a game forcing the team to adapt to this sudden and severe change. Jason Street (Scott Porter) is seriously injured during a game, resulting his paralysis.<sup>22</sup> As he is being carried off the field the position of quarterback passes to Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford), a relatively quiet individual who is unknown to his peers. With Street's fall Saracen is forced into a new social position, one that is completely foreign to him, a youth presented as being artistically inclined and not popular at school. Despite his being on the football team, he is ranked rather low on the school's hierarchical food chain.

Saracen's character is introduced as being responsible, as seen by how he takes care of grandmother preparing her medicine and food before going to practice. Later in the car with his friend Landry Clarke (Jesse Plemons) they discuss whether or

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<sup>20</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 77

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>22</sup> The event occurs in episode 1, season 1 of *Friday Night Lights*

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not he will play at all while looking at a picture in the local newspaper of Street. Landry asks if Saracen will get to play to which he answers “nope” and they continue to discuss his presence on the team as a form of punishment or humiliation. We even see one of the coaches asking Saracen to look for something in trash rather than running drills during practice. When we see Saracen take the field we see the fear flash across his face and we hear the doubt in the voice of the commentator about Saracen’s experience, or lack thereof. This is also made evident when he calls the plays to his teammates and says the wrong things, is confused by everything while the rest of the team is pressing him to take action. Street’s character is presented as being almost a complete polar opposite of Saracen. He was the star player on the Dillon Panthers, shown as being the respected leader for the players but also as popular at school as well as in the town of Dillon. Just looking at how Street calls plays, talks to the other players and talks to the coaches during half time, he is shown as being aware, and confident of everything. Everyone was expecting Street to lead the Panthers to the State championship game and through his leadership to help everyone to further their American dream; he is even explicitly referred to as a “great leader” by the voice over of a sports commentator. Even his serious spinal injury was initially presented as just being a speed bump that he would manage to overcome due to the ferocity of belief that people had in him. Street is almost the first person to realize that his fall is permanent and struggles to make this clear to those that held him up to a superhuman ideal. As Gerhard Falk explains players of the sport are often attributed a “hero” status.<sup>23</sup> One can claim that his heroic status further developed as a result of Street’s injury and his initial refusal to give up on football and his chances of ever playing the sport again.

There is a hierarchy present within the sport as well as one present in the school. Amongst the students the players become an embodiment of a form of hegemonic masculinity. R.W. Connell’s definition of a hegemonic masculinity explains that there is a group of men that are the holders of power.<sup>24</sup> Despite Street belonging to the hegemony of the school’s hierarchy the transference of his position and title to Saracen does not communicate its implied privileges and power. Despite

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<sup>23</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. page 10

<sup>24</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 77

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being within the framework of the hegemony he still presents himself as a kind of subordinate masculinity that is still complicit to much what it entails to belong to the hegemony. Though one can argue that the players shown in the series do not all seem to fit clearly into a clearly defined hegemonic masculinity. Rather they all seem to be complicit in how it functions but at the same time are just subjected to being looked at through its framework. That is to say Saracen is “QB1” but his popularity does not seem increase with the title, he is still portrayed as being removed and distant from the organization through his time on the series despite his successes and failures in his new role and eventually has to even defend it from challengers.<sup>25</sup>

Being seen as a real man or understood as a legitimate ideal of masculinity becomes a proof of worthiness of the rewards that are presented in the form of scholarships and social advancement. It is through the sport that, these hegemonic embodiments legitimize who and what they are, since their successes stem from a combination of factors, the strongest of which are their physical attributes.<sup>26</sup> Being unable to define one self as this hegemonic ideal, through these aspects results in what can be read as a deposition, a fall from power. They are just like everyone else and not deserving of adulation and following of their fellow teammates. These structures do not need to form as a result of the sport. Rather they are traits that exist and allow male individuals to climb above one and other in status. Returning to the example of Matt Saracen. As mentioned he has achieved the status of QB1 on the team. He is abruptly pushed into this role and ultimately accepts it and enters into it reluctantly. Since he is the only replacement for the previous quarterback his position and role on the team stands without contention for a period. His status as QB1 is challenged twice during his time on the team. Firstly by the character Ray ‘Voodoo’ Tatum (Aldis Hodge), who is presented as being a better player in almost every aspect, except for

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<sup>25</sup> Swain, Jon. "The Resources and Strategies Boys Use to Establish Status in a Junior School without Competitive Sport." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 23.1 (2002): 91-107. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 31 May 2011. <<http://search.ebscohost.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?diect=true&db=a9h&AN=6632290&site=ehost-live>>. page 105

<sup>26</sup> Swain, Jon. "'The Money's Good, The Fame's Good, The Girls Are Good': the Role of Playground Football in the Construction of Young Boys' Masculinity in a Junior School." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21.1 (2000): 95-109. *JSTOR*. Web. 31 May 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1393361>>. page 107



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his ability to get the team to follow his leadership.<sup>27</sup> Saracen's role as QB1 is once again secured by way to the team's support for him. In the third season of the series Saracen's position is once again challenged and ultimately stripped of him. A new player, J.D. McCoy (Jeremy Sumpter), is introduced to the team, who is once again presented as a better player than Matt Saracen.<sup>28</sup> Saracen is then stripped of his role as QB1 and pushed into a subordinate role as a wide receiver on the team. McCoy proceeds to lead the Panthers to the playoffs. In both of these cases, based only the attributes of the players and their capabilities on the field they were presented as better, or rather, more legitimate ideals of masculinity. These roles are not just held by individuals, but as Jon Swain explains the roles and positions must be constantly defended.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly although Tatum and McCoy are presented as being paragons of the Quarterback position in terms of raw capability – both of them fail to function as a team leader which is how Saracen is able to reclaim his position as he has the intangibles that allow him to lead a team in high pressure situations.

Among the students the players that become ideals of masculinity are sought after by the students that are junior to them and venerated by them. By way of their successes they are desirable by women and hold powerful position in the school and also the town. An example of this is seen, again, in the television series of *Friday Night Lights* when players, like Tim Riggins do not do their homework, instead has a rally girl (a school club that aims to support players with cheering and treats – but in practice can provide anything from homework to sex) do it for him. Even day-to-day you can see privileges players have, not getting IDed for alcohol despite being underage or receiving free meals.

For others to take part of the football team's successes allow them to take part in the hegemony. By becoming friends with the quarterback, for example, one is able

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<sup>27</sup> The character of Ray 'Voodoo' Tatum is first introduced to the series in episode 4, season 1 of *Friday Night Lights*.

<sup>28</sup> The character of J.D. McCoy is first introduced to the series in episode 1, season 3 of *Friday Night lights*.

<sup>29</sup> Swain, Jon. "The Resources and Strategies Boys Use to Establish Status in a Junior School without Competitive Sport." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 23.1 (2002): 91-107. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 31 May 2011. <<http://search.ebscohost.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6632290&site=ehost-live>>. page 105

to elevate their status just by way of association. The players are placed at the top of the social ladder of the student body, they are the embodiment of an ideal masculinity, and they are the “visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity”.<sup>30</sup> Connell elaborates that even though the players are placed in this position of power it does not mean that they are actual holders of power.<sup>31</sup> Everyone in school are governed by the school’s rules and regulations, the football players are looked at much closer than others, by the town, the school, and the authorities that govern the sport. At the same time many choose to turn a blind eye.

### **Expected Behavior**

There are many examples in *Friday Night Lights* that show that the priority and elevation of the football player’s status affects other parts of the school with program budgets but also the investment of time and attention. Among the student body the players have become the holders of power, they are at the top of the proverbial food chain, but they are still subjected to the institutional control of the school as well as the governing body that regulates football. If they do not perform in school, they lose their eligibility to play the sport.

Along with this elevation above others, in the student body and among some members of the community that exists around the sport there is as sense of responsibility that is developed. Some choose to accept it; others do not. Vince Howard shows this in a scene in the fifth season of the series where his girlfriend’s younger brother is having trouble adjusting to having a father that is regularly away on business. He takes the young boy aside and sits down to talk to him as an equal.<sup>32</sup> In this exchange between Howard’s girlfriend’s brother we see that he talks specifically about having to enter into a new role, which, is not an easy task but it still needs to be done. He speaks of this with knowledge gained by experience how ever little it might be, he has only recently climbed from being a would be criminal into a position of power and responsibility on the newly formed football team, the East Dillon Lions. His acceptance of his new role also shows him as being a different

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<sup>30</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 77

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>32</sup> The event in question come from episode 1, season 5 of *Friday Night Lights*.

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character than before. Howard is presented with the sport as an opportunity to avoid juvenile detention and decides to take it. Tim Riggins (Taylor Kitsch) is a completely different character to Howard; he is in a position of power and responsibility. Instead of accepting this role, he chooses to abuse it. Accepting favors from the rally girls, getting alcohol despite being underage, all but doing what is expected of him in that role. Riggins' actions off the field do not result in all too many repercussions except for being chastised and threatened with removal from the football team. His position on the team is rather safe since he is not in a position of leadership and there are no challengers to his position.

The privileges that allow the players to get away with minor things that go for the most part unnoticed. Nevertheless there are times where the notoriety and public outrage forces the hand of the authoritative figures that stand over the sport. One of the strongest examples is found in the first season of the show when Coach Taylor (Kyle Chandler) cuts one of the players from the team for beating up a student outside of school. The prestige and power of being on the football team is shown, as there is significant pressure to cover up the incident to allow the player to continue on the team. It is Taylor's moral character that leads to him doing the right thing, by cutting Bobby 'Bull' Reyes (Walter Perez) from the team rather than bow to the pressure of putting together a winning football team.<sup>33</sup> What the players do privately can threaten the team and their position on the team and within the community. When such actions stand out and pose a problem to the team they must be dealt with.

A continuation of this regulation of players' conduct also happens on the field during games. Connell explains, that despite the sport's violence being a legitimate behavior when it goes over board and people become injured it risks "discrediting the sport as a whole".<sup>34</sup> However the regulatory bodies are biased and often exercise judgments to serve their own agenda. Examples of this are shown in the filmic examples, in an episode of the show a player, Luke Cafferty (Matt Lauria), tackling a player during a game and injuring him. The body that regulates the sport decides that the violence used was excessive despite it actually being within the rules and a clean

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<sup>33</sup> The event in question occurs during episode 6, season 1 of *Friday Night Lights*.

<sup>34</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 37

tackle and decides to suspend him from playing for a few games.<sup>35</sup> This suspension poses a threat to Caffery's social status, though it is not implied as part of the punishment. Since he is not on the field for a time, a replacement player is given a chance to prove himself and if he is successful that means that Cafferty could end up spending more time on the bench, if he is not playing his heroic status and position in the hegemony is threatened. So despite being part of an elite class, football players are still beholden to higher powers that are capricious and not just or fair as they are required to be.

### **Missed Opportunities**

With the focus of these shows and films being on the football teams and therefore extremely focused on a cult of masculinity we see that any possible mobility seems to be tied to those actors that are successful in their roles of masculinity. That is to say the leaders, the members presented as characters of the hegemony, are provided with the opportunities to advance, to be socially mobile. When the truth of the matter is that many of the individuals will not actually be given a chance and therefore will not advance socially. They risk ending up much like their parents, stuck in the same town and living through the successes and punishing the failures of their sons. Looking at the film of *Friday Night Lights* that is what we seem to see through the way the town behaves towards the players but also if we look closer at the relationship between one of the player's and his father. This relationship ties back with the presence of an American dream that is tainted, in this case with the failure of Don Billingsley's father to attain any successes beyond his days on the football field. Charles Billingsley was a former State champion as shown by the ring he wears and constantly reminds his son of his victory. Despite his successes in the sport they did not lead to much successes in life. Rather than allowing his son to go after the dreams he has, Charles instead forces his son into going for the same dreams he once had and does so in an extremely abusive manner. The bitter taste of having missed the American dream has him pushing his son away rather than bringing him close and supporting him. Don Billingsley's character exemplifies just this difficult situation;

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<sup>35</sup> The event in question comes from episode 2, season 5 of *Friday Night lights*.

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his father was a past player on the team as well as part of the team that brought home the state championship. Now, or in the present time of the film, it is his son's turn and the father refuses to let him forget it. He goes as far as to publicly chastise his son for minor mistakes during practice sessions to drunkenly abusing him in more private situations. This is shown when Billingsley brings home a girl after a party and his father stumbles out verbally chastising him for failing on the field. The interaction escalates to the point of his father duct taping a football to Billingsley's hands, since he is "obviously" unable to catch the football and needs all the help he can to catch the ball. Billingsley's father was a successful player but his success on the field did not lead him to any other successes, he is still stuck in his town, a drunkard and based on what we are shown of how they live and dress working a job that does not provide a comfortable income. He clearly wants to live through the successes of Don, he wants to ride up the social ladder attached to Don as he climbs his way through high school and whatever else that may lay beyond. His son's successes along with his own become a kind of imagined immortality. The father even goes as far as to deem his son not worthy of the State champions ring and thereby himself and throws the ring out the window of a moving car.

This relationship is also mirrored in how the town relates to the team as a whole. We are briefly shown an example of this in a scene when Mike Winchell (Lucas Black) is at a local burger place and a man who previously played on the Panthers comes up to him and asks to take a photo with him and showing off his own State champion's ring. He talks to Winchell about the team and puts it across that anything less than a State championship would be considered a failure. Everyone is shown to live or die with the team's successes on the field, the town will see every home game without fail - the local media will discuss what mistakes were made or whether the coach is even worthy of his position leading the team. Everyone lives vicariously through the team and through the example of an idealized masculinity that they represent. Some do this more actively than others, for example from the same scene: a man stops outside of the restaurant and yells to Billingsley about a party. One of the players then derisively says, "Isn't that guy like 35?" Throughout the film and the television series we are constantly presented with just how much the town and previous star players have invested in team, through the radio shows, how people react to the failures, through the support organizations like the boosters who handle

fund raising for the team. There is even an episode in the show that touches on how important the team is deemed to be that quality of education as the other school in town without a football program is allowed to slowly degrade because of a lack of funding.

### **Doing what is Required**

Looking closer at some of the players they do not all fit into the hegemony nor do they all truly accept the role and requirements of being members of the hegemony. With some of the characters, like the aforementioned Mat Saracen his climb to being part of the hegemony is forced upon him rather than having dedicated his life to obtaining it. He does not accept it whole heartedly and his behavior is portrayed as more of an act he puts on in order to satisfy what people expect from his role as the “QB1”. It comes across as he is just along for the ride rather than leading people in a certain direction. If we were to take a look at another example from *Varsity Blues* with the character of Jonathan ‘Mox’ Moxon (James Van Der Beek) and his ascension to the same role as Saracen. Moxon may enter into his new role on the team as a required burden but once he is given a taste of what it is like to be the star player to see how people treat him and what it feels like to actually take the field he begins to change. Compared to Saracen, Moxon quickly enters into his role as a leader of his teammates, disregarding his coach’s orders in order to protect his teammates. His behavior becomes an example that the others aspire to and follow. As a character Moxon was already outspoken and at times almost a little rebellious, willing to question the powers that be, making him almost a polar opposite to Saracen who was more content with a status quo situation of being unseen without any requirements set on him by others.

The roles are formed by each person who enters them this is not only based on their own expectations of the role but what others are shown to be expecting. Then there are the cases of characters that seem to only enter the role as a necessity and therefore do are not shown to rise up to the occasion. Like the mentioned example of Matt Saracen who enters the role of being QB1 more as duty than a pleasure because of Jason Street’s injury. Disability presents an interesting situation for the holders of these masculine traits, which are mostly manifested and presented through the body’s

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physical aspects. Despite Street's character being exactly the same except for his spinal injury he loses his position as the ideal of a hegemonic masculinity. That is not to say he is not beloved by the people around him, almost more so for being able to live with such a devastating injury, he still falls away from the public eye and his role as a leader is all but forgotten when Saracen begins to do what his new role requires of him.

A disability makes being a leader or holder of hegemonic power an impossibility. This of course depends on the societal consensus of what should be considered the hegemony. With the loss of his physical capabilities on the field the strongest of his traits his position as an ideal masculinity type is placed in a precarious position.<sup>36</sup> A new male is elevated to the primary position as an ideal type for others to look towards. He, Street, still strives to return to the sport to attempt to overcome his spinal injury and disability only to fail as the series follows his storyline. With his attempts to overcome the disability allowed him to stay as a sort of ideal in spite of his injury, he was shown as trying "to meet the hegemonic standards."<sup>37</sup> As the seasons develop we see that he is still talked about amongst the team, individuals strive to be like him. So even with his disability hindering his return and advancement he is still present in the hegemonic structure. Street's legacy makes him useful to the hegemony and therefore is able to maintain a position that still holds some level of power in a new role as an advisor or confidant for the newly established leader of the team. We see that because of Saracen's inexperience and need of help, Street is able to still be of use to the team and the hegemony by providing his expertise and experience to Saracen. Looking at Street's character it is important to note that he is given this continued role with power because of the fact that he tries to overcome his injury. He is still someone for people to look up to because he is doing and trying to do anything that will give him back the use of his legs.

Connell explains that because of a disability it is expected for the individual in question to fall from his position in the hegemony, but with his attempt to overcome the disability there is still a chance to remain within the hegemony and possibly even

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<sup>36</sup> Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity, 2005. Print. page 54

<sup>37</sup> *ibid* Page 55

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return to a position of power.<sup>38</sup> Up until the point where Street accepts the permanence of his injury he continues to be an ideal type of masculinity that is looked up to. Eventually with his acceptance and trying to make a life for himself outside of masculine hegemony and settling down he leaves the series as a main character. As *Friday Night Lights* the series is so defined by Street's fall and Saracen's rise, the "ghost" of Street is still present and one of the closing scenes of the series finale shows the "new" Panthers run out to a game touching a symbol inscribed with Street's name showing his enduring legacy as a figurehead even though he has a tragic end as a masculine figure.

The hegemonic structure relationships between the players are formed in a manner that allows for strong and close friendship, a kind of brotherhood. By way of the leader the players fall into their positions on the team as individuals who all have worth and that the successes of the team as a whole do not rest on each of their individual shoulders but on the shoulders of the team as a whole. The players come together as a family and together overcome the challenges that they are faced with in their lives on the team. It is the cohesion that is needed and not a group made up of individual stars who are only in the sport to alone reap the benefits that could be waiting for them down the line. The precision and depth needed for a successful football play necessitates the whole team functioning which is unique compared to other sports like soccer or basketball, which can be carried by a few key stars.

In *Remember the Titans* there is a short exchange between Bertier and Campbell who are presented as the hegemonic leaders for their respective racial groups on the team. This exchange concludes with Campbell asking why he should care about the white players or the team as a whole when the same courtesies have not been extended to him or the black players. "No, no, what I'm gonna do is, is I'm gonna look out for myself and I'm gonna get mine." To quote what Campbell says. It is a sentiment that will change over time as the players enter into their roles of the leaders of the team as they realize that they can't "get mine" without the support of their teammates.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid* page 55



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It all comes down to the roles that these characters are entering into. They become ideals of a hegemonic masculinity through their physical embodiments.<sup>39</sup> In the films and television series analyzed the young men are not only a reminder of what used to be for the older characters but also examples of what their subordinates should aspire to be. Their roles are performed, there is an understood idea of what men especially football players should be like and therefore fall into line with it accordingly. Importantly the roles are not set in stone, as is seen with how different characters are forced in and out of their positions of status. As Connell explains the positions of the hegemonic masculinity is subject to consensus and can easily be changed.<sup>40</sup> This is also fall shown by Jon Swain's study of young boys at school, showing that after achieving a position of status the boys needed to constantly defend their position.<sup>41</sup> As has been shown by the fluidity of the characters' positions, going from being ideals of a hegemonic masculinity into being subordinates to it.

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>40</sup> *ibid* page 77

<sup>41</sup> Swain, Jon. "'The Money's Good, The Fame's Good, The Girls Are Good': the Role of Playground Football in the Construction of Young Boys' Masculinity in a Junior School." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 21.1 (2000): 95 - 109. *JSTOR*. Web. 31 May 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1393361>>. page 105

## **Brotherhood on the Field**

### **Standing against Tyranny**

The team members begin to form tight relationships between each other. In the films like *Varsity Blues*, *Gridiron Gang*, and *Remember the Titans* we are shown examples of how this brotherhood formed on the field will often be stronger than most other things in the lives of a player. Reminiscent of the brotherhood felt by soldiers who are forced in situations where only those present can understand the experience and sharing it creates indelible bonds.

By way of their training and the amount of time these youths spend with each other they form a group that is presented to have rather strong ties to one another. They tell each other things about their personal lives, help out one and other, and will even stand up for the other members of the team when it is required of them. *Gridiron Gang* and *Remember the Titans* both have very strong examples of how the team is able to form these ties and stand up against external threats to their cohesion, like gang ties or racial issues. *Varsity Blues* shows the team standing up to an internal threat - their Coach Bud Kilmer (Jon Voight). So long as the team is threatened the players are able to stand together despite their backgrounds as a result of the relationships they have formed through the sport.

Individuals look for something to belong to, a sense of belonging and worth. The football team presents that sort of possibility for many of the players. Being part of a team is based on other aspects of the different participants than their personal history or social and economic situation. A sense of belonging can be of great importance, particularly with youths who are still in the process of forming their identities. Brotherhood can be created in many different ways, but many of them come about through membership. Which creates a relationship with the other individuals that are also present, though the experiences of the field can bring them closer. Just like with soldiers and members on a team. It is through the hardships of being on the sports team we see the formation of a brotherhood of players.

Though they may not use the same rituals of blood brotherhood that have existed historically, examples of these involve mixing of blood and even ingesting

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one and other's blood.<sup>42</sup> These rituals would be done to signify how close friends were and would establish that despite not being born of the same parents, their friendship is as close or even closer than the one that exists between biological brothers. That is to say, they each contain a bit of blood from one and other and therefore have created a familial bond. As Klaus Oschema mentions in his text these blood brother relationships are perceived as stronger than regular friendships because of symbolic nature of this blood ritual.<sup>43</sup> The players instead form it through shedding their blood, sweat and tears together through shared hardship and trial. Depending on whatever the rituals the team decide upon, one main factor is that their shared suffering still persists as one of their shared experiences and it will stay that way despite whatever their lives outside of the sport may be.

In many cases for this brotherhood and community to form as a strong group a leader is required for the players to gather around. The brotherhood forms out of the existence of a hegemonic structure, because there is a hierarchy of masculinities that are placed into their different roles on the team. As mentioned above, the star players, the team captains and even the coaches enter into a role of leadership because of their position in the hegemonic masculinity. Without a leader or an ideal type the players do not come together and create the strong bonds that will be required of them. Out of this need for bonding and leading come these rituals that create a sensation of inclusion. A mentality amongst the players that speaks of a "we" and a "everyone else". The "we" created by these different rituals that more often than not denote hard work and suffering together. Suffering becomes one of the rituals that create this sense of brotherhood, alongside other actions like getting the same tattoos. One example from *Friday Night Lights* show using a branding iron (traditionally used to burn a symbol into livestock as a sign of ownership) to create a permanent symbol of belonging, the ritual including suffering and sharing since present characters each get the same branding and suffer the same pain. They have shared in something symbolic, like a rite of blood brotherhood and form closer and stronger relationships.

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<sup>42</sup> Oschema, Klaus. "Blood-brothers: a Ritual of Friendship and the Construction of the Imagined Barbarian in the Middle Ages." *Journal of Medieval History* 32.3 (2006): 275-301. *SciVerse*. Web. 31 May 2011.  
<<http://www.sciencedirect.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/science/article/pii/S0304418106000248>>. page 278

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* page 278

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One example of a ritual of brotherhood is a branding that some of the players in the final season of *Friday Night Lights* give each other. When compared to another film that focuses on brotherhood *Jarhead* (2005) we are shown a similar ritual of inclusion, where the character goes on to explain that the branding, or rather, the brotherhood of the unit is not given but earned. Like on the field, just because these players are forced together does not mean that they will instantaneously bond with one and other. Though, over time and being able to see the worth of everyone relationships will be formed. Sometimes only a close-knit group as is shown among some of the characters of the *Friday Night Lights* television series but they also become an example for the others. An ideal type to aspire to, and one that also forms the relationships between the rest of the team. As we are shown when the East Dillon Lions are formed and a brand new team has to be put together by Coach Taylor. As these players start off we are shown that there is no cohesion, the players are not syncing up with each other and this results in them not getting very far in their first season on the field. We are even shown that there is mistrust amongst the players with the introduction of Cafferty to the team.<sup>44</sup> He was a West Dillon Panther who was forced to change schools due to a school district zoning issue. Initially he does not want to accept the changes, he is even showing crying and begging the coach allow him to remain on the Panthers. He joins the team, since it is ultimately outside of his control. With the new team we understand there will be many failures in their future, the coach decided to forfeit their first game. It was an example of the lack of confidence there existed in the team. At the end of the second episode of season four he, the coach, gathers the team on the field and organizes an event where they burn their old jerseys. The old team is gone and the players are reborn as a new team, one of brothers who will work together. Cafferty takes part in the ritual and is also accepted as a member of the team, he will gladly win or lose with his new brothers. Through their failures and successes the team members are able to form a strong bond. The blood, sweat and tears that these players shed together brought them together as a group that will gladly stand together and support each other.

Jonathon Moxon in *Varsity Blues* shows another example of this brotherhood amongst the players. As the film develops the characters we see that Moxon is already

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<sup>44</sup> The events in question occur in episode 2, season 4 of *Friday Night Lights*

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popular amongst his teammates despite coach Kilmer keeping him on the bench. Eventually the star quarterback is injured during a game, which is a common theme in most football films, and Moxon is elevated to the position of being “QB1”. Already from the start we see that his character is a bit of a rebel compared to all the other payers, reading literature rather than his playbook, not doing what the coach demands, even rebelling against his father. . We are shown that his teammates trust him and trust what he does, though he is questioning an authority figure that is supposed to have the team’s wellbeing and later successes as his main focus. Coach Kilmer is shown as not caring about his team and their wellbeing, This is shown in how he treats players with injuries, injecting painkillers into their injured knees so they can keep playing despite injury although at a risk of doing permanent damage, or when he forces a player to take the field with a concussion. All the players are aware of the issues with the coach but they are all too afraid to stand up to him until Moxon enters his new role as the star quarterback and a new example of the hegemonic masculinity that challenges the previous regime lead by Kilmer. He stands up to the coach and the players all stand behind him, showing that they are no longer in need of him and he is causing more harm than benefit to the team and its cohesion.

### **Strengths of Brotherhood**

*Gridiron Gang* has a very interesting example of how the ties formed through the sport are can at times be stronger than whatever else may have existed off the field. The film is about juvenile offenders that have been arrested and sentenced to serving time at a youth detention center. Within the walls of Camp Kilpatrick these young men were still holding on to the identities they had formed in their lives before being arrested and incarcerated. This led to tensions amongst the inmates but also meant that when their time was served they would be returning to the exact same lives they previously had. Instead of becoming law-abiding citizens they would continue being a societal burden through their crimes and eventual re-arrests or in some cases deaths as a result of the gang violence. Once the leadership of the camp approves Sean Porter’s plan of creating a football team for the inmates we see a change in how the players view each other, but also a change in how the inmates are viewed by the people in their lives.

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Becoming part of the team, or even any of the teams in any of the studied films is ritualized. In *Gridiron Gang* it may be perceived as being different because of the fact that they are all serving sentences for crimes committed, but it is no different. The individuals join and are stripped of their individuality. They just become players on a team and it no longer matters who they were or what their backgrounds were. Now they are part of a team, they are part of a body whose function is to work together as a cohesive unit and not necessarily win the games they play but at least try. Being a team member creates a brotherhood amongst the players. On the team they are equalized with their fellow teammates since being born rich or poor does not matter when it comes to how fast they run, how well they catch and throw, or how hard they hit in tackles. It all comes down to training, training that is done together in order to work together as a functioning unit. The team's training becomes rituals that create a strong sense of membership and brotherhood amongst the teammates. It can be established that the football team becomes a tribe, one where every member relies on every other member to do their jobs. Without the cohesion and the responsibility of each of the team members there would be no advancement in the sport, in any sport for that matter.

Almost every aspect of the sport comes down to winning and working together, the glory and fame is shared since everyone did their part to get there. Though on the contrary to this many of the rewards, such as the scholarships and the promise of social advancement, are only provided on an individual level. Advancing with the team only goes so far, the individuals that are viewed as exceptional are lifted out and pushed up the societal ladder. No matter how well the team works together not everyone is able to advance. One must keep in mind though that even though the big goals and rewards are only provided to the few who stand out the most they are not the reason these individuals joined the team, or rather why they stayed on the team. These promised rewards only seem to come later when players really stand out based on their abilities. It is about the team, it is about the players who are on either side of them on the field, like in war films the individual reasons for their behavior no longer matters. What matters is if they let their comrades down by not doing what is required of them to succeed as a team.

Players on a team are given specific roles and whether they are offensive or defensive, they are expected to carry out their defined jobs. Some of these roles come

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down to protecting other players – specifically the ones carrying the football. This responsibility for each other translates to the lives of the players outside the game and off the field. This is shown when men from Willie Weathers' (Jade Yorker) life as a gang member threaten Kelvin Owens' (David V. Thomas) life. Weathers steps in to protect Owens by tackling his former gang mate and saving Owens' life. He acted in the same way he would have on the field and he does so knowing, or rather, trusting that all the players would do the exact same for each other. Weathers chooses to forsake his gang life. The film ends with all the players going their separate ways once their time at Camp Kilpatrick had come to an end. As we are shown with the brief biographical excerpts, we see that many of the youths were able to become successful in their lives without returning to crime. Some, like Willie Weathers were able to receive scholarships to better schools based on their abilities as football players, while others looked to form new lives. They left the program at Camp Kilpatrick with a new sense of self worth, this is something that is built up through the sport and through the relationships formed on the team.<sup>45</sup>

The rituals of brotherhood brought the team together but also instilled a sense of value in each of the players – one that they saw in each other but also themselves. The sport in itself is the ritual of bonding that forms the close-knit relationship similar to the one exists in families of actual blood relatives, that is the team forms an imagined family. This imagined family is formed through the hardships of the sport. Again the blood brother rituals that Oschema explains, involving mixing of blood, do not occur in these films but the same bond is formed.<sup>46</sup> Instead the sport is equated to a ritual, each win as well as each loss work to bring the team together.

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<sup>45</sup> Falk, Gerhard. *Football and American Identity*. New York: Haworth, 2005. Print. page 8

<sup>46</sup> Oschema, Klaus. "Blood-brothers: a Ritual of Friendship and the Construction of the Imagined Barbarian in the Middle Ages." *Journal of Medieval History* 32.3 (2006): 275-301. *SciVerse*. Web. 31 May 2011.  
<<http://www.sciencedirect.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/science/article/pii/S0304418106000248>>. page 278

## **Brotherhood & Race**

Racism presents itself as another obstacle for the team to overcome. *Remember the Titans* shows how a team is able to come together despite the tradition of prejudice and racism that has existed in the town just as it has existed through the nation. In this film we see how segregated school districts are pushed together to create a new one. This results in the two groups, black and white parts of the community, being forced together. It is shown in the film that the integration happens under strong resistance of both town as well as the players on the team. We see this through the protests, but also in the way that some characters refuse to form amicable relationships with the African American students. We see this animosity clearly displayed when Gerry Bertier's (Ryan Hurst) girlfriend refuses to shake the hand of Julius Campbell (Wood Harris) and instead leaves looking disgusted at the whole exchange. The animosity continues to be shown through out the progression of the film as parents are enraged and fear that their sons will be kept from playing because of the sudden influx of black players and most importantly the presence of a black head coach. All the same fears and prejudices exist amongst the players. A main difference exists between the players and the rest of the town and school; they will be forced into creating a relationship with the new black players one that results in a team.

As mentioned before the team is presented as a hegemonic structure with a hierarchy, where Bertier and Campbell are shown as being leaders for their respective groups. Players will follow the examples that they set; they both represent strongest and most talented players from their respective racial groups. At one point the coach forces the players to spend time with other players of a different race in order to learn that they are more or less exactly the same people and have many of the same thoughts and ideas about things. It is important to point out that before Bertier and Campbell form their friendship other players do create relationships that cross the racial boundaries. Though these relationships exist amongst some of the players the openness does not exist through out a majority of the remaining players. Eventual at the training camp that Coach Boone (Denzel Washington) organizes Bertier and Campbell begin to form a friendship. From this newly formed friendship we see how the team as a whole accepts one and other, not only for their physical capabilities on the field but also for who they are as people. This friendship for their fellow players



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despite their race later spreads out through the rest of the towns people. Even though the players do not make up the hegemonic leadership over the town in its entirety it still presents an example that some people eventually choose to follow. Later in the film we are shown Bertier's injury resulting in his being paralyzed from the waist down. Following this we see how the team comes together and how towns people seem to come together around the team, culminating with Bertier's girlfriend 'officially' introducing herself to Campbell before the final game of the season. A symbolic gesture that reflects the rest of the town's acceptance of the people they have been forced into coexisting with.

The team and the brotherhood that the players' form become stronger than external factors that can threaten the team's cohesion, and therefore their abilities to win as a team. Another example of the strength of this relationship and resolve that they players have formed that even threats from amongst the players themselves are dealt with internally. A player, Ray Budds (Burgess Jenkins), threatens during training camp that at some point when he sees the opportunity he will not block for the quarterback allowing him to get tackled by an opposing player. Ray later purposely misses the block and it results in Jerry 'Rev' Harris being injured and unable to play for the rest of the season. His prejudice and racism is so strongly rooted that in spite of having spent as much time as every other player on the team and having suffered through the same training and played together through the season he was unable to look past the color of the skin of his fellow teammates. Bertier decides that he must cut Ray from the team, which he brings up with Coach Boone and finally he takes Ray aside and tells him he is no longer part of the team. Ray's behavior was a threat to the team and even though he was part of the brotherhood, the team and specifically Bertier would not tolerate the damage that his behavior could cause to their success as a group. As a team captain, Bertier is the leader of the team not just on the field but he also becomes a leader for the team in matters that come up off the field. He is the hegemonic leader, and he is an example that the other players want to imitate. His strengths become the strengths of the team, his overt acceptance of Campbell as a friend and teammate leads to the rest of the team's acceptance of the new players.

## **Conclusion**

Football as a sport has a strong significance to the people of America. It is a sport that many people have to deal with at some point in their lives. They support a professional team, were on a high school team, went to a school with a team, or they just lived in a town with where the team was closely followed by everyone. Either way the sport has been there and it has had some role of importance in their lives even if they chose not actively take part in it. For some of these people the sport became their only path into something else in the future. Their only path that could lead them away from their small towns into colleges and finally maybe successful careers within football or outside of it. By way of the sport the high school students that excel at its practice could achieve scholarships allowing them to continue their educations as well as continue playing the sport. This might be true for a minority of players, but there is still a majority of them who will never come anywhere near to advancing in the same way that the few star players are able to.

The dream that is presented is tainted, since it is successes as a group that advances the individuals whose prowess is considered to be exemplary. To each of the players the possibility of success and advancement is presented as a goal they are all eligible for, which is true for some. Everyone is presented as already knowing who those few are, but at the same time the players still give it their all just for the slim chance that they might be included in the selected few. It all comes down to the American dream and an idea that with hard work and perseverance individuals will be able to climb to the tops of the social ladders that lay ahead of them. A dream that carries some truths but at the same time only gives provides some individuals with false hope of a goal that they will never be able to achieve. As for many hard work and skill is not enough and there needs to be an element of luck.

For many of the players on the team their years in high school and on the team will be their last years of education as well as playing football. The group works together and excels only to cement the opportunities that are afforded to a selected few.

Masculinity and the dream of advancement are strongly tied to one and other. Especially for the youths that live in a world where football is presented as their only way out, they may not have the grades needed nor can they afford the tuition prices.

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These young men are expected to advance, to surpass the current role models that they might have in their lives, or their parents want something better for them. Either way this requirement is added like a weight on the shoulders on each of the players, one that is presented as being almost impossible to deal with. As mentioned above we see how characters are forced into roles that they would have never chosen to enter if they had it their way. As seen with Matt Saracen who reluctantly enters into his new role as the leader of the Panthers. With the entry into his new role see that the dream promised through football does not apply for everyone. He is not provided with one of the opportunities, though he is one of the individuals who yearn for an escape and for a new life. With the power that football as a kind of kingmaker it is only extended to the individuals presented as having the best prowess on the field, those people are not always the ones who are in need of the help and opportunities. The possibility to advance is tied to the masculinity of the individual practitioners and their positions within the hegemonic hierarchy that is created within the sport. Only the holders of power advance and they do so on the backs of their teams. It is a dream that only the individual can take part of, while they are only able to succeed with the help of the their team. Success of the individual is achieved through the successes of the whole team. As we are shown at end of the films that are based on true stories only ever some of the players ever really make it anywhere.

At the same time as the sport may present ideas and dreams that are tainted, but at the same time it provides something for the people on the field. Understanding of one and other, self reliance and way of learning that success comes from hard work. *Gridiron Gang* shows this to us as we see how the players that make up the Kilpatrick Mustangs come together despite their different gang affiliations and issues to work together and be successful as a team. Though it happens because of the way the team creates an almost ritualized way of inclusion, like the rituals of blood brotherhood. The team is a fraternity of players, each one having proved their worth to each other in one way or another, but also to themselves. Some of the players are able to escape their lives of gangs and crime. Similarly it also provides the practitioners with a sense of self worth and understanding that they are able to stand up to problems and overcome them. *Remember the Titans* and *Varsity Blues* show us each examples of this. The team taking on issues of race that have had traditionally been parts of their lives and working past them. Or in the latter case coming together

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to stop a tyrannical coach. It all comes together behind hegemonic leader and shows how much of the behavior of the individuals stem from a hegemonic structure that allows them to take power as a leader. It also shows that though there is hegemony and a strong structure that has been associated with many kinds of oppression it also is able to bring people together and be inclusive, but only if the individuals are able to show their worth to group as a whole.

Achieving the American dream, or at least attempting to achieve it is understood as a requirement for the players. Many of them are presented as not having a chance to advance without the opportunities that are promised by the sport. Though this is not the case for everyone on the teams, but rather a small minority that is presented as a being the hegemonic leaders of the team, that is to say the strongest players. They stand out in front of the other players they are the ones that play their roles as ideal examples of masculinity. These performers are the ones who advance and seize the promised opportunities, they are given the scholarships and go to college and make careers. Since that is what the sport is often shown as, a means of escape from the lives they have and an escape from the lives their parents have. It is a break to the cycle that they have been witnesses to through out their youth. Essentially the football team and the community it forms becomes a method of transportation for the individual. By way of the team's efforts the few are able to advance. Without the cohesion and brotherhood that these young men form through the sport there would only be a kind of stagnation. People end up falling into the same cycles that they have been living in and just accept it. This is not the case though, for each of these characters an idea of success, the American dream, has been indoctrinated into each of them and not striving for it would be a sign of failure. As mentioned this is not the truth for many of the players, but only a few that make up this hegemonic leader strata. For the rest all that a waits them is this sense of failure that they were unable to achieve the dream, as shown by the character of Charles Billingsley and his almost pathological investment in his son's successes. This dream, or its promises of success brings people together.<sup>47</sup> A team is formed, a brotherhood of young men who look beyond where one and other is from and together attempt to do what is needed to

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<sup>47</sup> Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: a Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: England: Oxford UP, 2004. Print. page 189

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advance. Only it is not everyone that is able to get a taste of success, but only the ones that fit into and play the roles of the hegemony.

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### Films & Television Series

*The Blind Side* (2009)

Director: John Lee Hancock

Writer: John Lee Hancock, Michael Lewis

Cinematography: Alar Kivilo

Producer: Broderick Johnson, Andrew A. Kosove, Gil Netter

Editing: Mark Livolsi

Cast: Sandra Bullock (Leigh Anne Tuohy)

Tim McGraw (Sean Tuohy)

Quinton Aaron (Michael Oher)

Jae Head (S.J. Tuohy)

Lily Collins (Collins Tuohy)

Ray McKinnon (Coach Burt Cotton)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0878804/>

*Friday Night Lights* (2004)

Director: Peter Berg

Writer: Buzz Bissinger, David Aaron Cohen, Peter Berg

Cinematography: Tobias A. Schliessler

Producer: Brian Grazer

Editing: Gabrielle Fasulo, Colby Parker Jr., Susan Rash, David Rosenbloom

Cast: Billy Bob Thornton (Coach Gary Gaines)

Lucas Black (Mike Winchell)

Garrett Hedlund (Don Billingsley)

Derek Luke (Boobie Miles)

Tim McGraw (Charles Billingsley)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0390022/>

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 1, season 1 (aired 29 May 2007)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Peter Berg

Writer: Peter Berg, H.G. Bissinger

Cinematography: David Boyd

Producer: Nan L. Bernstein

Editing: Conrad M. Gonzalez, Keith Henderson, Stephen Michael

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Zach Gilford (Matt Saracen)

Scott Porter (Jason Street)

Connie Britton (Tami Taylor)

Gaius Charles (Brian 'Smash' Williams)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Riggins)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0868133/>

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*Friday Night Lights* Episode 4, season 1(aired 24 October 2006)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Dan Lerner

Writer: Kerry Ehrin

Cinematography: David Boyd

Producer: Bridget Carpenter, David Hudgins

Editing: Scott Gamzon

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Zach Gilford (Matt Saracen)

Scott Porter (Jason Street)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Gaius Charles (Brian 'Smash' Williams)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Rggins)

Aldis Hodge (Ray 'Voodoo' Tatum)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0872912/>

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 6, season 1(aired 7 November 2006)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Dan Lerner

Writer: Carter Harris

Cinematography: David Boyd

Producer: Bridget Carpenter, David Hudgins

Editing: Stephen Michael

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Zach Gilford (Matt Saracen)

Scott Porter (Jason Street)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Gaius Charles (Brian 'Smash' Williams)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Rggins)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0877087/>

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 1, season 3(aired 1 October 2008)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Jeffrey Reiner

Writer: Jason Katims

Cinematography: Todd McMullen

Producer: Nan L. Bernstein

Editing: Angela M. Catanzaro

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Zach Gilford (Matt Saracen)

Scott Porter (Jason Street)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Gaius Charles (Brian 'Smash' Williams)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Rggins)

Jeremy Sumpter (J.D. McCoy)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1216618/>

*From Pigskins to Sheepskins*

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 2, season 4(aired 4 November 2009)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Michael Waxman

Writer: Kerry Ehrin

Cinematography: Todd McMullen

Producer: Nan L. Bernstein, Ron Fitzgerald, Michael Waxman

Editing: un-credited

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Zach Gilford (Matt Saracen)

Matt Lauria (Luke Cafferty)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Michael B. Jordan (Vince Howard)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Riggins)

Jeremy Sumpter (J.D. McCoy)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1501909/>

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 1, season 5(aired 27 October 2010)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Michael Waxman

Writer: David Hudgins

Cinematography: Todd McMullen

Producer: Nan L. Bernstein, Ron Fitzgerald, Michael Waxman

Editing: Margaret Guinee

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Matt Lauria (Luke Cafferty)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Michael B. Jordan (Vince Howard)

Taylor Kitsch (Tim Riggins)

Jeremy Sumpter (J.D. McCoy)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1631962/>

*Friday Night Lights* Episode 2, season 5(aired 3 November 2010)

Creator: Peter Berg

Director: Michael Waxman

Writer: Kerry Ehrin

Cinematography: Todd McMullen

Producer: Ron Fitzgerald, Nan L. Bernstein, Michael Waxman

Editing: Stephen Michael

Cast: Kyle Chandler (Eric Taylor)

Matt Lauria (Luke Cafferty)

Connie Britton(Tami Taylor)

Michael B. Jordan (Vince Howard)

Aimee Teegarden (Julie Taylor)

Jeremy Sumpter (J.D. McCoy)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1631967/>



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*Gridiron Gang* (2006)

Director: Phil Joanou

Writer: Jeff Maguire, Jac Flanders

Cinematography: Jeff Cutter

Producer: Neal H. Moritz, Lee Stanley

Editing: Joel Negron

Cast: Dwayne Johnson (Sean Porter)

Xzibit (Malcolm Moore)

David V. Thomas (Kelvin Owens)

Jade Yorker (Willie Weathers)

Setu Taase (Junior Palaita)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0421206/>

*Remember the Titans* (1999)

Director: Boaz Yakin

Writer: Gregory Allen Howard

Cinematography: Philippe Rousselot

Producer: Jerry Bruckheimer, Chad Oman

Editing: Michael Tronick

Cast: Denzel Washington (Coach Herman Boone)

Will Patton (Coach Bill Yoast)

Wood Harris (Julius Campbell)

Ryan Hurst (Gerry Bertier)

Craig Kirkwood (Jerry 'Rev' Harris)

Burgess Jenkins (Ray Budds)

Kate Bosworth (Emma Hoyt)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0210945/>

*Varsity Blues* (1999)

Director: Brian Robbins

Writer: W. Peter Iliff

Cinematography: Chuck Cohen

Producer: Tova Laiter, Brian Robbins, Michael Tollin

Editing: Ned Bastille

Cast: James Van Der Beek (Jonathon 'Mox' Moxon)

Jon Voight (Coach Bud Kilmer)

Paul Walker (Lance Harbor)

Scott Caan (Charlie Tweeder)

Amy Smart (Jules Harbor)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0139699/>

*Jarhead* (2005)

Director: Sam Mendes

Writer: William Broyles Jr., Anthony Swofford

Cinematography: Roger Deakins

Producer: Lucy Fisher, Douglas Wick

Editing: Walter Murch

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Cast: Jake Gyllenhaal (Anthony Swofford)  
Scott MacDonald (D.I. Fitch)  
Peter Sarsgaard (Alan Troy)  
Jamie Foxx (Staff Sgt. Sykes)  
Lucas Black (Chris Kruger)

Country: Germany, USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0418763/>

*Hellcats* (TV Series 2010)

Creator: Kevin Murphy

Director: Various

Writer: Varios

Cinematography: Stephen McNutt

Producer: Jae Marchant, Rose Lam, Tom Welling

Editing: Christopher Cooke

Cast: Alyson Michalka (Marti Perkins)  
Ashley Tisdale (Savannah Monroe)  
Robbie Jones (Lewis Flynn)  
Heather Hemmens (Alice Verdura)  
Sharon Leal (Vanessa Lodge)  
Matt Barr (Dan Patch)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1596356/>

*Bring it On* (2000)

Director: Peyton Reed

Writer: Jessica Bendinger

Cinematography: Shawn Maurer

Producer: Marc Abraham, Thomas A. Bliss

Editing: Larry Bock

Cast: Kirsten Dunst (Torrance Shipman)  
Eliza Dushku (Missy Pantone)  
Jesse Bradford (Cliff Pantone)  
Gabrielle Union (Isis)  
Clare Kramer (Courtney)

Country: USA

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0204946/>

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<sup>ii</sup> "sheepskin." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 31 May. 2011. <Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sheepskin>>.