

Winning ways

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

The primary appeal of sports movies is in the way they combine the drama of competition with other genres—the triumph-of-the-spirit movie, for example, or the coming-of-age story, or the romantic comedy. Even a conventional picture like *Miracle* (which came out early this year and is now available on DVD) or *Mr. 3000* can be immensely satisfying because of the way the filmmakers (Gavin O'Connor and Charles Stone III respectively) connect sports to other themes.

Miracle dramatizes the real-life challenge of hockey coach Herb Brooks (a marvelous, held-in-check performance by Kurt Russell) to transform a crew of college kids into the team that robbed the Russians of the gold medal at the 1980 Winter Olympics. The movie is part sports melodrama, part biography. The climactic encounter between the Americans and the Soviets is excitingly staged. But what makes the film rousing and perhaps memorable is the metamorphosis of the boys from self-involved adolescents into young men who surmount adversity in quest of a goal outside themselves.

What we especially remember from the picture—besides Russell's beautifully judged reading of Brooks's pregame speech—are the faces of the boys as they champ at the bit, struggle to absorb bitter turns of luck (like the player who must accept his fate when Brooks pares his team down to the requisite 20), and discover they can transcend the old limitations of their young bodies and pliable spirits.

Mr. 3000 belongs to a category popularized by the baby boomers: the middle-aged edition of the coming-of-age movie. In these films, characters long past the bloom of youth find salvation by reexamining their priorities and often by acknowledging the underappreciated beauties of compromise. (Two of the earliest and best examples were also built around sports: *The Best of Times*, in which Kurt Russell and Robin Williams get to replay the big high school football game they once lost, and *Bull Durham*, a glorious hybrid of baseball picture and romantic comedy.)

In *Mr. 3000*, Stan Ross, a self-centered baseball player (the always-terrific Bernie Mac, seizing his first opportunity to give a genuine acting performance), retires from

the game after making his 3,000th hit to become an entrepreneur and wait around for election to the Hall of Fame. When it turns out that his record was miscalculated and he's three hits shy of that magic number, he rejoins his old team, the Milwaukee Brewers, whose players are half his age and unimpressed with his arrogance and egotism.

The movie gives Ross a teammate who reflects back his best and worst qualities: T-Rex (Brian J. White), the Brewers' most gifted and charismatic player, who holds himself above his teammates and has his eye on his own advantages. These two men wind up mentoring each other.

The filmmakers provide Stan with another old mistake to rethink, reuniting him with the sports reporter (Angela Bassett) whose love he lost long ago through selfishness and infidelity. Bassett, with her magnificent African-sculpture face and her warm, blues-tinged voice, makes middle age look pretty good, and she and Mac are a supremely romantic couple.

The problem with Wimbledon, which matches up Kirsten Dunst as a hotshot U.S. tennis player with Paul Bettany (of *Master and Commander*) as a fading English star taking his final shot at Wimbledon, is that the writers (Adam Brooks, Jennifer Flackett and Mark Levin) and the director (Richard Loncraine) don't bring the romantic-comedy conventions in sync with the sports-movie conventions.

The apparatus that threatens to keep Lizzie and Peter apart seems rigged. Her dad (Sam Neill) thinks that an amorous entanglement will distract her from her game. The two actors are charming together, but his role is far better than hers, so it's really Bettany's picture. The supporting cast never makes much of an impression, unlike that of *Mr. 3000* and *Miracle*. (Luckily Bettany's performance is a good enough reason to see the film.)

Lizzie's encouragement alters Peter's view of himself and leads him to ultimate victory. But once she's delivered a locker-room pep talk and declared her love, there's nothing for her to do during Peter's decisive match but look on anxiously from the stands. Whereas the climactic competition scenes in *Miracle* and *Mr. 3000* showcase the broader themes of the movie, *Wimbledon's* departs from romantic comedy entirely. When he wins, Peter rushes up into the crowd and lifts Lizzie off her feet while the cameras roll and their romance, along with his win, becomes front-page news. This moment doesn't crown a convention; it merely tacks on a cliché.