

Not a slam dunk

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 7, 2006](#) issue

The myth that sports are racially redemptive makes for formulaic movies. *Glory Road* feels a lot like *Remember the Titans*. The films (both produced by Jerry Bruckheimer) show how a team's drive to win a championship overcomes racial divisions and leads blacks and whites to bond like brothers.

Glory Road is about Texas Western University's 1966 champion basketball team, which featured an all-black starting five. It's hard not to be moved at seeing Texas Western's five black starters line up opposite the University of Kentucky's five white ones in the national title game. UK's racist coach, Adolph Rupp (played by Jon Voight), who avowedly opposed recruitment of black players at that point in his career, is shown scowling like some sort of Confederate general. Texas Western's victory was a symbolic victory for black athletes, and it spurred the integration of athletics in the South.

Bruckheimer's productions refuse to let 30 seconds pass without a zinger of a line or some bit of action. *Glory Road* director James Gartner knows how to play on an audience's emotions. The film shows that things were not easy for coach Don Haskins (played by Josh Lucas) and the seven black players he recruited to Texas Western (now Texas-El Paso, or UTEP). One black player was beaten up in a restroom when the team bus stopped for lunch. One time the players' hotel rooms were broken into and the walls sprayed with racist epithets written in blood. The entire team was pelted with objects and curses in opposing arenas, and they were received coldly in their own building. The team's white players, holdovers from the previous coach, complained that they'd become the minority on the team. But the white players and the school's nervous administrators quickly show the better angels of their nature when the black players turn out to be good guys—and when the team starts winning.

The problem with the myth of redemptive athletics is that it allows us to grow misty-eyed without ever really contemplating the depth of this country's racist heritage or the considerable work still needed to overcome it. The film presents racists as

obviously evil—in Rupp’s scowl and in the snarling white fans waving Confederate flags. The notion that sports can bring races together ignores the fact that blacks have always entertained and performed for whites, from slavery’s earliest days. Millions of Americans could watch *The Cosby Show* or marvel at Michael Jordan’s skills on the basketball court without being willing to have a black neighbor, friend or son-in-law. And *Glory Road*’s story of a noble white coach who sacrifices his career and his family’s safety to give benighted young blacks a chance in life is not free of its own kind of paternalism and white self-congratulation.

On a less serious note, this film is chock-full of basketball anachronisms. Though the arenas and the uniforms look authentic, Texas Western’s style of play is not. The black players are repeatedly shown throwing down slam dunks, occasionally over opposing players, and afterwards they flex their muscles and scream. They also throw alley-oop passes, including one off the backboard for the final basket in the title game against UK. The black players talk trash to one another and to opponents. None of this went on in the 1960s. It wasn’t until Julius Erving and Darryl Dawkins played in the 1970s that dunking became an art form and dunking over an opponent a sign of machismo. The scream and flex after the dunk are new even in the past ten years, attributable to the likes of present-day stars Allen Iverson and Vince Carter.

The artless manner in which players dunked in the 1960s would not have made the highlight film on today’s *Sportscenter*. (The invention of the alley-oop pass can be dated: it happened in a practice at North Carolina State when the great David Thompson caught an errant pass in mid-air and laid it in. State added the play to its repertoire. That was in the early 1970s.) Even today no respectable team would throw an alley-oop off the backboard in a meaningful moment in any game, much less in a championship game.

So basketball historians will not be happy. So what? The deeper problem with the film’s historical inaccuracy is that it trades on a stereotypical view of racial difference. The movie emphasizes how Texas Western combined Haskins’s (white) drill-sergeant insistence on basketball fundamentals with his (black) players’ innate flair and creativity. Star player Bobby Joe Hill can defend and pass the way Haskins wants, but he can also dribble between his legs and perform a 360-degree turn the way he learned on the playground. Haskins and these players need each other in order to be truly great. It’s white and black, yin and yang. In reality, plenty of white players, then and now, have played flamboyantly (Pete Maravich was an archetype of the style in the 1950s), and plenty of black players have no need to jive-talk or

show off (as the majority of black players, then and now, amply show). These are learned behaviors born of imitation. The film's suggestion that these are somehow natural white and black traits is the sort of racial myth that must be undone.

Despite its limits, the mythic story of redemptive athletics presents a challenge to the church. What does it mean that millions of people have their most formative interracial experiences not in the church but in sports? Well, perhaps nothing. One can block, tackle, pass and shoot with someone of another race and still never really seek the good of that person. But the experience can be a start in that direction. That the start often comes in athletics, where the lure of winning proves stronger than the prohibitions of segregation, and not in the church of Jesus Christ, in which baptism washes away racial distinctions, is a source of shame indeed. The gospel is more deeply true than whatever redemption happens in sport—so why do we so rarely see it having this effect?