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## Ty Cobb

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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Was he the greatest ballplayer of all time? He thought so and told everyone who would and would not listen that he was. In the first voting for entrance into the Hall of Fame Ty Cobb outpolled all his rivals. Ernest Hemmingway thought him one of the greatest, but also a dispicable human being. It is this latter view that dominates the portrayal of Ty Cobb by Tommy Lee Jones in this stunning and deeply disturbing film just released on home video.

Ty Cobb was born in 1886 in backwoods Georgia and died in July of 1961 in Atlanta. From 1905 until 1928 he played major league baseball with a fury that no one else has ever brought to the game.

Writer and director Ron Shelton has masterfully taken sportswriter Al Stump's 1994 biography of Cobb and turned it into a compelling two hours plus of drama, comedy and tragedy. Capturing Cobb's madness while appreciating his status as a great American sports hero is no easy task, but Shelton has achieved both. This is a story so bizarre and a personality so extreme that it would have been easy to go over the top into caricature. But Shelton disciplined both the script and the actors and maintained the proper balance.

Al Stump spent much of Ty Cobb's last year on earth with him on an assignment to write Cobb's official biography as told by Ty Cobb. The film uses Al Stump's rollercoaster experience with Cobb as the device to examine the life of this complex personality. Those going to "Cobb" to find a baseball story will be disappointed, but those going for a character study of Ty Cobb will not. Shelton develops the relationship between Cobb and Stump, author and ghostwriter, into a study of a human relationship of considerable complexity. As much as he is repelled by Cobb, Stump is strongly influenced by him, perhaps because, as Cobb says, it the closest that Stump would ever come to greatness.

As the story develops we see Stump writing two biographies of Cobb: the one Cobb is dictating and the one Stump is writing on scraps of paper. We know that in the end Stump published Cobb's version "My Life in Baseball: The True Record," in the early Sixties, and only in the past year has the full Stump version appeared. Stump did give the public one early glimpse of the dark side of Cobb with an award winning magazine piece he wrote a year after Cobb's death.

Tommy Lee Jones is truly magnificent in capturing both the horror and charm of Ty Cobb in a chilling high energy performance. This rendition of Ty Cobb will not soon be forgotten by those who see the film. Nearly as impressive is Robert Wuhl as Al Stump the young hotshot sportswriter. Wuhl's task in some ways was the more difficult one as Stump undergoes a transformation over the course of the film. He must be convincing and strong, but he cannot dominate the action as Cobb does.

The Cobb that emerges in the film, as indeed the one that emerged from Stump's 1994 book, is a despicable character. He drinks too much, is paranoid about doctors, hates Jews and Blacks and nearly everyone else around him, is a public bore, and abuses most everyone in sight.

Estranged from his family, Cobb's children no longer communicate with him. He has been through several marriages marked by the physical abuse of his wives. He is an ugly combination of Southern charmer and redneck bully.

Having failed his own children he set up a scholarship fund for the poor children of Georgia. Having failed to develop friendships with his fellow ballplayers, he financially supported many in their old age who were down and out.

In some ways he was brilliant. He mastered the stockmarket and invested wisely, becoming a millionaire. He moved in social circles with people from the corporate boardrooms and high government office, including presidents from both places.

Much is made of the tragedy that struck Cobb just after he joined the Detroit Tigers. His father was shot by his mother, or his mother's lover, as his father tried to come through a window in the middle of the night into Mrs. Cobb's room. The film offers three versions of the incident, and in the end the truth of the matter remains illusive. Mrs. Cobb was tried and acquitted of the murder, while Ty remained loyally at her side.

Some regard this as a character shaping traumatic event in Cobb's life. No doubt it had a major impact on him, but as the film suggests Cobb was a twisted personality before the death of his father and it did not fundamentally alter that personality.

This is film to be seen by anyone interested in Ty Cobb,  
baseball, human relationships, abnormal psychology, or the  
meaning of hero in American life.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you  
don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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