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Entertainment for the Whole Family!



You have to wonder if Michael McCambridge ever got to watch a hockey game before he ended up with somebody's, well, you know.

His mother, Charlestown Chiefs owner Anita McCambridge, wasn't above violence in hockey as long as she could make a profit from it, but she'd be damned if she would ever allow her children to watch the sport. Kids are impressionable, you see. They might stick up a bank. Heroin. You name it.

Imagine Anita's horror at learning that the members of her former hockey team, the scourge of the Federal League, over time had evolved but not necessarily changed; they're still the face of goon hockey at its peak. But, strangely, they've also become the epitome of family-friendly entertainment.

The Hanson Brothers were initially shunned and mocked by their disapproving teammates. Their intellect, or lack

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thereof, was called into question by their coach who found them so frightfully bizarre that he vowed they would not play for his club. Today, however, they are idolized by millions of fans around the world, from 82-year-old legend Gordie Howe to children whose parents weren't even born when the Hansons stepped onto the War Memorial ice to commence what fans have dubbed "the greatest shift in hockey history."

Go ahead, Google it. You'll see.

It's difficult to explain the transformation of the Hansons from "retards" and "criminals" to icons who still tour North American arenas every year, dispensing their special brand of tough, in-your-face hockey, without having changed a whole lot about their style. These three men, all in their mid-50s, are also still making movies, the latest of which was subtitled "The Junior League," earned a PG rating and was aimed at audiences of all ages.

Then again, sometimes you just have to appreciate the irony, rather than try to explain or justify it.

Anyway, let's give Anita McCambridge the benefit of the doubt. She seemed like a smart woman — maybe she too eventually came to see the Hansons and the Chiefs as more than just cash cows. After all, she wouldn't have been the first person to come to a particular judgment about these people and then change their mind later.

For example, Frank Deford, in a review of *Slap Shot* that was published in the March 7, 1977, edition of *Sports Illustrated*, called Paul Newman "aimlessly vile" in reference to his scene with Kathryn Walker, McCambridge's portrayer. He also said Newman was simply out of his element.

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"Slap Shot's player-coach should properly be a lost, fey figure, desperate at the end of the road. That's the way these fellows are. Instead, Newman plays him with the cocky insouciance of a Butch Cassidy, and that is simply not the character."

In a tribute to Newman that appeared in *SI* on September 30, 2008, Deford sang a different tune: " . . . hockey people adored him for his performance in *Slap Shot*. That movie was such a boon to hockey, just as he made pool more glamorous, playing Fast Eddie Felsen in *The Hustler* and then in *The Color of Money*. If Paul Newman was connected, it must be good."

But the magazine had long since atoned for Deford's scathing initial thoughts. This process actually began with a backhanded compliment only two weeks after that review was published, in the March 21, 1977, Scorecard column, edited by Robert W. Creamer. Creamer wrote that people in hockey had been criticizing the film for what they claimed was its focus on violence, calling it unrealistic that the on-ice shenanigans would be even tacitly encouraged, as was depicted in the film. But Creamer also detailed a recent real-life incident in which John Ferguson, then the coach of the New York Rangers, had become so incensed during a game that he flew into a rage, using foul language, making rude gestures and hitting a linesman with a thrown water bottle. He was fined \$500 for the tirade, a punishment Creamer seemed to think was ridiculous.

"Ted Williams was once fined \$5,000 for spitting in the general direction of the crowd. And that was before inflation. Maybe we'd better take another look at *Slap Shot*," Creamer wrote.

Well, it was a start.

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In August 1999, *SI* columnist Steve Rushin wrote about the top sports films of all time and included a reference to Charlestown's heroes. "Every movie ever made about a team of profane outcasts — Mean Machine in *The Longest Yard*, the Chiefs in *Slap Shot*, Chico's Bail Bonds in *The Bad News Bears* — has been, without exception, brilliant."

The magazine produced its first Top 20 Sports Movies list in February 2001, and *Slap Shot* made the list at No. 9. The film's profile grew starting in 2002 when its first sequel was released and so was a 25th anniversary DVD that included not only commentary by the Hanson Brothers but also the film's original soundtrack. The music had been replaced by generic sound-alike songs for TV airings of the movie and on its VHS releases, but viewers could now once again thrill to the authentic 70s sounds of Maxine Nightingale, Leo Sayer, Elton John and Sonny James while, equally true to the 70s, Newman broke one fashion law after another.

In late March 2003, the magazine's staff placed Newman at No. 3 on its list of actors who had turned in the most believable athletic performances, citing his ability to lie, cheat and play dirty "like a pro." At the same time, the staff named *Slap Shot* as the top hockey film of all time. "When you talk about hilariously foul-mouthed movies, this comedy about a hapless minor league hockey team is the gold standard."

The staff compiled a new list in August 2003, the all-encompassing Top 50 Greatest Sports Movies. *Slap Shot* was slotted in at No. 5. A little more than a year later, Mark Bechtel commemorated the Academy Award nominations by awarding fictional "sports flick Oscars." He chose Lindsay Crouse as best supporting actress for *Slap Shot*. Brad Sullivan

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fell just shy of a nomination for best supporting actor, but Newman was chosen best actor for playing Reggie Dunlop. He beat out himself in *The Hustler*, Kevin Costner for *Bull Durham*, Gene Hackman for *Hoosiers* and Robert De Niro for *Raging Bull*.

“He was absolutely perfect for the role. He was at the film’s center and was surrounded by an oddball, hilarious cast, but he never let the movie descend to the level of farce,” Bechtel wrote, also praising Newman for allowing his co-stars to deliver most of the film’s memorable lines, “while he gave it all a realistic edge, keeping the film grounded — funny without being stupid.”

When *Sports Illustrated* chose the Hanson Brothers for the cover of its summer double issue in 2007 and included a major feature story on the Hansons by Austin Murphy, it was official — the film’s rehabilitation in the eyes of *SI* was finally complete.

Famed movie reviewer Gene Siskel acknowledged his own first impression of *Slap Shot* had been wrong. He appeared with reviewing partner Roger Ebert on *Late Show with David Letterman* on September 10, 1993, and Letterman asked the pair if they had ever had occasion to rethink an initial review.

“*Slap Shot* was an example,” Siskel said.

“Oh, I like that movie, great movie,” Letterman interjected, jokingly referring to the Hansons as “the Ramone Brothers.”

“I agree,” Siskel continued. “My initial review was mixed and then I saw it, like, two weeks later, thankfully, and I knew it was a terrific film, a great working-class story. A wonderful risky performance from Paul Newman . . . just a terrific film.”

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Newman's performance was indeed risky. He had played ne'er do wells before, characters you weren't supposed to like but did anyway. But the role of Chiefs player-coach Reggie Dunlop took Newman to a level that was arguably lower than that occupied by, say, Hud Bannon. *Sports Illustrated* was right — Dunlop did lie, cheat and play dirty like a pro. He refused to grow up. He duped, betrayed and threatened friends and blackmailed his boss to get what he wanted. He expressed his frustration and anger with the vilest of words. He seemed at times to bask in his own sleaziness. His attempt to go straight near the end, sincere though it might have been, lasts only until he realizes that the path he has followed throughout the story could actually lead him to a pot of gold after all. "I could make a goddamned fortune," he exults.

Of course, in real life, Newman had already made a fortune as well as a legend, having enjoyed one of the most successful and prolific careers in film history. Although he was known for his handsome features, particularly his striking blue eyes, he was a talented actor who didn't like to take the easy route. He refused to rely on his looks. He consistently tackled projects that he found interesting and challenging. One such film was 1964's *The Outrage*, in which Newman disguised himself with a fake wig and mustache and brown contact lenses to play a Mexican bandit and rapist.

Yet, for all the times Newman had pushed the envelope throughout his career, in *Slap Shot* he took a chance that few others of his stature would have dared. This was because he agreed to play not only Dunlop but also the character exactly as intended, with no softening of his persona or language, no winking at the camera. It must be remembered that the use

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of profanity, gratuitous or otherwise, in mainstream films was still very new. When John Schuck, as Painless Pole Waldowski, told another character in *M*A*S*H* that his “fucking head (was) coming right off,” it was the first time the word “fuck” had ever been used in the dialogue of a major motion picture. The year was 1970.

The criticism Newman received for *Slap Shot* was probably to have been expected. Despite that, he never shied away from his performance; on the contrary — he took pride in it and went to great lengths to defend it and the film. For the rest of his life, he remained very proud of *Slap Shot* and his participation in it, repeatedly telling people that he had never had so much fun making a movie.

“*Slap Shot* is one of my favorite films and Reggie Dunlop is one of my favorite characters,” he said in a June 2007 interview. “They are both classics.”

His opinion is now widely recognized, and his performance is now seen as proof of his immense talent as an actor. Who else could have made Reggie a likable character without changing any of his defining characteristics? The noted *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Richard Roeper (*Ebert & Roeper*) suggests no one else could have straddled that line between playing Reggie as an absolute bastard with few redeeming qualities and turning him into an obvious clown, winking at the camera.

“With Newman, you didn’t get that sense. He’s that guy (on the screen),” Roeper says, suggesting Burt Reynolds and Robert Redford as two actors of the time who wouldn’t have been able to resist mugging. “You just never get the sense that he’s giving us a hint, ‘Oh, come on, you know I’m just putting it on — I’m a good guy!’”

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That's not to say Newman didn't acknowledge the audience at certain points, but his work in these scenes is very subtle. He acted them out in a way that took for granted the viewers' intelligence; Newman believed we would understand, without being told, exactly why Reggie is doing what he is doing — the sudden stop after walking past the Hansons' hotel room where they are playing with their race cars, the last look back at the pay phone after being hung up on while trying to call Francine, the quick glance we get right before he opens the locker room door to greet the Hyannisport police officers. "He's bringing us into the performance without overdoing it," Roeper says.

Howard Baldwin recognized the brilliance of Newman and the film right away. He lived through hockey's 1970s goon age as the owner of the World Hockey Association's New England Whalers. He moved with the Whalers to the National Hockey League and eventually owned two other teams in the league before moving into motion picture development and production. As such, he can offer a unique perspective on the success and continuing relevance of *Slap Shot*.

"It was a very smart, entertaining movie that reflected that era," says Baldwin, whose film projects include the hockey movies *Sudden Death*, with Jean-Claude Van Damme, and *Mystery, Alaska*, with Russell Crowe, as well as the Academy Award-nominated *Ray*, about legendary musician Ray Charles. "If it's a good movie, it doesn't matter whether it's a sports movie or a love story or a war movie or whatever — it's a good movie. And these guys made a good movie. The characters were a lot of fun. You got vested in the characters. That's what it takes to make a good movie."

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Hockey players, naturally enough, were the first people to get it, especially those who have lived in spartan conditions on rickety buses and in shabby dressing rooms.

"I think every hockey player has definitely seen it at least a couple of times and knows all the lines," says Cincinnati Cyclones captain Barret Ehgoetz, who has watched it many times while having ridden his fair share of buses around his home province of Ontario and across the United States.

"I've only seen *Slap Shot* probably 50 to 100 times," Jeff Jackson, head coach of the Notre Dame men's hockey team, told Allison Hayes for the ND athletics news site www.blueandgold.com in December 2007. "It's always one of the favorites on the bus trips."

"When I coached juniors, that movie was playing on the bus every year," Mike Babcock, Stanley Cup-winning coach of the Detroit Red Wings, told the *San Jose Mercury News* in January 2008.

A year earlier, in February 2007, Babcock told John Niyo of the *Detroit News* that during his coaching career he has used clips and lines from the movie to motivate his players or just to get some laughs. "There's just so many unbelievable lines in that movie."

"In juniors," Red Wings veteran Kirk Maltby said to Niyo, "I think it was probably on the TV on every bus trip we ever took."

"I think the first time I saw it was when I was a major junior player on the buses," NHL goalie turned TV analyst Darren Pang said in a September 2008 interview with Bob Young of the *Arizona Republic*. "It was the No. 1 VHS on the bus. You always had guys on the team who could recite every line."

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They not only love *Slap Shot*, they take pride in it, just as Newman and his co-stars did. It was an attitude that engendered itself early on in the production.

"It was a blessed venture from the very beginning," says Jennifer Warren, who played Dunlop's estranged wife Francine. "The script was golden; we all fell in love with the script, and we came together for the joy of doing wonderful material. That's why everybody was so happy on that set."

Paul D'Amato, who played Chiefs nemesis Tim "Dr. Hook" McCracken, says the movie has lasted and still resonates because it was real and it came across that way.

"This movie has the things in it that I think Aristotle and the classics would be proud of. When you think about Aristotle's *Poetics* — plot, character, thought, language, music and spectacle — this is what he wrote out, saying these things are important. If you look at *Slap Shot*, it meets all of those criteria, number one. Number two, there wasn't a special effect in it. There were guys and girls doing things in their character via this dialogue to accomplish this task and make people laugh. And people laugh 30 years later because the same things are funny."

The late Ned Tanen, who was the president of Universal Pictures when *Slap Shot* was produced, had the final say in the approval process that saw it brought to the big screen. He said that while he felt it was hilarious, he also recognized it as social commentary — screenwriter Nancy Dowd's depiction of contemporary America, particularly Rust Belt America. It's a viewpoint that has become more apparent with time.

"It was a brilliant movie. It's defined this country and not necessarily with a lot of attractive qualities," Tanen said in

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February 2007. “Unfortunately, they were true then and they’ve become more true now, much more.”

When you think of a cult classic film, *Slap Shot* should immediately come to mind. *USA Today* film reporter Susan Wloszczyna explains her personal criteria for a cult classic and how *Slap Shot* fits the description.

“It’s one that didn’t start off maybe being appreciated in its time, but a few people took to it. It touched a chord in them that doesn’t get touched normally by more mainstream, normal films. What it needs is the sense of space between then and now,” she says. “I think people were so hung up by the sex and the language and the violence and the fact that Paul Newman was in the middle of it all that they didn’t quite understand that (*Slap Shot*) got at something that was very unique to a sports film, and very real and honest. I do think cult films tend to have exaggeration, which this does, but also at the core there is some kind of honest emotion, a rawness that doesn’t get exposed enough in mainstream movies because they want to appeal to the broadest audience possible.

“And there are not a lot of good hockey films. There are just not. This is one that really gets at something about the sport that people appreciate.”

“It’s literally my favorite sports movie,” says Barbara Morgan, executive director and co-founder of the Austin Film Festival, in the capital city of Texas. “I love that movie. I like comedies, but that’s a special movie. It’s not just the inappropriateness of it; you could see it happening. It seemed not so much ridiculous as more accurate, life on a minor league hockey team. And the casting was great. It’s a film, honestly, that you could never make today. That’s, I guess, a little bit

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of what I love about it. It really is a film you could never make today."

While many critics have reconsidered their initial opinions of *Slap Shot*, legendary journalist and author Dan Jenkins has never needed to do so. He wrote in *GQ* in November 2007 that it was "the best sports film of the past 50 years." He goes even further today.

"As a lifelong sportswriter I am the first to proclaim *Slap Shot* the best sports movie ever made," he says. "Why? Because it was not only falling-down hilarious and captured the good-natured profanity of sports, but at the same time circled all the edges of truth, and even underlined many of them. Most sports movies are embarrassingly stupid and naïve because they're made by Hollywood nitwits who fall into two categories: jock-sniffing hero worshippers and naïve punks.

"I have worked in Hollywood and even got three films on the screen but never had any control, thus I marveled at the accident that became *Slap Shot*. It's what my novel *Semi-Tough* should have been on the screen, but wasn't, and *Slap Shot* remains one of those movies I wish I'd written. How it got to the screen as well as it did remains a modern miracle, like *Casablanca*."

With apologies to the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, let's see how the first "miracle on ice" came to be.