

There was a time when people gathered around their radio to listen to soap operas, shows like "The Lone Ranger," "Amos and Andy" and "You Bet Your Life." Now people gather around their TV sets for entertainment. But there's a group of people keeping radio drama alive on public radio. Find out more on Page 5D.

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Filling the void until opening day

By Wayne Peal
staff writer

The unthinkable won't really happen, thank goodness. There will be major league baseball this season.

But it's still going to be a few weeks before the teams come back north. How can eager Tiger fans pass the time?

Don't bother with the tractor pulls on ESPN. Relief can be as close as your nearest video store.

Baseball has been a frequent movie topic. But the wise consumer will choose carefully.

Highlight films are a safe choice. In addition to historical overviews of the sport, there are also individual highlight films featuring the game's most notable teams — including the Tigers. (And the 1984 World Series film is still available.)

Highlight films, though, are pretty safe and predictable. More venturesome fans head straight for the theatrical releases.

Even though plenty of baseball movies are available for VCRs, the sport hasn't been especially well-served by Hollywood.

The game's most dramatic moment, Jackie Robinson's heroic breaking of baseball's color barrier has only been told once — in a forgettable, low budget film starring Robinson himself.

Babe Ruth, the game's most colorful figure, was dealt an injustice by the much-panned 1948 film biography with William Bendix badly miscast in the title role. (Though a new, perhaps better, version with beefy "Roseanne" star John Goodman has been rumored.)

MANY BASEBALL films fail because their lead actors, while talented, just aren't believable as athletes. Tony Perkins in "Fear Strikes Out" immediately comes to mind.

Even Robert DeNiro isn't exactly convincing in the much-praised "Bang the Drum Slowly."

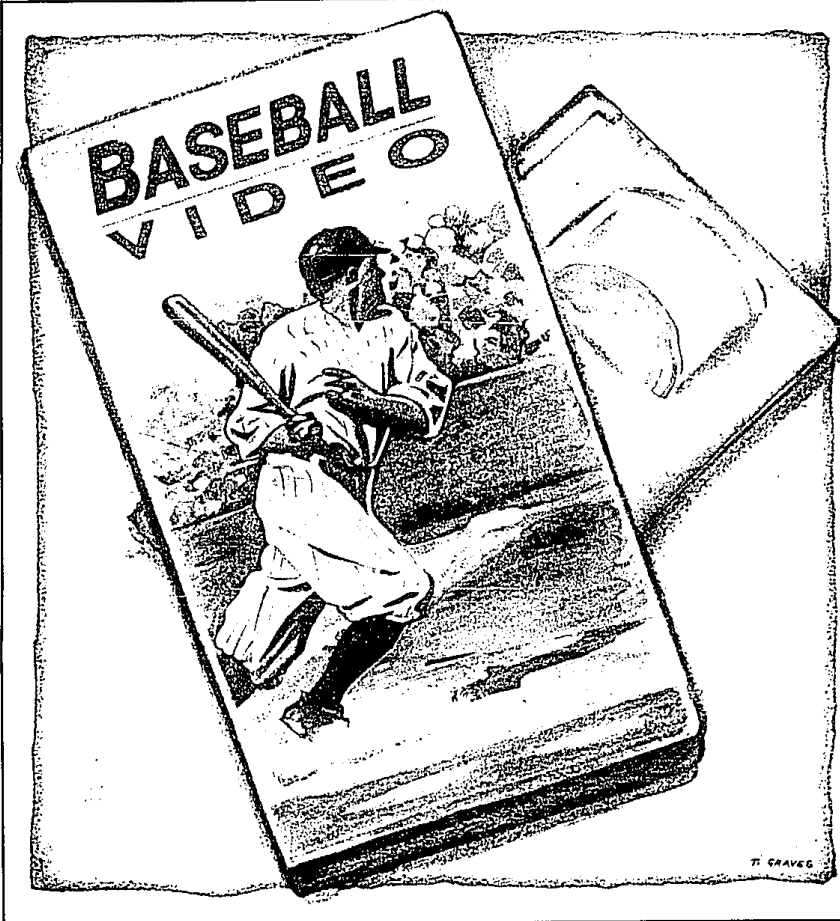
Objections aside, several baseball movies really do stand out. Perhaps tellingly, most of them are fantasies, rather than biographies.

I've seen just about every baseball film ever made. Here are my favorites:

1. "The Natural" — Many critics called a big strike three on this Robert Redford vehicle upon its 1984 release, particularly because it turned the amoral anti-hero of Bernard Malamud's 1950s novel into a shining knight for the feel-good 1980s.

It looks much better in retrospect. Redford is convincing as a ballplayer — if an aging slugger and his terse acting style fits the part well. As a fantasy fable, this ranks right up there with "Batman" and Randy Newman's musical score is brilliant.

If you've seen it before, see it again to savor the performances of Robert Duvall, as a mercurial sports columnist, and veteran character actors Wilford Brimley



and Richard Farnsworth, as Redford's manager and coach.

DRAWBACKS — The altered ending does muddy things a bit — but with a movie this enjoyable, who cares?

Special bonus — Look for real-life ex-Tiger Phil Mankowski and former Rookie of the Year Joe Charboneau in (very minor) supporting roles.

2. "It Happens Every Spring" — There were numerous, sentimental

baseball-fantasy films released in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This one, starring Ray Milland, is the best of the lot.

Milland, as a mild-mannered, decidedly non-athletic, college professor accidentally invents a substance that makes baseballs avoid wood. In the process, he becomes a big time baseball star. Eventually, he loses his magic potion but wins the game and gets the girl anyway.

DRAWBACKS — It isn't yet avail-

able on VCR, but check your local outlet and cable and UHF station listings — it's a TV staple.

Special bonus — Just imagine how good Dan Ackroyd would be in a remake.

3. "Long Gone" — A broken down minor league ballplayer, a sexy female bent on seducing him — hey, haven't we seen this before? Well yes, it is somewhat like "Bull Durham" and it does lift a scene or two from "The Natural" and even from "A Soldier's Story."

where baseball was a peripheral part of the action. Nonetheless, this made-for-HBO movie possesses a certain charm of its own.

FOR MY MONEY, William Petersen (last seen as Joe Sr. in the Kennedy mini-series) is far more convincing as the weary leek than was Kevin Costner. Co-star Virginia Madsen, one of Hollywood's sexiest, least-heralded actresses, also shines.

Special bonus — Comic-magi-

cian Teller (in a speaking role yet) and ex-Laugh In star Henry Gibson as a dim-witted pair of father-and-son club owners.

DRAWBACKS — The ballfield and locker room language, often peppered with obscenity, is authentic — but it might be a tad strong for young viewers and those turned off by such salty verbiage.

4. "Pride of the Yankees" — One of the few baseball biopics worth remembering, Hollywood legend suggests Gary Cooper had never even set foot on a baseball diamond until called upon to play New York Yankees great Lou Gehrig. But Cooper, the epitome of the strong, silent type, is believable as the strong, silent (and tragically doomed) Gehrig. This is a great male tear-jerker, on the order of "Brian's Song."

SPECIAL BONUS — Babe Ruth, Gehrig's teammate and rival, is portrayed by the only actor who could do him justice, Ruth himself.

DRAWBACKS — None really — but bring your Kleenex.

5. "Bingo Long's Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings" — As with "The Natural," the film softens the hard edges of the novel on which it was based. Still, Billy Dee Williams and James Earl Jones are convincing as barnstorming Negro League ball players in the pre- and post-Jackie Robinson era. Their disappointment in being left behind as younger blacks are finally invited into the major leagues is palpable, their love for the game genuine.

DRAWBACKS — The mix of comedy and drama doesn't always work.

Special bonus — Jones is expected to return to the screen when the award-winning play "Fences" comes to the big screen. That's the heart of the line-up. The bench-warmers include:

1. "Major League" — The Cleveland Indians win the pennant. OK, it's another fantasy. While too many subplots crowd the action, this is an enjoyable, if slight, comedy. Charlie Sheen is especially enjoyable as a fast living, fast throwing young pitcher. Maybe he should be back in a sequel.

2. "EIGHT MEN OUT" — This is story of the scandal that broke when eight members of the Chicago White Sox were accused of throwing the 1919 World Series, told in documentary style by filmmaker John Sayles. The lack of a strong central character and the failure to take a stand, either exonerating the ballplayers or damning them, seriously hampers what could have been an outstanding film.

Charlie Sheen gets billing, though David Strathairn nearly saves the day as tormented pitcher Eddie Cleotis.

3. "Damn Yankees" — Made back in the 1950s, when the New York Yankees really did win the pennant year after year, this musical still holds up well. (Although "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" with Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra is a lesser-seen alternative.)

Pullum's: A bit of Jamaica close to home

By Larry O'Connor
staff writer

"Come to Jamaica," the ad says. At Pullum's Place in Detroit, Jamaica comes to you in a bottle. Sure, any bar can throw on a few gaudy calypso records and serve up rum and Cokes with umbrellas.

But for a real taste of the Islands, just ask Carmen Allen of Southfield. He helps operate "reggae night" on Fridays at Pullum's along with fellow Southfield resident Barry Williams.

Allen pulls an unmarked, corked bottle off the shelf. In the vessel are bits and particles of Irish moss, pimento leaves, China brew, raw walnuts and peanuts along with the some fresh ginger. The concoction swirls around in 200 proof rum.

Allen smilingly calls it "Island Tonic." No takers so far. The bottle has sat on the shelf for more than a year.

Owner Gary Pullum shakes his head.

'I go everywhere, mon. I spend two to three days getting everything.'

— Carmen Allen

"That will put curl in your hair," he said.

Allen offers a less toxic alternative. He calls it "The Islander Surprise," which is one of several non-alcoholic drinks offered at the international juice bar.

"The Islander Surprise" consists of mango juice, papaya, guava, moso, pimento leaves, China brew, raw walnuts and peanuts along with the some fresh ginger.

No ashtrays or peanuts atop this bar, just mounds of exotic looking fruit. Allen dutifully names each one in the stack, pointing to papaya, mango, and pickled pear and kiwi with his knife.

ONE MANGLED piece is called "ugli," a tropical fruit consisting

of lemon, orange, lime, grapefruit and mandarin orange. Not exactly stuff to be found in the produce section at the local A&W.

"I go everywhere, mon," said Allen, who is originally from Mandeville, Jamaica. "I spend two to three days getting everything."

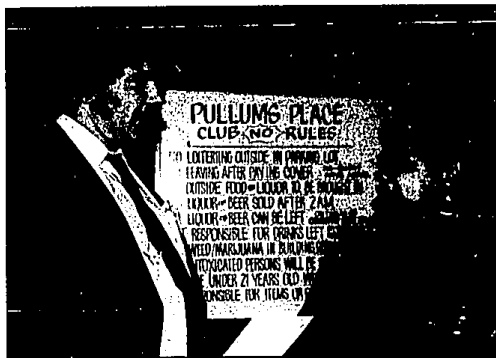
Also, of the alcoholic variety there are Island favorite beers of Red Stripe, Guinness, Heinekens and Corona. In the works is a mix drink called "Pullum's Punch," which consists of fruit juice and rum and will be served in a sea shell.

"We even have 24-inch straws to serve it with," Pullum said.

Drinks, yes, but food? The Island menu at Pullum's includes Jamaican beef patties, vegetarian patties, goat, curried chicken along with red beans and rice.

Pullum's Place on Fridays is about music. Specifically, the sounds of the Caribbean. The club has been offering reggae and other world beat music for three years.

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Owners Gary and Annie Pullum have been providing the sounds and tastes of the Caribbean on Friday nights at Pullum's Place in Detroit for three years.

ART EMANUELE/staff photographer