30 for 30: An Inquiry into Sports Documentaries to Engage in Social History

> *It [sports] can be a place of inspiration that doesn't transcend the political but becomes the political, the place where we see our dreams and aspirations played out in dynamic Technicolor. Politics are remote and alien to the vast majority of people. But the playing field is where we can project our every thought, hope, and fear.*
>
> – Dave Zirin[1]

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IN THE ABOVE QUOTE, Dave Zirin captures the power of sports as an opportunity to connect individuals to the study of history. As history teachers, we look to connect students to the interpretations of past events and how those events inform the present. Recently, in a presentation to classroom teachers, I began by asking the following two basic questions: "What do sports teach?" and "Why might we use sports to teach history?" In response to "What do sports teach?" audience members suggested various concepts from perseverance to fairness and individual rights to rules. In response to "Why might we use sports to teach history?" audience members voiced opportunities to discuss change over time, tolerance, varied points of view, and economics (e.g., monetary value of players). Sports and sports documentaries provide an entry point to discuss difficult ideas evident in the modern era and connect students to historical concepts and content that contains personal, institutional, and national implications.

Murray Nelson identifies sports as a "unifying factor for [local] communities."[2] He asserts, "The study of sports in American history

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is the story of great American themes—racism, sexism, responses to war, demagoguery, sudden economic success, immigration, urban growth, community life, advances in transportation, media hype, and so forth."[3] Thus, sports become one possible narrative through which students can broaden their understandings of the United States. Historians refer to history presented in the form of stories as narratives. There are two forms of historical narratives: traditional and modern. Traditional historical narrative recounts people, events, and motivations in chronological order, while modern historical narrative focuses on trends and conceptual understandings of the past.

Documentary is a form of narrative. Alan Marcus and Jeremy Stoddard found a significant use of documentaries by secondary social studies teachers. Eighty-two percent of secondary social studies teachers reported using documentaries at least once a week.[4] In addition, Marcus explored students' perspectives on documentaries. He found that high school students identified documentaries to be accurate and trustworthy.[5] Documentaries have biases, thus, students need to critically examine these historical resources.

Teachers create environments for students to broaden their understandings and explore history through inquiry. Inquiry is a valuable instructional tool for increasing learning and motivation. Many researchers suggest teaching students to engage in "doing history" or historical inquiry.[6] Historical inquiry involves 1) asking historical questions, 2) collecting and analyzing various sources of evidence, 3) distinguishing the significance of evidence based on the historical question, and 4) developing a historical interpretation. In order to effectively participate in history inquiry, students and teachers "read like historians." In order to "read like a historian,"[7] students read and discuss a wide variety of texts (literary fiction, nonfiction, and informational texts) to achieve better understanding of the past.

Linda Levstik suggests teaching students to engage in "doing history," which involves an emphasis on "sources well scrutinized"—meaning "students pose questions, collect and analyze sources, struggle with issues of significance, and ultimately build their own historical interpretations."[8] Robert Bain acknowledges that it is the teacher who, after reading the literature, is the one left to "design activities that engage students in using such thinking in the classroom."[9] Thus, there are opportunities for teachers to create learning experiences to promote historical inquiry.

NCSS Themes Addressed in *30 for 30*

I. Culture
II. Time, Continuity, and Change
IV. Individual Development and Identity
V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
X. Civic Ideals

Figure 1: National Council for the Social Studies themes addressed in *30 for 30.*

History and social studies teachers are tasked with engaging their students in social science inquiry. The importance of inquiry is reflected in the National Council for the Social Studies' *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards*. These standards are arranged around an *inquiry arc*, in which students develop questions and plan inquiries, apply disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluate sources and draw on evidence, and make their conclusions public and take action.[10]

While historical inquiry can be a powerful tool, implementing it in classrooms can be difficult for the following reasons: 1) the pressure teachers feel to address materials in order to prepare students for standardized assessments;[11] 2) the reliance on necessary content knowledge to enable students to engage in "doing of history";[12] 3) the lack of (perceived) student enthusiasm to explore and examine various sources of evidence to develop an understanding of the past;[13] and 4) the difficulty students encounter when identifying and explaining the significance of evidence in response to their historical questions.

ESPN's *30 for 30* is a documentary series combining sports and inquiry-based presentation of material through which teachers and middle- and high-school students have the opportunity to explore social history as a personal, institutional, and/or national narrative (see **Figure 1**: National Council for the Social Studies themes). In the following sections, I present classroom ideas using three *30 for 30* documentaries—one personal, one institutional, and one national. Keep in mind, each documentary could be told from all three perspectives and the instructional strategies are interchangeable.

Title	Sport	Social Studies Concepts
The 16th Man	South African rugby	• Conflict and cooperation • Segregation • Integration
June 17th, 1994	Multi-sport	• Multi-causal events in history
The Band That Wouldn't Die	Baltimore Colts band	• Culture • Perseverance • Place
Broke	Multi-sport	• Financial choices and decisions • Economic consequences
The Two Escobars	Columbian soccer and drug trade	• Culture • Global consequences • Political systems
Tim Richmond: To the Limit	NASCAR driver diagnosed with AIDS	• Individual rights

Figure 2: Selected ESPN *30 for 30* documentaries.

How *30 for 30* Work

30 for 30 is a series of short films that air on ESPN and serve as case studies of a time and place situated within the world of sports. Each documentary represents a filmmaker's point of view and the story each wants to tell (see **Figure 2** for a list of examples). The documentaries are a reflection of artful narrative and distinct visual style. The *30 for 30* documentaries begin with each filmmaker framing the story they want to tell with a series of images, voice-overs from several individuals close to the story, and often, an overtly stated guiding question for investigation.

Student Viewing Parties and Questions for Inquiry

In order to identify and explain the narrative structure used in many *30 for 30* documentaries, teachers can hold a viewing party. This is simply an opportunity to watch several clips from *30 for 30*

documentaries and have small-group discussions in the classroom. Content-area learning relies on students' abilities to effectively listen, observe and speak.[14] When opportunities for small-group discussions are provided, teachers are able to address the C3 Framework in which (teacher- and student-generated) questions are identified as the "key to student learning."[15] Additionally, the Common Core State Standards for English/Language Arts identify Speaking and Listening standards like "Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation and other information known about the topic to explore ideas under discussion."[16] Begin this lesson by asking students, "What is an inquiry?" Students may say things like, "It is an investigation" or "Something to think about" or simply "questions." Then ask students, "What kinds of questions facilitate inquiry?" Hopefully, students will present a series of compelling and supporting examples. Next, as a class, view the first five minutes or so of a *30 for 30* and ask students to listen for and be able to identify the filmmaker's question for inquiry.

Next, set up viewing stations around the classroom or in the media center so that several documentaries can be shown simultaneously. Organize students into groups of three or four viewing partners and explain that they will be watching the first five minutes of four or five documentaries. Because of the common structure of these documentaries, the guiding questions for the inquiry are introduced in these five minutes. In their small group, students will record the title, the topic, and the inquiry question(s) on a graphic organizer (see **Figure 3**).

Following the viewing party (seeing all documentary clips), students will individually reflect on commonalities among the questions and share with the whole class. Students should recognize the use of "how" and "why" questions. They may also identify the filmmaker's use of additional (supporting) questions. Finally, ask students to discuss, based on the clips they watched, the documentaries they would be most interested in watching from start to finish and why. Students may identify things like the compelling question, topic, time period, or the evidence presented as reasons for wanting to view a particular documentary. Teachers can link these ideas to student-based inquiry in which they should be cognizant of various factors—their questions, topics, time periods, and evidence.

Documentary Title	Topic	Filmmaker's Question for Inquiry
Unmatched		
The Fab Five		
Ghost of Ole Miss		
Reflection: What do you notice about questions across all the documentaries you viewed?		
Which documentary would you most like to view in the entirety? Why?		

Figure 3: Viewing party graphic organizer.

Teaching Personal Narrative with *Unmatched - The Rivalry*

In *Unmatched - The Rivalry*,[17] filmmakers Nancy Stern Winters and Lisa Lax present the growth of women's tennis through the personal stories and relationship of Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova beginning in 1973 to tell a story that has institutional as well as (inter)national implications. This is a story of one of the greatest sports rivalries, told using archival materials and personal conversations between two amazing athletes.

In order to investigate the relationship between Evert and Navratilova and to tell their stories, Winters and Lax utilize several social studies concepts and topics: change, communism, defeat, friendship, gender, rivalry, and sexual orientation. They present the changes in the player's relationship since the early 1970s, from victories, to defeat, and the evolution of their rivalry. Navratilova recounts the pivotal events in her life tangential to tennis, from defecting from Czechoslovakia, to coming out, and the support that Evert provided. In order to address these social studies concepts, the filmmakers invite viewers into seemingly intimate conversations

between Evert and Navratilova as these former competitors—now friends—share memories with one another. Winters and Lax use conversations and stories between Evert and Navratilova as their sources. The athletes share memories across their careers and the intersections of these stories through family and archival films as well as personal pictures.

The results of this particular inquiry are presented in this *30 for 30*. The results help students think about the relationship of the individuals and individuals' stories in order to better understand the complexities of the Cold War. Following the viewing of *Unmatched*, students can conduct their own inquiry about the impact of sports on Cold War personal relationships, as well as institutional relationships ("The Miracle on Ice" U.S. vs. U.S.S.R. hockey game in the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, 1980) and international relationships (the U.S. boycott of the Summer Olympics in Moscow, 1980).

Teaching Institutional Narrative with *The Fab Five*

The Fab Five chronicles the University of Michigan's "Fab Five" basketball team in the early 1990s. The story of this team is told by four of the five players, as well as coaches, sports writers, and cultural icons. The documentary presents two possible views on the "Fab Five": 1) "flashpoint of a cultural rebellion" and 2) "the essence of everything that was wrong with college sports." The overarching question for inquiry is, "What happens to a legacy?" This is a universal question for the study of history.

In the introductory minutes of this documentary, uptempo music plays as quick clips of the "Fab Five" flash on the screen. The music and images are accompanied by a voice over by Mary Sue Coleman, University of Michigan president, explaining, "This is a day of great shame for the University." This is followed by a series of words quickly displayed on the screen, including "banned," "sanctions," "baggy shorts," "trash talk, time out, pride, and scandal." The film also introduces and explores many common social studies/history concepts, including the consequences of actions, cultural rebellion, race, revolution, and threat.

This documentary chronicles "the formation, rise, scandal, and epilogue"[18] of the 1991 basketball recruiting class of the University of Michigan (Juwan Howard, Ray Jackson, Jimmy King, Jalen

Rose, and Chris Webber), using archival footage of each player to document challenging beginnings (e.g., Howard from the southside of Chicago; Rose in the westside of Detroit) to a place in the national spotlight of college athletics. Scandal associated with decision-making runs throughout this narrative, including Rose's ticket for loitering in a crack house, to the team's choice to wear baggy shorts and black socks in an effort to claim something as their own.

Each of these documentary films presents opportunities for teachers and students to "read like a historian"[19]—to source, contextualize, engage in close reading, and corroborate evidence. However, *The Fab Five* is a particularly good opportunity to engage in this process, beginning with sourcing. One hopes that each film compels both students and teachers to think about sourcing the question, "Whose story is being told?" Authorship and voice are significant tools used in this documentary. Of the "Fab Five," only four contribute to this documentary: Juwan Howard, Ray Jackson, Jimmy King, and Jalen Rose; Chris Webber is absent. As a result of the filmmaker's use of authorship and voice, students are positioned to scrutinize the sources being used in this documentary. In attempting to tell a story of the "Fab Five" as a cultural revolution, the documentary makes use of music icons Chuck D and Ice Cube to present the impact of the team beyond the world of sports. As students do a close read of this documentary/text, they may begin to recognize the voices/perspectives that are—and are not—presented.

Similar to the previous example, the results of this inquiry into college sports are presented as a documentary. This documentary provides opportunities for students to react and respond to the bigger themes and associated ideas presented. For example, in 1973, the NCAA lifted a ban on allowing freshman to play in intercollegiate competitions, thus, the "Fab Five" were able to play together in 1991. Ask students, "Do you think there should be restrictions on who can/cannot participate in intercollegiate sports? Explain."

The Fab Five documentary is an opportunity for students to critique a *30 for 30* film—this could be done with many, if not all the documentaries. Have students view the documentary either in class (a majority of films are approximately fifty minutes) or as a homework assignment. As the students are watching the documentary, they should note the following things: 1) guiding question(s) for the documentary; 2) the argument(s) being presented

Prompts for Critique and Evaluation

Overall, what were your reactions to the documentary?

Did the filmmaker answer his/her guiding question(s) through the course of the documentary?

- In what ways was he/she successful in answering the question(s)?
- In what ways was he/she ***not*** successful in answering the question(s)?

How did the filmmaker present their evidence in the documentary?

- In what ways did you trust the evidence the filmmaker used?
- In what ways did you question the evidence the filmmaker used?

Overall, would you recommend this documentary to someone else? Why?

Figure 4: Prompts for critiquing and evaluating a *30 for 30* documentary.

and story/stories being left untold; 3) evidence being presented; and 4) reaction(s) to the film. Using their notes, task students to write a critique or an evaluation of the documentary (see **Figure 4** for possible prompts).

Teaching a National Narrative with *Ghosts of Ole Miss*

In *Ghosts of Ole Miss*, Wright Thompson recounts national events associated with the Civil Rights Movement at the University of Mississippi in 1962 and the impact on present-day Mississippi. These events include the football team going undefeated and the integration of the University. Students can use the viewing guide found in **Appendix A**.

Thompson's inquiry is driven by three questions that are easy for students to identify in the opening minutes (approximately six)

of the documentary: "Why haven't I been taught this [information about the 1962 riots, etc.] in school?" "What is the cost of knowing our past?" "And what is the cost of not knowing our history?" In order to investigate these questions and tell these stories, Thompson challenges viewers to think about issues of equity, perspective, and change over time. In order to address these social studies concepts, Thompson consistently makes connections between Mississippi in 1962 and today. Additionally, he utilizes a variety sources, illustrating the myriad of resources needed to tell this story. Thompson's inquiry begins at the University of Mississippi library and special collections. The sources he uses include records and artifacts from the 1962 riots—from first-hand accounts to archival film. As students view this documentary, they should be prompted to think about how this story fits in with other stories (e.g., Birmingham Church bombings, *Brown v. Board of Education*, The Little Rock Nine, Rosa Parks) and how this informs their larger understandings of the Civil Rights Movement. As with the previous examples, Thompson shares the results of his inquiry through this documentary. It exemplifies a personal, institutional, and national story of race and change over time, and offers students an opportunity to make sense of these varied perspectives.

How Does This Fit?

Over the course of a semester, or even a unit of study, students are presented with a variety of information and possible narratives about the past. Toward the end of a unit, the teacher shows a *30 for 30* film about that time period. For example, *Ghosts of Ole Miss* could be shown at the end of a unit on the Civil Rights Movement. Prior to viewing the film, ask students to complete the left side of a T-chart to review what they know about the Civil Rights Movement using the "5 Ws" approach (**Appendix B**). As they are watching the documentary, prompt students to jot down notes in the right-hand column using the same guiding questions. Following the viewing of the documentary, ask students to "turn and talk" with another student, reviewing their notes and discussing the reflective questions. Finally, to the whole class, ask your students, "Does this documentary fit into what we know about the Civil Rights Movement?" and "What is the value to knowing these stories?"

Classroom *30 for 30* Projects

Students can conduct their own inquiries about social issues associated with a time period you have presented in class from a fairly political perspective. Students will follow the *inquiry arc*: develop questions for inquiry, use disciplinary tools and concepts, gather and evaluate evidence, and present their findings. In this case, the students will structure and present their findings on the *30 for 30* model. The topic will be introduced and the student filmmakers will connect to the topic through their question for inquiry. They will engage with and present a variety of different historical sources, from written documents to oral histories to images and music. Think about the number of students in your class and the amount of time you would like them to have to present their inquiries. For example, if I have thirty-five students in my class, and I would like them to create videos that are five minutes long, I would refer to the assignment as "35 for 5" because there will be thirty-five short films, all of which are five minutes long. Or if a class of thirty is working in groups of three on ten-minute videos, I would refer to the assignment as "10 for 10."

Conclusion

Using *30 for 30* clips strategically helps students understand a time and place historically through personal stories that had an impact on institutions and nations. By drawing attention to these personal stories and promoting careful examination of the *30 for 30* documentaries, teachers can access a valuable classroom resource. Students will be able to reflect on and ask inquiry-based questions, utilize social studies concepts and tools, evaluate evidence, and share their findings.

Notes

1. Dave Zirin, *A People's History of Sports in the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2008), xii.
2. Murry Nelson, "Sports History As a Vehicle for Social and Cultural Understanding in American History," *The Social Studies* 96, no. 3 (May-June 2005): 118.
3. Ibid.
4. Alan S. Marcus and Jeremy D. Stoddard, "Tinsel Town as Teacher: Hollywood Film in the High School History Classroom," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007): 303-330.
5. Alan S. Marcus, "Students Making Sense of the Past: 'It's Almost Like Living the Event,'" in *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film*, ed. Alan S. Marcus (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers, 2007), 121-166.
6. Jere Brophy and Bruce VanSledright, *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, fourth ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010); Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Samuel S. Wineburg, "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of the Cognitive Processes Used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83, no. 1 (March 1991): 73-87.
7. Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).
8. Linda S. Levstik, "Negotiating the History Landscape," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 393-397.
9. Robert Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 334.
10. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 17.
11. Linda M. McNeil, *Contradictions of Control: School Structure and School Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1986).
12. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).
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14. Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Barbara Knighton, *A Learning Community in the Primary Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Nell K.

Duke and V. Susan Bennett-Armistead, *Reading and Writing Informational Text In The Primary Grades* (New York: Scholastic, 2003).

15. NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework*, 17.

16. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (Washington, D.C.: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1.a.

17. *30 for 30: Unmatched - The Rivalry*, made available for free at YouTube by ESPN, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qf3L3bjFT-o>.

18. Thomas Neumann, "Michigan's Fab Five in their Own Words," ESPN, 11 March 2011, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=neumann/110311_fab_five_documentary&sportCat=ncb>.

19. Wineburg, Martin, and Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian*.

Appendix A

Viewing Guide for *Ghosts of Ole Miss*

1. What are Wright Thompson's (the filmmaker's) questions for inquiry?

2. Identify the social studies concepts and tools Thompson employs to conduct this inquiry.

3. Evidence—complete the table below:

What types of evidence are used to conduct this inquiry?	What is the benefit of using this piece of evidence?	What is the challenge of using this piece of evidence?	How does the filmmaker use this evidence?

4. What are Thompson's conclusions?

C3: Evaluate citizens' and institutions' effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at the local, state, national, and/or international level. (31)

Appendix B

The Civil Rights Movement T-Chart

Class Experiences (lectures, discussions, readings, etc.)		**Documentary** *Ghosts of Ole Miss*
	Who?	
	What?	
	When?	
	Where?	
	Why?	
	How?	

Identify the information that is similar in the left and right columns.

Identify the information that is different in the left and right columns.

In what ways does the different information help you understand the Civil Rights Movement in new ways?

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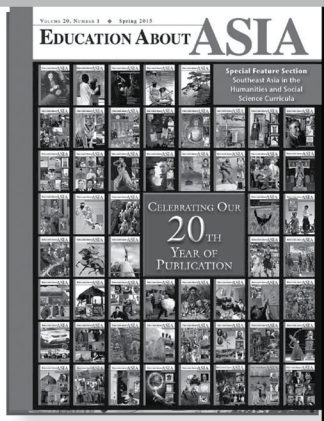

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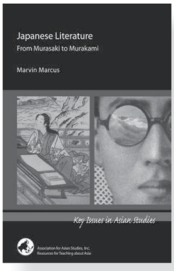

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