

SANIBEL SHELL SHOCKED

The Greatest Baseball Movie Ever Made

By Art Stevens

As an avid baseball fan, I've seen lots of movies about the sport. There have been bio-epics about such legendary baseball icons as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Monty Stratton and Christy Mathewson. But in this humble sports fan's opinion no movie about baseball is as riveting as "The Natural" starring Robert Redford, made in 1984.

And no scene in any baseball movie is as electric as the final one in this movie. I fast forward to this last scene every time the movie appears on TV. Redford has never been better and the theater of pure baseball has never been captured as artistically.

The movie is based on a novel by Bernard Malamud. Not too many great sports novels are translated well to the screen, but one of the exceptions is "The Natural." The novel and the movie were based loosely on actual events in the life of Eddie Waitkus, a first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies in the early 1950's. Waitkus was in the prime of his career when a mentally disturbed baseball groupie shot him when he opened the door to his hotel room.

Initially, he was given up for dead. But Waitkus recovered and actually resumed his baseball career with the Phillies. In the movie, the Redford character Roy Hobbs experienced a similar career imploding incident. He was a promising pitcher in the 1920's with a huge fastball when he was also shot by a delusional female fan. Although the shot wasn't fatal, it appeared that it did enough destruction to permanently derail his baseball career.

Fade out, years pass and one day a now older Roy Hobbs mysteriously shows up in the locker room of the New York Knights, a fictionalized major league baseball team. He begs the manager, played by Wilford Brimley, to give him a shot at making the team. Hobbs pleads with the manager to have one of the team's pitchers throw as hard as he can to him to prove that he could hit major league pitching. The manager looks him over and is immediately dismissive. But there's something about Hobbs that intrigues him. He sends one of his pitchers out to audition this mysterious new arrival assuming that this aging ball player would fail the test and go back from whence he came.

Instead Hobbs hits every one of the pitcher's hardest fast balls out of the ball park. The manager decides to take a chance on this aging rookie and gives him a reserve spot on the team. Hobbs sits on the bench waiting for his opportunity. It comes one day when one of the starting outfielders has a tragic accident on the field. Hobbs is told to take his place. A star is born. Hobbs becomes an instant legend when he begins to hit mammoth

home runs day in and day out to lead what was a struggling team to the brink of the National League pennant.

There's a story in between about romance, gamblers, and bribes but when watching this film I always fast forward to that extraordinary final scene.

The remnants of Hobbs's old gunshot wound begin to play a role in the movie's denouement. Blood begins oozing out of Hobbs's side and he's hospitalized during some very important final games for his team. And once again, without Hobbs in the line up his team struggles. But the team still manages to be tied for first place on the last day of the season necessitating a one –game play off which will decide the pennant and which team will go to the World Series.

Hobbs leaves his hospital bed to play in this most important game. Nothing will deter him from his destiny. It's a night game and the massive klieg lights over the grandstand seats in right field will soon play a major role in the movie's climax. Hobbs's team falls behind two to nothing and he himself seems to be rusty and hurting. He strikes out badly his first few times up.

But then it's the last of the ninth inning and his team is still behind by the same score. Two of his team mates manage to get on base. So with two out and two men on base up comes Roy Hobbs.

He swings and misses badly at two pitches fired by a flame throwing young relief pitcher who is cool and determined. He then hits a long foul ball down the right field line and breaks the bat he had made himself in his younger days which he's called "Wonderboy."—the same bat he's used throughout his amazing rookie season. As a result, the plot is at a crossroads. Does the symbolism of the broken bat mean that Hobbs is destined to fail? Or will fate give him a second chance? Can he succeed with a different bat? He looks imploringly at the team's cherubic bat boy.

"Bring me a winner, Joey," he exhorts. The bat boy trots over to the team's bat rack and picks out a bat that he hopes in his heart will enable Hobbs to give it the kind of ride that will win the pennant for the team. When he brings the new bat to Hobbs, the two of them stare at each other trying to project calm and confidence. Hobbs smiles reassuringly at the bat boy and digs in. It's do or die. He takes his position in the batter's box with resolve etched across his face. Before the pitch is thrown Hobbs winces in pain, probes the side of his uniform and sees blood seeping through it from his old wound.

Hobbs is a wounded warrior striving for a last gasp of heroism that has been denied him all his life. Hobbs understands that this is his penultimate moment. His entire fate and history have taken him to this point.

Before the pitch, a huge bolt of electricity ignites the dark sky as though a signal from above. The symbolism is clear. The roaring home crowd exhorts its hero to do something dramatic and special. And as the pitch floats up to the plate in movie-style slow motion, Hobbs swings. There's the unique sound of bat and ball colliding and the ball sails high and deep into the night to the furthest part of the stadium and crashes into

one of the klieg lights. The light shatters, sparks fly, and fragments of glass rain down onto the field like confetti and fireworks. Hobbs circles the bases slowly, having just hit the game winning three-run home run that wins the pennant for his team. The crowd erupts, his teammates cheer and tears flow from the eyes of the crusty old team manager.

The look on Hobbs's face is that of redemption – redemption for a career nipped in the bud that could have propelled him to legendary status as one of the great baseball players of all time. This home run and the pennant it generated for his team is his coda.

Every time I watch this final scene from “The Natural” I feel inspired. Heck, if Roy Hobbs can achieve glory and propel his team to victory then that's all the motivation I need. I decide to challenge my friends to a game of tennis and call each in turn and say “let's get it on.” And one by one they ask me if I've been watching “The Natural” again.