

**Bull Durham Film Analysis**

Kathryn M. Carlson

Department of Graduate Studies, University of Western States

SPP 6550: Sport Psychology

Dr. Walter McCutcheon

December 1, 2024

## **Bull Durham Film Analysis**

### **Introduction**

The film *Bull Durham* (Shelton, 1988) portrays a minor-league baseball team with a talented pitcher, Ebby Calvin 'Nuke' Laloosh, who has performance issues. The manager brings in a new catcher, 'Crash' Davis, to teach Nuke how to harness his talent with the hopes that he will improve. Meanwhile, a team groupie, Annie Savoy chooses Nuke as her student and lover for the season. Throughout the film, situations and conversations represent sports psychology theories and concepts. This paper will analyze and apply film scenes to the following psychological concepts: self-presentation, perfectionism, burnout, peer and family influence, leadership, moral behavior, performance anxiety and coping, achievement goals, self-determination, and attributions and performance. Examples from the film can be exaggerated at times, but there are lessons to be learned from the following scenes.

### **Self-Presentation**

On a bus traveling to an away game, Crash becomes mad at Nuke for playing guitar and loudly singing. Crash takes the guitar away.

**Nuke:** How come you don't like me?

**Crash:** Because you don't respect yourself, which is your problem. But you don't respect the game, and that's my problem. You got a gift.

**Nuke:** I got a what?

**Crash:** You got a gift. When you were a baby, the Gods reached down and turned your right arm into a thunderbolt. You got a Hall-of-Fame arm, but you're pissing it away.

**Nuke:** I ain't pissing nothing away. I got a Porsche already; a 911 with a quadrophonic

Blaupunkt.

**Crash:** Christ, you don't need a quadrophonic Blaupunkt! What you need is a curveball!

Nuke already feels like a Major League-quality pitcher. He uses self-promotion tactics, like throwing pitches that showcase his power, buying an expensive car, and ignoring his faults when he falls short. His self-perception relies on his possible self rather than his actual self. Nuke displays his ideal self with material possessions to appear like the player he believes he can be.

This scene accurately represents my understanding of self-presentation. Self-presentation is a “process that occurs when people try to monitor and regulate the impressions of them that others form” (Horn, 2021). Nuke is using his possessions, clothes, and confidence to influence the opinions that others have of him. Crash is trying to teach him that his current strategies are unhelpful and he should instead work on his curveball. Athletes often blur their current abilities and their potential abilities. When these two aspects conflict with each other, athletes will display appearances to show their ideal selves rather than their actual selves.

### **Perfectionism**

Nuke has been pitching well during one game. After a well-pitched inning, he comes back to the dugout and says to Crash, “I was great, huh?”

**Crash:** Your fastball was up. Your curveball is hanging. In the Show, they would have ripped you.

**Nuke:** Can't you even let me enjoy the moment?

**Crash:** The moment's over.

Crash is demonstrating a push toward perfectionism. Instead of recognizing Nuke's improvement, he only criticizes his mistakes and shortcomings.

Perfectionism is “considered a personality characteristic that reflects compulsive striving for flawlessness” and can include a tendency for compulsive striving and harsh self-critical appraisal (Horn, 2021). Many within the psychology community debate whether perfectionism requires both aspects. The debate on whether perfectionism is positive or negative persists among practitioners. However, the “core defining features of perfectionism reflect an extreme and irrational form of thinking and behavior” and negatively affect motivation and achievement striving (Horn, 2021). Crash is using this compulsive striving to help prepare Nuke for Major-League competition.

I don’t believe this movie was the best way to show perfectionism. Better examples can come from the movie *Center Stage* (2000). In this movie, dancers and teachers chase perfection through extra practice, unhealthy eating habits, and social manipulation, which we can see in real performance situations.

### **Burnout**

When Crash first appears in the film, he mentions that he is too old and experienced for the role for which the team wants him. They brought him back to help Nuke develop as a pitcher. But he becomes bitter because he wants to further his career. Throughout the movie, Crash revisits this sentiment. He has worked too hard to continue in minor-league baseball. The new role in the Durham Bulls does not fulfill his needs or expectations. However, Crash’s goal would be returning to a Major League team himself.

Crash and many movie players believe their self-worth is contingent on achievement. They want to be promoted to Major League teams, set new records, or achieve more attention from the league. This constant chase leaves the players open to burnout. Burnout can occur when “perceived worth is brought into question” (Horn, 2021). Crash shows these tendencies because

he is a veteran and is given the role of helping a young player. Once Nuke is promoted to the new team, Crash is released, finds a new team, but retires soon after. He later notes that he will look for a manager position at a different baseball team next season.

This is an excellent example of athletic burnout. Many athletes become emotionally, physically, and socially exhausted in pursuing perfection. Coaches and staff working with athletes should build systems that protect against burnout. Systems should include avoiding overtraining, recovery, mental support, and resistance against perfectionism.

### **Peer and Family Influence**

During the Durham game against the Fayetteville Generals, Crash and Nuke clash on calling pitches. After an opponent's home run, Crash laughs as he approaches the mound. He confesses to Nuke that he told the batter to expect a fastball since Nuke refused his calls. Crash used this experience to convince Nuke to trust him playfully.

Nuke feels accepted by his team members up to this point. This moment in the movie shows a slight shift. Crash doesn't look up to Nuke and forces him to show trust and respect for Crash. When both of them call for the ball from teammates, it is thrown to Crash, not Nuke. The Interpersonal Theory (Sullivan, 1953) can be demonstrated in Crash's efforts to make Nuke a better team player. Even though Nuke feels accepted, his motivations are egocentric. This turning point helps him make better decisions for the team and trust the other team members.

I like this illustration of the Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry. Many young, talented athletes have difficulty shifting their focus to the team. If the skill is learned early in their careers, athletes can become substantial additions to teams. If the athletes lack the maturity to adjust, their careers can suffer. This theory doesn't mean that an athlete will lack success. Many professional athletes outscore others in games. However, this theory suggests that athletes are

better when they are committed to their team's success. Not every high-scoring athlete will lead her team to championship victories.

### **Leadership**

After a Durham loss, Coach Joe “Skip” Riggins, approaches Crash in the locker room.

Crash had hit a home run.

**Skip:** I don't know what to do with these guys. I beg. I plead. I try to be a nice guy. I'm a nice guy. But I don't...

**Crash:** Scare 'em.

After this short conversation, Skip brings all the players into the shower and seeks to inspire them through insults (calling the team “lollygaggers”). Skip is searching for a motivational model for his team. He tries to lean on the three principles of Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan et al., 2000). He explains that his kindness permitted behaviors due to his belief in each player's competence. He has noticed that his leadership style was permissive and not effective in this situation. So, when that fails, he uses extrinsic motivation to rally the team.

Many coaches utilize extrinsic motivation for their team. They use positive motivators (rewards, praise, and bonuses) and negative motivators (threats, insults, and deadlines). I have noticed that extrinsic motivators work well with younger athletes but lose effectiveness when athletes reach adolescence. So, seeing a coach use these tactics for a minor league baseball team is unrealistic. It could cause a short-term boost, but motivation will only last with other motivational tactics. I think it would be more effective for elite coaches to foster environments where the three psychological needs are met through need-supportive behaviors.

### **Moral Behavior**

Annie's monologue opens the film with the premise that she only believes in the religion of Baseball. She lists the guidelines she follows each season to help her adhere to her "religion." As she follows her rules, she believes that she is helping the team and the players by supporting the team, sleeping with one player each season, and offering baseball advice to players during games. With her prosocial behavior and motivations, Annie demonstrates structural-development theories because she uses her moral reasoning to justify behaviors that could be considered questionable. "Structural developmental theorists consider the perpetrator's intentions to be fundamental in determining the morality of an action" (Horn, 2021). Her character is interesting because she has a strong moral identity that protects her from guilt or shame others may place on her. In a different light, her behavior of hanging around the ballpark and sleeping with players could be considered immoral. In her mind, her intrinsic motivation to help the team justifies her behavior. However, her behavior and fulfillment are not sustainable since she is motivated towards achievement-based goals.

It's not until Annie develops feelings for Crash that she reexamines that moral identity and adjusts her belief system. This representation of a moral identity and moral reasoning is an exaggerated case. Many fans would not have the money, time, or interest to fully invest in following a minor league team to the same degree as Annie. Instead, many could interpret Annie's dedication to the team as an obsessive passion because it dominates her time, thoughts, and actions.

### **Performance Anxiety/Arousal and Coping**

Early in the film, Nuke's self-talk reveals that he has performance anxiety. He displays "negative expectations about the performance and fear of failure" (Horn, 2021). He fails to

manage his performance anxiety, and it is reflected in his pitches. Nuke throws wild pitches during games, and the team continues to lose. As they leave for road games, Annie gives him a garter to help him “see things differently.” She says, “You’ve been pitching out of the wrong side of your brain. This will help put things on the right side.” Annie recognizes Nuke’s performance anxiety and offers him a coping mechanism in the form of a distracting technique. Nuke doesn’t use the garters at first and continues to perform poorly. His inability to control his performance arousal affects his pitching.

When he finally uses the garters, his self-talk shifts to things like “this underwear feels kinda sexy.” This distracting technique is a method of coping because his focus is split between the feel of the garters and his involvement in the game. Coping can be defined as “the ongoing efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands that a person appraises as taxing” (Horn, 2021). Until this point, Nuke’s behavior has suggested that he has a high level of performance anxiety, low coping skills, and achievement-based goals. Thus, a distracting and denial coping technique should be an appropriate approach to his performance anxiety.

I think this representation of Nuke’s performance anxiety and coping is good in theory. However, it presents coping mechanisms as a quick fix. While we may see an initial improvement when introducing coping mechanisms, quality coping mechanisms can take practice and time before being effective in high-stress situations such as athletic performance.

### **Achievement Goals**

The first time that we see Crash step up to bat, his self-talk represents Performance-Approach goals. He wants to show that he is a better player than the pitcher. After hitting a foul ball, he looks at the pitcher and says, “Throw that shit again, Meat.” He does this to get inside the pitcher’s head and bait him. During this game, Crash strikes out, but we see similar self-talk

throughout the film. Crash leaves the dugout in a different game and says, “I’m taking him downtown!” Crash constantly compares himself with his teammates and opponents by showing he is a better player in knowledge, skill, and leadership. He works hard to display his competence in this manner.

“Performance-approach goals would be oriented toward the attainment of normative competence, winning or comparing favorably against others” (Horn, 2021). Key components of Performance-Approach goals are extrinsic motivation and social comparison. Unfortunately, there aren’t many examples of task-orientation in the movie. So, we don’t have evidence that supports or negates whether Crash also has mastery goal orientation. If he does have task or mastery orientation goals, we would generally expect him to have high competence and “experience a more adaptive profile of motivational outcomes” (Horn, 2021). The movie lacks evidence to show these parts of Crash’s character. We would have to assume that if he is entirely focused on these performance-approach goals, it can lead to perfectionism and burnout.

This is a good representation of athletes with similar goal orientation. They focus on showing competence rather than mastery. This attitude can affect their ability to pursue after setbacks, social-moral functioning, and effort levels (Horn, 2021).

### **Self-Determination**

On the bus after a game, Nuke approaches Crash and asks for more advice. He says, “Teach me something new, man. I need to learn.” Nuke is open to learning because his three basic needs have been met: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. At this point in the film, Nuke shows a new level of motivation. Competence is the “need to interact effectively within the environment” (Horn, 2021), and Nuke has this need fulfilled when he improves as a pitcher and the Durham Bulls start winning.

Autonomy refers to “self-endorsed” behaviors (Horn, 2021), and Nuke has chosen to listen to Crash and learn from him. It’s crucial for Nuke to feel and show others that he has decided to listen to Crash. Even though it may look like Crash is controlling Nuke and his decisions (the pitches), Nuke chooses to listen to Crash and establish his autonomy in this situation. Nuke is displaying his *autonomous dependence* on Crash’s advice and leadership. *Autonomously dependent* would be when a person goes to another for help (University of Rochester, 2013). Relatedness is feeling connected and important to a community, and Nuke could feel like he has this need fulfilled in two different ways. He could feel like the team community and fans are connecting well with him because he is helping the team win. He could also have this need fulfilled by his growing connection with Crash. When these two characters were introduced at the film's beginning, they did not connect well. As they worked together and Nuke improved, their relationship and relatedness also improved.

This scene is a good example of motivation becoming more substantial when basic psychological needs are met. When these three basic needs are met, motivation increases in quality and positivity.

### **Attributions & Performance**

Annie and Nuke play “catch” in her backyard one afternoon. Nuke tries to seduce Annie, but she convinces him to “take all that sexual energy and kind of hold on to it for a few hours and then rechannel it into [Nuke’s] pitching tonight.” Nuke did very well that night, and the Durham Bulls started on a twelve-game winning streak. Nuke attributed his performance to his abstinence. Nuke demonstrates his perception of performance control, which “refers to people’s perceptions or beliefs about the causative factors for their performance outcomes within achievement contexts” (Horn, 2021). In this example, Nuke admits a positive internal attribution

when he says his abstinence has contributed to his performance enhancement. To him, this is a stable, controllable factor that has worked for him. Crash encourages this thought process. But, Annie disagrees and tells him that this belief is misguided. When Annie confronts Crash, he tells her that it doesn't matter why a player *thinks* they are playing well. If they have a reason, it helps them perform well.

While Nuke's attribution may be misguided, Crash explains how attributions affect an athlete's performance. The "explanations are hypothesized to have significant impact on people's expectancies for future outcome. In turn, these reactions are prime determinants of their future motivated behavior" (Horn, 2021). This may be an exaggerated example of attributions. More often, we would see athletes attribute good performance to hard work, dedication, and practice. While we could also see athletes attribute poor performance to injury, age, or officiating.

### **Reflection and Conclusion**

I did not enjoy analyzing "Bull Durham" and applying it to the different sports psychology theories we learned in class. I felt like many other films could have illustrated the theories. The following are suggestions for some of the theories and principles used in class. I think that these can represent the concepts better.

- **Self-presentation:** In "The Dark Knight," Bruce Wayne chooses his outfit, voice, and symbol (the bat) to intimidate and scare potential criminals. He uses that fear to fight for causes that are important to him. Most superhero movies could show this.
- **Perfectionism:** I mentioned that Center Stage would have been a better example of this concept. But, Black Swan also shows the dangerous aspects of perfectionism. At the sacrifice of her mental and physical health, Nina is found bleeding from an unintentional self-inflicted wound. When asked what happened, she responds, "I felt it. It was perfect."

She chases this idea of perfection throughout the film and finally finds it when she sacrifices her life.

- **Burnout:** “Next Goal Wins” portrays Thomas Rongen who deals with burnout and feeling undervalued at his new position.
- **Peer and Family Influence:** Peer and family influence can be shown in scenes from “Mean Girls.” Cady’s parents encourage her to be herself. In contrast, she finds friends that encourage problematic attitudes and behaviors.
- **Leadership:** “Remember the Titans” demonstrates leadership when Gerry connects with Julius as a teammate and defends him against the other teammates against integration.
- **Moral Behavior:** “I, Tonya” illustrates the moral behavior we expect from athletes and how society reacts when they fail to meet these standards.
- **Performance Anxiety and Coping:** “Endless Summer” shows performance anxiety when surfers encounter dangerous waves and difficult situations.
- **Achievement Goals:** “The Blind Side” shows Michael Oher’s goal orientation while he works through challenges with school and football.
- **Self-Determination:** “The Truman Show” is a story about a man who believes that his core beliefs and three basic needs have been undermined by a show built around him.
- **Attributions & Performance:** “Dodgeball” shows a team with little chance of winning but works hard to beat a far superior team.

“Bull Durham” demonstrated many stereotypes of sports psychology theories and concepts. It would have been nice to study films and scenes where the stories could be like situations we will face as future professionals and practitioners. I think that the scenes suggested in this reflection section would be an improvement to the assigned film for this assignment.

### Reference List

- Horn, T. S. (2021). *Advances in Sport and Exercise Psychology* (4th ed.). Human Kinetics
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68.  
<https://doi-org.uws.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Shelton, R. (Director). (1988). *Bull Durham* [Film]. Origin Pictures.
- Sullivan, H.S. (1953). *The interpersonal theory of psychiatry*. New York, NY: Norton.
- University of Rochester, (2013, July 1). *Highlights of the Opening Remarks from the 5th Conference on Self-Determination Theory* [Video]. YouTube.  
<https://youtu.be/C4E10e8zIkw?si=qaaejjUtOee7xyhd>