

How Interactions Between Disney and Sports Inform the Disney Narrative

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Author's Preface

As my Capstone for the University of Wyoming Honors College, I have written a research paper exploring the interconnections between Disney and sports as two dominant aspects of American culture. This project began in a class by Dr. Susan Aronstein on Disney Discourse and evolved into a more in-depth exploration of these interconnections as they pertain to race, class, and the Disney version American Dream. Chapter One of this paper will explore several of the ways that Disney has curated its relationship with American athletics in order to maintain existing structures of power with respect to race and class. Though Disney has made strides towards presenting itself as representative of the universal childhood experience, it utilizes its relationship with sports to enforce systemic issues of race and class that prevent that from being the case. Chapter Two is a close reading of the 1992 film *The Mighty Ducks* and further exploration of the franchise. It comes to the conclusion that Disney uses its relationship with sports to present a Disney version of the American Dream that advocates for childhood innocence in order to avoid conversations of race and class that accompany the adult world and challenge Disney's notion that hard work is the only necessary component to achieving success. Though the film acknowledges systemic issues of race and class, in allowing the underprivileged Ducks team to see success over affluent, White opponents, the film dismisses any challenges that could be associated with their marginalizations. The two chapters connect through their assertions that Disney ultimately advocates for the maintenance of existing structures of power in order to market itself to the populations that it can most benefit from through merchandising, film revenue, and other commercial endeavors.

Chapter 1

In the American cultural framework, Disney and athletics have emerged as two dominant factors, particularly in crafting childhood identity. The two similarly rely on fanship, and Disney has intentionally formed a relationship between them which enhances this fanship. Through the various ways that Disney connects itself to both real and fictional sports teams, it is able to distort the line between what is real and what is Disney in order to not only market its products but also to influence children into adopting the expectations of behavior that align with Disney's world view. Despite The Walt Disney Company's attempts to present itself as a universal childhood experience, Disney enforces a narrative of the American Dream through its relationship with sports that actively excludes lower-income children and children of color in order to affirm existing power structures of race and class.

Since its creation in the 1920s, The Walt Disney Company has grown in its influence on American cultural identity and continues to provide American children with values and expectations to take into their adult lives. Though at its creation, the company's productions tended to impose fewer moral messages, this changed in the 1930s when "both [Walt Disney] and his enterprise emerged as reassuring symbols of the American way of life" (Watts 143). Disney productions went from the simple cartoons that characterized the early years to integrating messages to teach younger generations. "Experts on child-raising and psychology publicly lauded his films for their healthy impact on young viewers, while newspapers praised him for refusing to license his characters to advertise liquor or tobacco" (Watts 145). The general consensus began to emerge that Walt Disney and his productions were able to have a moral influence on the children to whom they were targeted. One major aspect of these moral messages was an endorsement of the United States and the American Dream. As consumerism grew in the United States, this influence extended itself beyond moral messages into the creation of mass merchandising that set Disney apart from other production companies at the time

(Watts 148-149). The simultaneous sales of products and values became the model that Disney continues to rely on today.

This influence only continued to grow as the emergence of new technology allowed Disney to pursue innovative new exploits. In the 1950s, Disney expanded into television, and one of its earliest television specials was a Christmas special entitled “One Hour in Wonderland” (Watts 363). The decision for a Christmas special is significant due to the associations that Christmas has with childhood, family, consumerism, and now Disney. Christmas allows consumerism to become an expression of childhood and family that Disney takes advantage of when marketing itself as the ultimate creator of childhood experiences. Christmas is a time when the purchase of products, allows consumerism to become a necessary component to childhood spirit. These are two important aspects of Disney’s message. It was also during the 1950s that *The Mickey Mouse Club* first aired (Watts 369). Here, Disney was able to explicitly exemplify the ideal boy and girl to the audiences of children across the nation. One of the most significant markers of growth during this period was the creation of Disneyland (Watts 383). Unlike other production companies, Walt Disney had envisioned and created a mecca of fun and excitement for American children. Beyond this, Disneyland served as a place where families could go for children to enjoy and parents to return to their childhoods, including through the purchase of Disney-branded products. Disneyland’s creation is one of the largest markers of the way in which The Walt Disney Company was able to distort children’s perceptions of real and fake. Because of this, they are able to sell the Disney version of events that they use to enforce narratives about American culture and to maintain their status as a quintessential part of the American childhood experience. Here, the characters from their television are able to interact with them in real life. Disneyland is simultaneously in this world and a world entirely of its own in which Disney values are presented. The ability to distort reality or to “Disneyfy” is critical to the company’s success because it allows Disney to shape children’s

perceptions not only of Disney productions but of the world as a whole. In doing so, Disney is able to romanticize history and rid children's views of American history of anything they find unsavory or counter to their portrayal of the American Dream and the idealized American experience. Main Street, USA seeks to represent an ideal American city and intentionally is lined with stores full of Disney products and merchandise. It is intentionally reminiscent of a time past but lacks any of the problems associated with that time, including racism. By crafting itself as an expression of an ideal American childhood experience, both for children and their families through an appeal to nostalgia, Disney intentionally ignores any issues that contradict its portrayal of this experience, particularly issues of race and class.

Today, 67 years after Disneyland first opened, Disney's influence has not dwindled. Though the market has expanded with the emergence of other children's media production companies including Dreamworks, Nickelodeon, and PBS Kids, Disney is still uniquely situated in the scope of its influence over the American conception of childhood. Disney has managed to remain synonymous with the American childhood experience. In 2019, Disney created its own streaming network Disney+, and it was an immediate success. Within the first day of the service, 10 million people had already subscribed, and it is estimated that the service will have 230 to 260 million subscribers by 2024 (Hyde et al). The success of The Walt Disney Company in its expansion into streaming reveals the influence that it is able to have today. With tens of millions of people consuming Disney content every day, the messages of Disney films, television shows, and documentaries are more readily available than ever before. New Disney films are able to be consumed side-by-side with those that would have characterized the childhoods of the parent and even grandparent generations. Disney encourages the consumption of its products which are only available for streaming on their paid platform in order to connect to the inner child of all members of the family. Because of this, content from years ago is still being viewed by

today's children due to the nostalgia of the older people in their lives. Representations of race and class from previous Disney films still influence children today despite Disney labeling some of them as problematic with a warning placed before many films on the platform. The nostalgia that comes from the company's ability to market itself as essential to the American childhood experience allows problematic narratives to continually be shown regardless of the social conditioning that these narratives perpetuate. Disney's reliance on nostalgia combined with their representations of race and class in America work together to perpetuate these narratives and to maintain existing power structures in the United States.

Equally significant to Disney in the American childhood experience is athletics, and though the two do not seem directly connected, Disney has made strides to associate itself with sports through merchandising partnerships, the creation of innumerable sports films, and ownership of sporting-related companies and teams. Just as with Disney, Americans tend to identify heavily with sports, particularly during their youth. According to a 2019 study by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 60% of U.S. youth participate in sports (Hyde et al e207). Though many American children participate in sports, the study identifies disparities in participation based on race and class, particularly among younger children. These disparities are significant because they reveal that there is larger participation among White males, increasing with income bracket (Hyde et al e207). Though athletics tend to be a defining aspect of American childhood, this is particularly so for the demographic that has the most access to the necessary equipment and other costs associated with participating in sports. Disney values these associations with sports because they appeal to the demographic of children that play them most. Additionally, sports present an ideal avenue for the projection of the narrative of the American Dream that is so frequently featured in Disney productions. Because sports are often presented as a place in which hard work matters above all else, they provide an opportunity for Disney

to assert the importance of effort over any societal constraints of race and class despite the clear associations they both have to participation in athletics.

Beyond participating in sports, American culture also surrounds watching sports, and this viewership is primarily where Disney has primarily formed its relationships with American athletics. The Olympics and World Cup as well as more-regional sporting events bolster support for the United States through patriotism and team pride. In 1996, Disney expanded its scope by purchasing ESPN, one of the largest sports broadcasting networks (Fabrikant). This provided the Disney company with marketing opportunities across a new platform as well as the ability to use real athletes to further distort reality in producing its many sports films. According to Forbes, 90% of the most streamed programs on Disney-owned networks in 2020 were sporting events (Yakowicz). Since this partnership, Disney has used the relationship for cross-media marketing opportunities. For example, when promoting the Disney film *Hercules* in 1997, Disney created a website for the film that featured the “OSPN: Olympus Sports Panhellenic Network,” creating a synergy between the fictional film and the real-life ESPN that they own (Wasco 62-63). The Walt Disney Company’s ownership of ESPN has allowed for many such intersections to be created and prevented. Disney has been accused of not allowing competing films to be advertised on ESPN in order to protect the Disney brand (Wasco 66). Though when it was first purchased ESPN was simply a traditional broadcasting network, streaming has allowed the company to expand its scope even further. Alongside Disney+, ESPN+ has seen success in its platform outside of the previous reliance on cable. “According to the network, ESPN has seen a 23% increase in viewership among millennials (the 18-34 age group) year-over-year when live streaming and out-of-home viewing is counted. In the 25-54 demographic, the gain was 18%” (Spain). This includes increases in viewership of the NFL, college football, and the NBA. Promoting both its own namesake product and its subsidiary products, the Walt Disney Company has created The Disney Bundle that includes streaming networks

Disney+, ESPN+, and Hulu, which it acquired partial ownership of in 2019 (Sherman). Both ESPN and Hulu have exclusive rights to stream sporting events, and Disney's ability to control what is advertised during these events gives them the power to influence those who are watching. The commercials for the bundle show the Disney team that has been assembled by placing beloved characters alongside real athletes. In showing famous or exciting moments in American sports history, Disney simultaneously appeals to American sports fanship, Disney fanship, and patriotism. This is significant because patriotism is essential to Disney's message. The Disney version of patriotism encourages an unquestioning loyalty that erases systemic issues of race and class.

The most significant televised sporting event in the United States is the Super Bowl, and Disney has become an anticipated element of this event through its iconic faux-spontaneous advertisement. The Super Bowl is an important event in American culture and has become a national holiday and annual social event due to the sport's significance. In 2022, the Super Bowl garnered over 112 million viewers, making it the most-watched televised event in two years and the most-streamed Super Bowl ever (Dixon). The Super Bowl has become synonymous with advertising, with many people tuning in just to watch the outlandish and over-the-top commercials. "The social context of Super Bowl viewing also favors ad watching. People view the game in groups...According to Hallmark cards, there are more social gatherings around the Super Bowl than any other event. A partial explanation for the evolution of the game as a 'communal ritual' may be the pre-event advertising that urges consumers to treat the Super Bowl as a big party" (McCalister 408). Though many of the advertisements have become anticipated due to their yearly appearances such as Budweiser, one of the most notable Super Bowl advertisements does not come in the form of a traditional commercial. In 1987, The Walt Disney Company debuted its now-famous Super Bowl commercial tradition with Phil Simms of the New York Giants. It begins with highlights of Simms accompanied by the Disney song "When You Wish Upon a

Star” and is followed by the question “Phil Simms, you have just won the Super Bowl. What are you going to do next?” to which Simms exclaims, “I’m Going to Disney World” (“I’m Going to Disney World”-first ad, 1987). Since this original version of the advertisement, the saying has become an expected tradition of the event and has appeared in almost every Super Bowl since. Each year that the advertisement has appeared, it has remained almost identical to the original Phil Simms commercial in video clips and in the orchestral “When You Wish Upon a Star.” This relationship is significant because it connects American sports fanship with Disney’s commercialism and blurs the line between what is real and what is Disney. Disney relies on the fact that those watching, particularly children, will look up to the players proclaiming the Disney parks as the ultimate destination to aspire towards. The socioeconomic ties to American sports participation are not insignificant in this partnership. American youth who value Disney or the players are more likely to be able to mimic their athleticism or their trip to the park if they come from a higher income bracket. In this way, Disney markets itself to the economically advantaged in order to promote its commercial interests. Despite having the players proclaim Disney as a universal goal to aspire towards, the company’s endorsement of consumerism has a clear demographic which is more particular and goes against the notion of Disney as essential to all childhood experiences.

Though the Super Bowl advertisement is one of the most significant ways in which Disney uses an appeal to American athletic fanship to market itself, it is far from the only significant partnership between Disney and sports marketing. In 2020, the NBA Finals took place at Disney World in a “Covid-19 Bubble” (Ward-Henninger and Maloney). Here, Disney was able to make itself a safe space amidst the pandemic. Due to Disney’s ties to ESPN, this was easy to do. Getting itself into the sports realm through its purchase of ESPN allowed Disney to expand its venture beyond its typical scope into American sports fans. Seeing Disney was unavoidable while watching the NBA finals, allowing Disney

to market itself without limits. The facilities were already available in The Walt Disney Company-owned ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex, but the company did spend \$150 million in order to make it top-of-the-line and pandemic-proof (Marchand). In showing the famous players of the NBA at Disney being safe from harm, Disney is able to perpetuate the idea of itself as being simultaneously other-worldly through its ability to avoid contamination that everyone else would feel surrounded by while also connecting with the real world through the players. Children watching could see their idol athletes at Disney and increase their desire to go there, particularly since they would not be able to at the time. The ability to increase anticipation for the park's reopening was critical to Disney at the time because they lost \$2.4 billion during the Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns (Whitten). Keeping people thinking about the Disney parks while they were closed increased the company's chances of drawing crowds once they eventually reopened.

This partnership also allowed for unique merchandising opportunities between Disney and the teams. Disney created merchandise including apparel, pins, and phone cases that featured allusions to Disney films in NBA team colors and styles (Armenia). Though the collection claimed to provide a way for fans to connect with their teams during an unusual NBA finals without any fans in the stands, it serves to remind fans that Disney was the provider of the safe space for the teams that they care about and to utilize the excitement surrounding the sport to generate excitement for Disney and to promote the consumerism that the company thrives on. Some examples of the merchandise include shorts with Mickey Mouse heads made of basketballs, pins that feature Mickey Mouse in each team's jersey, and hoodies with the slogan "a whole new game," alluding to the song "A Whole New World" from the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*. The use of Mickey Mouse as the most iconic Disney character allows for him to shift from simply serving as a Disney icon to serving as an emblem of the safety of the Covid Bubble as well as a stand-in for every fan who was not able to attend. The "whole new game" slogan is

significant because it places Disney as a forerunner. The company founded itself on innovative exploits in cartooning and beyond, and this slogan embodies The Walt Disney Company's desire to shift American sports fanship from where it is to include Disney. Before, it was simply the NBA Finals, but now it is different. It includes the safety of Disney and the excitement of the characters that renew the excitement for the sport. In combining these two dominant aspects of American culture through fanship and consumerism, Disney is again able to affirm its ideal person as having money. Through the promotion of unique merchandise to show true fanship, Disney tells those watching the NBA Finals, particularly children, that their ability to spend is an important aspect of supporting the teams that they love, but beyond this endorsement of capitalism, placing Disney imagery alongside every team makes the individual teams less important and exalts Disney as being the unifying factor between them all.

This sentiment extends beyond the NBA into other professional sports as well. In 2021, Disney and the NFL partnered with the company Junk Food Clothing in order to produce Disney-themed merchandise for all 32 teams in the league (Kato). Beyond the traditional Disney characters, the company also capitalized on its ownership of *Star Wars* and *Marvel*, including characters and designs from them in the merchandising. According to Josh Silverman, executive vice president of third-party commercialization of Disney consumer products, games, and publishing spoke about the collaboration, "We are always looking for ways to engage with our fans in new and unexpected ways, and this collaboration with the NFL allows us to do just that...Fans can now celebrate their favorite teams and characters from Disney, Marvel and Star Wars, and all in time for the 2021 NFL season to begin" (Kato). Though providing unique interactions with fans is the claimed intent of the collaboration it seems as though it is a convenient excuse for Disney to yet again impose the importance of consumerism upon its fans through reliance on American sports fanship and to unite them all through

Disney. It is critical that these Disney collaborations are not with just one team but with all of them, allowing Disney fanship to supersede any regional or cultural differences between the teams.

Beyond professional sports, Disney's athletic partnerships have also extended into collegiate sports teams, particularly college football, in order to further curate the image of itself that the company presents. The earliest of these partnerships was with the University of Oregon under Walt Disney himself. Leo Harris, who was at the time of the agreement Oregon's athletic director, was friends with a Disney cartoonist who made the handshake agreement between Harris and Walt Disney for the famous Donald Duck to be used as the University of Oregon's mascot (Associated Press). Disney had great control over the Duck, and when the official agreement was drafted between the company and the university, it contained the statement that Disney owned the mascot costume and had the right to call for its destruction at any time (Associated Press). This partnership remained until 2010 when Disney and the University agreed to split because "the Duck strayed" in ways that "ruffled feathers in the Magic Kingdom" (Associated Press). One example of this occurred in 2007 when the Duck was seen in an altercation with the Houston Cougar in which the Duck punched the opposing team's mascot repeatedly ("When They Say, 'Duck,' They Mean Duck"). Though Donald Duck is presented as an angry character, being a cartoon character provides him with the ability to avoid any consequences and to remain endearing. The Oregon version of Donald assaulting a competing mascot does not have the same effect. When shown in a cartoon, violence is coded as humorous, but in real life, acts of violence challenge Disney's presentation of an ideal America. The Duck was also seen in a rap video that Disney did not approve of in the year prior to the end of their contract (Associated Press). Rap is a genre that was created by Black artists seeking social change for issues of systemic racism as well as financial struggles. With Disney attempting to create an image of a raceless, classless, idealized America, the Duck's association with a genre that highlights systemic oppression was not viewed favorably by the

company. Though the rap video itself did not contain such themes, the decision to split not long after the incident makes it seem as though the mere association with the genre was enough to deem the Duck as being not Disney enough.

In addition to Oregon, the University of Central Florida has a unique relationship with The Walt Disney Company due to its geographic proximity to the Disney World parks, and they utilize this relationship as an endorsement of their vision of the American Dream by showcasing the student athletes' success. This partnership is not nearly as longstanding as the Oregon one was. Formed in 2019, UCF and Disney agreed that Disney would serve as the official cruise line, resort line, theme park, and water park destination for the team. This also provides UCF's collegiate teams with the opportunity to visit Disney World every year. Additionally, students who work at the park are provided with free tuition (Heisler). This connection makes sense for Disney's goals dating back to Walt Disney himself. In the article "Mickey as Professor," Walt Disney explains his desire to have his cartoons extend beyond the expectations of media into a form of children's education, including moral education. Disney uses the example of wartime cartoons to emphasize the merit of Disney films as an educator, stating:

"The motion picture took a leading part in all phases of wartime education-propaganda and information as well as training. It explained and supported ideas, it showed with impartial fidelity the course of events, it made hidden phenomena visible, and it demonstrated the way to control them. So successful was the motion picture in this task of education for war that close attention was once more given to its capacity as a means for enlightenment and teaching in the work of peace."

Disney claims impartiality, but the wartime films were clear propaganda. Though he poses Mickey as an educator in ideal American values and learning, it seems that Disney's venture into education allowed Disney to impose values onto the children watching that align with the company, including expectations

of class, consumerism, and patriotism. Children who fall into the affluent population that Disney encourages are able to mimic the athletes endorsing the Disney parks and wearing the Disney merchandise, while the children who do not begin to question whether they are inferior for not being able to participate in this consumerism. The presentation of patriotism discourages these same children from questioning the system that endorses some of them and disadvantages others. In partnering with these universities' athletics, the company maintains the message that Walt Disney created that places the company as an educating force in the United States, but conveniently does so through athletics, the aspect of the universities that benefit the most from merchandising and bring in large amounts of money annually. Additionally, the athletes being shown at Disney parks signals them as having succeeded in achieving the American Dream. Through the hard work that allowed them to become college athletes, they are able to achieve the ultimate goal of a trip to Disney World and neither their race nor their class played a role in challenging this because of their effort and Disney's endorsement of it.

Aside from partnerships, merchandising strategies, and ownership of sports broadcasting networks, one of the main ways that Disney interacts with sports is through film. Not only do these films further curate the narrative of the American Dream and the idealized American experience, but they also allow Disney to further promote these merchandising strategies. There are two main types of films that Disney produces that interact with American athletics: biographies featuring Disney versions of real-life players, teams, and events and fictional stories featuring teams and characters manufactured by Disney. Both present their own unique set of assets in informing the narrative that Disney seeks to create. Where the biographical films are able to impose Disney values onto real life, providing them with more merit, the fiction films are able to be entirely constructed in Disney's image which idealizes the American Dream and dismisses systemic issues in the United States relating to race and class.

Disney strategically uses the guise of simply relaying historic events in its sports biographies, when in reality, the company uses real players and teams to share “rags-to-riches” stories that they have shaped in a way that disregards social issues in the United States. The company has created a large number of these sports biographies which range greatly from football and hockey to horse racing and figure skating. These films are based on true stories that promote patriotism through their exciting portrayal of American sports teams, commend wealth and hard work through a recurring rags-to-riches theme, and distort reality by producing a Disney version of events that depicts racism and classism as issues of the past. “Hollywood, it would seem, cannot resist a feel-good sports movie...Chief among the various Hollywood studios in developing sport-themed movies over the last two decades has been The Walt Disney Company” states Michael D. Giardina in his work “*Remembering the Titans: Screening ‘Race’ in Disney’s America*,” which explores the ways in which Disney “Disneyfied” American race relations in its biographical film *Remember the Titans* (Giardina 77). He discusses Disney’s oversimplification of race in the film through the team’s “solution” to segregation and disregard for racial tensions that clearly still exist today. *Remember the Titans* shows the success of a recently racially-integrated high school football team under Black coach, Herman Boone. Though tensions are shown early in the film, they are soon resolved. In this, Disney uses the team in the film as a microcosm for race relations in the United States, claiming that though there have been issues before, unity allows for them to no longer exist. Seeing as Disney has positioned itself as a universal American experience, this perceived unity of race relations is important. Giardina contends that The Walt Disney Company uses its power to market its biography films to be as real as possible to prevent audiences from realizing that they are being influenced (Giardina 85). Henry A. Giroux states in *The Disneyfication of Children’s Culture*, “Disney’s view of the world needs to be taken up in terms of how it narrates children's culture and how it can be held accountable for what it does as a significant cultural public sphere...Disney’s

corporate and cultural influence is too enormous and far-reaching to allow it to define itself exclusively within the imaginary discourse of innocence, civic pride, and entertainment” (Giroux 69). This facade of itself that Disney attempts to create as a mere storyteller or creator of entertainment makes the sports documentary film an ideal candidate for it to relay its messages. Disney has the market on children’s entertainment through the influence that it has curated over the years and the market on sports through its ownership of ESPN and many partnerships that it has formed. Because of this, it has the ability to shape the way that children perceive sports and American history through the powerful tool of the biographical film, and it has consistently taken advantage of this tool to idealize the United States and diminish systemic issues of race and class.

Remember the Titans is just one example of how Disney uses sports biographies to enforce Disney values. *Miracle* is a 2004 Disney film that focuses on the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team who defeated the much-favored Soviet Union. The film heavily relies on patriotism, evoking American sentiments about Communism and the Soviet Union for a new generation who would not have experienced the 1980 Olympics in real life. Aside from encouraging patriotism in the younger generation who would watch, the film also renews the patriotism in the parents who would accompany their children in viewing the film. This film is interesting as a documentary because of the synergy that it has with the 1994 film *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, the second installment of *The Mighty Ducks* franchise, which focuses on the Ducks team from the previous film attending the Junior Olympics. Though one is conveying real events and one is fiction, the two films have several scenes that are eerily similar. In *Miracle*, the team is asked to announce where they are from and who they play for in order to convince them to dedicate themselves fully to the United States after tensions arose between the members of the team who played for Coach Herb Brooks at the University of Minnesota and the players from other universities who were selected for the team at tryouts. Similarly, Coach Gordon Bombay instructs his

players to announce where they are from before having them chant “Ducks” despite half the team being the Ducks from the original film and half being newcomers for the United States Junior team. They also face a similar punishment when they lose to their “enemy” team in both films in which they must skate laps in a closed arena after the game. In *D2*, the enemy is Iceland and in *Miracle* it is the Soviet Union, but ultimately the teams serve the same role in elevating American patriotism. In creating this parallel between the real Disney film *Miracle* and the fictional *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, Disney is able to shape their depiction of reality and to elevate the team that they created in their fictional Mighty Ducks into a symbol of American patriotism.

In addition to creating synergy with the biography films that are presented as real, Disney fiction films portray sports in Disney's vein. Though the next chapter of this paper will explore *The Mighty Ducks* in greater detail, other films in which Disney portrays athletics include *Air Bud*, *The Game Plan*, *Ice Princess*, *Snow Dogs*, *The Luck of the Irish*, and many others. These films can be used to perpetuate similar themes to the biographies, but lean further into Disney magic by implementing elements such as dogs playing sports in *Air Bud* and bets with leprechauns in *The Luck of the Irish*. Ultimately, though, both types of film still serve to convey a rags-to-riches storyline that enforces existing power structures of race and class despite Disney's strides to present itself as a uniting force or as appealing to all American children.

When considering the many connections that The Walt Disney Company has formed with sports over the years, it is clear that it sees the value of athletics in American culture and uses American sports fandom in order to curate an idealized image of America and to promote the Disney vision on the world. Though both Disney and athletics have a significant place in American culture, the intersections between them allow Disney to exemplify its values in patriotism, but beyond this, to equate themselves with patriotism by curating the image of Disney as a universal American childhood experience. Despite

positioning themselves as such, their relationship with sports serves as an endorsement of the American Dream that intentionally ignores experiences that challenge the idealized America that Disney carefully curates. The effect of this is the dismissal of social issues of race and class that challenge the understanding of the equitable American Dream in which hard work alone controls an individual's wealth and success.

Author's Preface

The following chapter will explore *The Mighty Ducks* in order to exemplify the themes of the American Dream, race, and class as discussed in this chapter. *The Mighty Ducks* is the quintessential Disney sports film in its portrayal of a rags-to-riches storyline that is largely dismissive of the issues of race and class that are presented in the film. Additionally, *The Mighty Ducks* provided Disney with the unique experience of solidifying its relationship with the sports world through the resulting creation of the real NHL team, The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. It is because of this film's significance both for Disney and in the world of sports that *The Mighty Ducks* is the ideal film to explore in supplement to the connections from this initial chapter.

Chapter Two

Though there are many Disney sports films, none have become as iconic as *The Mighty Ducks*. After the first film's release in 1992, the Ducks were seen again on the screen in 1994 and 1996 for sequels *D2* and *D3* respectively. The film also inspired multiple series: one animated series in 1996 and a live-action series released nearly thirty years after the original film in 2021 entitled *The Mighty Ducks: Game Changers*. *Game Changers* signifies the franchise's ability to withstand the test of time and Disney's ability to maintain the relevance of its older films with the new generation. Aside from the film's importance in the Disney universe, *The Mighty Ducks* is unique in that it inspired the Disney-owned real-life National Hockey League team The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim in the California home of Disneyland. The film franchise furthers the relationship with American athletics that The Walt Disney Company has cultivated in order to relay Disney's version of the American Dream and to dismiss the issues of race and class that it presents through a simple solution of hard work and an endorsement of the simplicities of childhood.

Hockey being the featured sport of *The Mighty Ducks* is significant due to the sport's association with a largely affluent, White demographic. In 2022, the NHL is 84% White, and there are continually cases of racism against the people of color in the league (Bromberg). In youth hockey, many parents fear the cost and time commitment, with the sport needing expensive equipment and extensive rink time (Bromberg). This anxiety is alluded to in *The Mighty Ducks*, which is significant because it features a team that is largely outside of the affluent, White demographic of the sport.

Though Disney values wealth and success, it Disneyfies both of these concepts through a critique of greed and an endorsement of the simpler experience of childhood. This is primarily evidenced through the plotline of head coach Gordon Bombay, who becomes the coach of a local youth hockey team in Minneapolis Minnesota as community service after he receives a DUI. Bombay is shown as

being affluent through his career as a lawyer, but his associated character flaws reveal a need to return to his childhood through hockey. This is presented in the film's beginning through the cutting between Gordon's childhood hockey days and the current day practicing law. The film begins by showing Gordon as a young child playing hockey for the Hawks, who later are revealed to be the rival team to the Ducks. When Gordon gets the opportunity to take a game-winning penalty shot, his coach tells him "you miss this shot, you're not just letting me down, you're letting the whole team down, too." They show him missing the shot and then the scene cuts to an adult Gordon practicing law. The mentality that his coach enforced on him in the game sticks with him into his adult life with him saying things such as "gotta go for the W every time" and "30 and 0 I remain undefeated." Not only does he maintain the idea from his childhood that winning means everything, but he also uses sports vernacular to do so. In showing Gordon as having gotten the DUI, the film presents him as needing to change and critiques his sentiment of always needing to win. The association with alcohol alludes to Gordon's needing to change through a return to his childhood because of alcohol's position as an adult beverage, which symbolizes his progression from childhood into a dysfunctional version of adulthood. Though Disney values success and the associated wealth, Gordon's greed for winning does not position success in the light that Disney wants it to be associated with. In having his punishment for the DUI be to work with children playing hockey, Disney puts Gordon back into the place from the scenes from his childhood and reunites him with his inner child. This is important because it marks the opportunity for Gordon to experience Disneyfied success with the children from the District 5 hockey team as opposed to the greedy, adult success that he previously celebrated. While the vision of the American Dream to adults is plagued with complications including inequity and selfishness, to children, aspirations toward success are blissfully ignorant of these issues, something that Disney encourages.

When the team is first introduced, they are not on the rink but instead digging through a dumpster on the streets of Minneapolis. They find a purse and a can of beans that they use to construct a prank in which they have a dog defecate in the purse and then leave it on the street with a dollar bill sticking out. When a man stops to pick up the purse and gets into his car with it, they say “this man deserves what he gets.” Because the man did not seem in need of the money, this scene serves as another critique of greed in the film and having the children construct the situation that established this places them in opposition to the greed that has accompanied Gordon thus far in the film. It also reveals a juxtaposition between the children and the adults in the film that ultimately favors childhood. Where the children represent an anti-greed sentiment by playing this prank, both Gordon and the prank’s victim are adults whose greed has been shown to be a negative attribute. Despite the prank being unkind, the film reveres it because it is performed by children. This indicates the theme of the film in which the adult desire for success is coded as greedy, but success that is accompanied by a sense of childhood should be celebrated.

When Gordon first meets the team, the film intentionally emphasizes the differences in race and class between them. The team is shown playing on an outdoor rink that has not been very well maintained. By contrast, Gordon arrives in a limousine with a driver and wearing a suit. The first words that are shared between him and the team articulate this distinction, with one of the players saying “yo dude, you obviously in the wrong hood.” This statement has both race and class implications, with “yo” having connections to African American Vernacular English and “hood” connoting urban neighborhoods, often in the inner-city with large minority and lower-class populations. By establishing these connections, the film not only widens the separation between the team and Gordon but also reveals to the audience the socioeconomic status they should associate with the team. Though the team does not seem to want Gordon, the film reveals that they have not won a single game, indicating that they need

help. If the film entirely endorsed a childhood sentiment, then they would have no need for Gordon, but since Disney ultimately endorses success, it is critical that Gordon fix the team and the team fix him. In establishing them as a team comprised of minorities and members of the lower class, Disney attempts to make them seem in need of the help of Gordon, the rich, white lawyer. Conversely, in establishing him as a greedy, adult lawyer, the film indicates that he needs them too. Though Disney is critical of Gordon's version of success, it does not simply endorse the rag-tag team of lower-class children when they are losing, and only truly allows them to become successful with the help of Gordon. Though Disney presents the film as endorsing the underdog and childhood spirit, the film actually endorses the American Dream, but only when it is performed in the Disney way that uses the innocence of childhood to ignore any social constraints that make the concept unequal.

Though Gordon is not initially well-received as the coach, the film presents him as redeemable by indicating that his childhood spirit has not been entirely lost. When Gordon announces to the team that he will be their new coach, he is met with laughter. This laughter is soon shut down when he reads the roster, establishing that he really is the coach, and makes the announcement "I don't like hockey and I don't like kids." This statement reveals to the audience how important the opening scene was where he missed the game-winning shot. While he once loved the sport, he has since become bitter and has rejected all things associated with his past while playing it. The hatred for children would be taken negatively by the audience of children who would likely identify with the players more than Gordon. Because Disney films are made for children, they tend to romanticize childhood wonderment, therefore, anyone who goes against it can be expected to be either a villain or to go through a change in the film. This glorification of childhood is further emphasized through the fact that up until this point in the film, parents have been absent in the scenes with the children. This comes to an end when the children commandeer Gordon's limousine and demand a ride around the ice. Player Charlie's mother arrives and

criticizes Gordon for allowing the children to ride in the car on the ice. When he reassures her that it was okay, the film establishes Gordon as different from other adults by revealing an internal sense of childhood that he does not realize he retains. In doing so, the film foreshadows the redemption arc that Gordon goes through in his return to hockey and simultaneous return to his innate sense of childhood wonderment. This redemption is critical to Disney's ability to use the film to depict their image of the American Dream. The Disney version of American success cannot be plagued with greed, it needs to simultaneously value success and still maintain the joys and innocence of childhood. While success in the adult world must acknowledge the negative aspects of society including inequalities, childhood success is blissfully ignorant of these things, making it ideal for Disney to appeal to.

The first District 5 game shown in the film is against the affluent rival team, the Hawks, and serves as a way for Disney to begin establishing the narrative that neither race nor class impacts a person's ability to succeed. Not only are the Hawks portrayed as the best team in the league, but they are also Coach Gordon Bombay's former team. Stark differences between the two teams become immediately evident, and beyond showing the differences in skill between them, they also reveal the vast differences in class. While the Hawks skate in sync and wear matching uniforms, the District 5 team wears mismatched uniforms with "D-5" written in marker or hand-stitched on. The Hawks have top-of-the-line equipment and padding, but the District 5 team wears helmets from other sports and newspaper shoved in their clothes for padding. This difference establishes the Hawks as the upper-class kids and the District 5 team as the lower-class underdogs that Disney frequently relies upon in presenting its version of the American Dream.

Before the game starts, Gordon has flashbacks to his own time with the Hawks when he runs into his old coach, still coaching the team. They reveal that Gordon's father passed away when he was young, furthering the Disney absent parent trope¹ and placing him parallel with the children he is

coaching. While his father died and was literally absent, the relative lack of parental representation of players in the film gives them absent parents despite not actually being orphaned. Gordon's former coach maintains the always-win mentality that he imposed on Gordon, as is shown by the Hawks chanting "win, win, win" before the game begins. This is contrasted by the District 5 team's mundane response to Gordon's attempts to get them to perform the same chant. This juxtaposition reveals the different mindsets of the two teams. Whereas the Hawks are only focused on winning, the District 5 team is just there to have fun. The constant need to win is a manifestation of the greed that the film critiques despite it not actually involving money. On the other hand, playing the game merely for fun emphasizes the sense of childhood wonderment that it seeks to elevate. Because of this, the Hawks are presented as children who have been stripped of their childhood joy and the District 5 team is presented as bringing Coach Bombay closer to his which he was stripped of many years ago. However, despite this elevation of this sense of childhood joy, Disney still presents a film in which the audience is encouraged to root for the District 5 team to win, not just have fun. This reveals that mere childhood joy is not enough. Success is critical to Disney's message, but it cannot be plagued by greed and must instead be accompanied by childhood innocence that allows for the disregard of the systemic issues that the film acknowledges.

In the next game, Coach Bombay introduces "take the fall, act hurt, get indignant" to the team in an attempt to cheat his way into a win. Not only is this method unsuccessful with the referees, but it loses Gordon some respect in the eyes of his players, particularly Charlie. In the locker room after the game, one parent storms in and after telling his children to leave says to Gordon, "this is what I gave up my overtime pay for? To watch my kids taking falls?" This statement again reinforces the role of class in the film and reveals the struggle that the families of the children on the District 5 team have gone through to allow them to play hockey. The parents want to see their children succeed when they are

putting so much money into allowing them to play the sport. While the adults in the film are thinking about money and social challenges, the children in the film are simply thinking about hockey. Disney's endorsement of the childhood mindset simultaneously endorses a lack of consideration for the issues of the adult world. Gordon then goes to visit Hans, the owner of a sports equipment store that he used to work for, who reminds him of the love of the sport that he had as a kid. He goes skating by himself and reminisces about skating on the same rink as a child. This marks the beginning of Gordon's character growth in the film and the shift from the mindset that winning is all that matters. He goes to Charlie's house to apologize and to promise that his coaching will be "a lot more fun this time around." Gordon's return to his own childhood helped to correct some of the failures of his adult life that the film points out, specifically greed and a need-to-win mentality. In doing so, the film encourages children to remain in the simple world of childhood and adults to return to it.

After changing his mindset, Gordon begins to work towards actually helping the team, and gets a donation from his boss Mr. Ducksworth to elevate the team through wealth. He explains that "fair play doesn't come cheap," and contends that the team needs a donation of \$15,000 for new equipment, uniforms, and rink time. Gordon also states that these things are necessary for them to be "taken seriously." In saying that they are not being taken seriously because of how their uniforms reflect their class status, the film makes a statement about how American society views wealth. Providing the team with this donation erases the visual differences between them and the other teams in the league and therefore marks Disney's erasure of any issues that they may have faced because of their class status. When Ducksworth ultimately agrees, the team is named after him and changed to the Ducks. When it is initially revealed to the team that they will be called the Ducks, they are disappointed, but Gordon explains that ducks are significant because they fly in formation as a team. When they all get on board, he exclaims, "we're the Ducks, the Mighty Ducks!" Beyond the importance of the connection to

teamwork, the decision for the duck mascot is important in the film because it inherently evokes comparison to the other bird team, the Hawks. While hawks are birds of prey, ducks feed on small fish and insects. Because of this, the hawk has a more violent connotation as opposed to the duck which is often a peaceful figure in ponds and lakes. Beyond this, the duck connects to the most important bird in the Disney kingdom as well, Donald Duck. In utilizing the duck as the namesake and mascot in this film, Disney is able to produce synergy with one of its company's original characters and remind the audience of Disney while they watch the film.

After changing their uniforms and assuming the appearance of wealth, the team is able to begin being successful, indicating Disney's endorsement of wealth. In the new uniform, the Ducks tied the Cardinals 2-2 and finally played a non-losing game. With the new equipment and name, the Ducks begin acting like a team and performing better. This change reveals the shift in Coach Bombay, but it also reveals the difference that money was able to make. The District 5 team without upper-class Coach Bombay or donations from an affluent law firm did not score a single point, but the Ducks with their newfound connection to wealth have begun to achieve success. Changing into new clothes and equipment allowed the team to also change the way they play. Here, despite framing the film as though it is an endorsement of the underdog, Disney reveals that it values wealth above all else.

The film directly alludes to social issues in the United States only to dismiss them through the Ducks' ability to succeed despite them. After the win against the Cardinals, Gordon learns of a redistricting that would have meant that today, he would have been zoned to play for the Ducks instead of the Hawks. The film shows a map that depicts red lines across Minneapolis. This scene is significant because though it relates to pee wee hockey districts, the literal use of red lines are evocative of redlining, a historic practice that economically disadvantaged African Americans. This not-so-subtle nod to these practices indicates the overall themes of wealth and class in the film, and moreover reveals that

The Walt Disney Company is aware of the sociopolitical implications of its films. Gordon uses the knowledge of this redistricting to challenge the eligibility of star Hawks player, Adam Banks. Like Bombay, Banks was zoned for the Hawks but after the redistricting, his zoning changed to make him a Duck. The team initially rejects the idea of Banks joining the team, especially when it is revealed that Gordon too was a Hawk. Some players even decide to quit the team, with one player stating, “forget it cake-eater. If you want to play, play with yourself.” The phrase “cake-eater” is used several times throughout the film in reference to both Coach Bombay and Banks. It alludes to the legend that Queen of France Marie Antoinette uttered the phrase “let them eat cake” in reference to the starving peasants in France. The story claimed that she heard they had no bread to eat so she said for them to eat cake, revealing how out of touch the French upper class was with their lower class (Foster). Though the attribution of this phrase to Marie Antoinette is false², the class implications of the phrase remain the same. By evoking this phrase in calling Gordon a “cake-eater,” the players comment on the disparity between his class and theirs as well as his inability to understand them because of it. Despite Gordon buying the team new jerseys and dressing them up like the upper class, the separation between them and him still remains.

The power of wealth and socioeconomic inequity in the film are further emphasized when Gordon is asked to a meeting with Mr. Ducksworth and his affluent friends who are seeking to use their influence to change the redistricting rules to their benefit. The friends are Adam Banks’ father and the Hawks coach, and they reveal that they “cut a deal with the pee wee hockey league” to allow Banks to continue playing for the Hawks for the season and to have the districts be adjusted for the next season so long as Gordon withdraws his protest. When Gordon refuses, he is fired from his job at the firm. This scene reinforces the connections to redlining, showing the rich adults in the film having sway with the league to be able to change things to discriminate against the success of the lower-income district’s

team. It also reveals the full character development that Gordon has gone through to no longer resonate with the mindset that winning is the only thing that matters and to begin to value teamwork and fairness. At the end of the scene, Gordon repeatedly quacks at Mr. Ducksworth before storming out of his office. In a parallel scene, the Ducks team gets in trouble at school for chanting quack after resolving the argument that ensued from Gordon's association with the Hawks. By placing these scenes parallel to each other, Gordon is placed parallel to the children, and his child-like spirit is used, yet again, set him apart from the other adults in the film. The adult world is plagued with inequities that Disney acknowledges but ultimately dismisses through the Ducks' success story. The children are not shown as the ones associated with this inequality, and Disney uses its endorsement of childhood spirit to allude to the fact that they are an adult conception and if ignored then anyone can achieve success.

With the addition of affluent player, Adam Banks, the team sees even more success and advances to the playoffs. In order to attempt to boost team morale, Coach Bombay brings the team to a Minnesota North Stars game where they meet real-life NHL players Basil McRae and Mike Modano. This is one way in which the film allows the audience to immerse themselves in the film and for Disney to blur the line between what is real and what is fake. Disney uses its connections to sports in the real world to strengthen the reality of its sports films for children watching. By showing players that sports enthusiast children might know alongside the Ducks players, the Ducks seem more real to the audience. The more real the film seems, the more susceptible the impressionable, young audience is to adopt the film's messages because they are more likely to connect to characters that register to them as real. McRae and Modano also call Gordon "the real deal" and offer him a tryout in the minor leagues if he ever wants one. This gives him credibility as a coach and instills greater faith in him from the team and audience.

This faith leads them into the playoffs where they inevitably meet the Hawks again in the finals, but this time win the game and fully affirm Disney's position on diminishing the effects of inequality by allowing the poor Ducks to beat the affluent Hawks. After tying the game at 4-4 late in the third period with the Duck's signature "flying V," the Ducks are fouled and given the opportunity to take a penalty shot. The situation mirrors the scene of Gordon's own pee wee finals from the beginning of the film, but as a coach, he takes a different approach. Instead of telling Charlie that he must win, he says "you may make it, you may not. But that doesn't matter Charlie, what matters is that we are here." This complete change of mindset reveals that Gordon has embraced the inner child that valued the sport of hockey above greed or winning. Unlike Gordon as a child, Charlie makes the shot and wins the game for the Ducks. This affirms that the transformation that Gordon goes through is valued by Disney. In encouraging a child-like focus on simply the sport, Disney indicates the belief that considerations of inequality complicate things for adults and that without acknowledging these issues, work directly correlates to success.

Though *The Mighty Ducks* positions itself as supporting a rag-tag, underdog pee-wee hockey team, the constant concerns for greed and references to wealth, class, and race reveal that the film serves as a greater commentary on socioeconomic class. Despite encouraging the audience to root for the lower-income Ducks team over the upper-class Hawks, the film still ultimately affirms the importance of wealth by only allowing the Ducks to succeed with the help of affluent former Hawk coach Gordon Bombay and player Adam Banks. By allowing these characters to play such a significant role in the success of the Ducks, the film presents a savior narrative in which the upper-class members of society are able to redeem lower-class individuals. The endorsement of childhood innocence adds a unique Disney attribute to the film, but ultimately serves the purpose of further dismissing social inequalities in the achievement of success. The film shows that Disney is aware of its ability to influence American

children and the powerful tool that American athletics and fandom can be in assisting them to do so, and moreover evidences Disney's version of the American Dream that intentionally dismisses or encourages people to ignore social inequalities.

The influence of this film is evidenced by its resulting legacy, with merchandise, multiple sequels, multiple spinoff series, and an actual NHL team all coming out of it. The NHL team The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim are by far the most distinct example of the legacy that Disney cultivated for this film. After the film brought in over \$50 million at the box office in 1992, The Walt Disney Company made the decision to invest that same amount of money into a National Hockey League expansion team to be called "The Mighty Ducks" (Ostrove 37). They began to play in the 1994 season, the same year that the company released *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, the first sequel to the film. The Disney connection to Anaheim expands well beyond the decision to purchase the team. Because of the proximity to Disneyland, the choice to have a Disney-branded NHL team in the city was not only a way to market *The Mighty Ducks* sequels that were to come but also to market Anaheim as a city. While the film *The Mighty Ducks* featured the Minnesota North Stars, they made no strides to purchase the team when it moved just a year after the film's release. Instead, it chose to invest specifically in Anaheim and to create a real version of its Mighty Ducks. This was not the only time Disney purchased a sports team in Anaheim. In 1998, they bought the California Angels and renamed them to the Anaheim Angels after concerns that the team would move away from the city (Ostrove 39). This reveals the vested interest that The Walt Disney Company has in the city of Anaheim. Having Anaheim in the name instead of simply California is critical to Disney's endorsement of the city. About Disneyland, Walt Disney stated, "Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world" (Deseret News). This expands beyond the barriers of the park itself and into the city that it claims. Anaheim has become a uniquely Disney city unlike the locations of any of the other parks in

cities such as Tokyo, Paris, or Orlando. Because Anaheim was the location in which Walt Disney created the Disney cartoon studio and later the first Disney park, it has become the most important city for the company. The success of Anaheim is the success of Disney, and The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim are a perfect example of this because they not only promote *The Mighty Ducks* film franchise but also Anaheim as a whole and thereby, Disney, and they capitalize on American sports fandom to do so.

Creating an actual Mighty Ducks team to be seen alongside the team from the movie helps Disney to distort the line between what is real and what is Disney in order to promote consumerism in Anaheim through the connections between wealth and class presented in *The Mighty Ducks* film. Though once just a pee wee hockey team that children rooted for while watching the Disney film, the creation of The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim gives fans a real-life team to latch onto, root for, and support monetarily through merchandising and ticket sales. The audience for The Mighty Ducks may have already had an interest in hockey, but many younger children also could have first been exposed to the sport through the film. These fans particularly would benefit the Disney-owned NHL team because they would likely not have any preexisting NHL allegiances. Even the children, though, that were already hockey fans and watched *The Mighty Ducks* could get excited about the prospect of seeing their favorite NHL team play against The Mighty Ducks come-to-life, and perhaps making the trip to Anaheim for the game and a trip to Disneyland. The promotion of wealth in the film serves to establish *The Mighty Ducks* fandom in those children who would be able to afford these experiences. Ironically, unlike many of the kids represented on the Mighty Ducks team in the film, Disney seeks to appeal to the children who come from families that are able to make the trip to Anaheim, get tickets to the NHL game, visit Disneyland, and purchase merchandise. In the guise of promoting a rag-tag group of children, the film actually endorses wealth that benefits the consumerism that Disney and Anaheim rely on.

Shortly after the team formed, the second film in the franchise was released, *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, and the synergy between the real team in Anaheim and the fictional team in the films was strengthened. In *D2: The Mighty Ducks*, the same Ducks team from the first film is joined by a few new players when Coach Bombay is asked to coach the United States of America's junior national hockey team. The film follows the same general structure as the first, with the Ducks struggling in the beginning, but ultimately making it to the finals where they compete for a Gold medal against their rival team, Iceland. Iceland is significant as Disney's rival country of choice because it has a largely White population. By choosing Iceland, Disney was able to avoid any conversations of race or racism in the rivalry, but also to affirm the all-White team as being the standard of success in hockey, a largely White-dominant sport. Though still including themes of race and class, this film introduces a strong sense of patriotism that the previous film did not. This patriotism is particularly emphasized by the many similarities between this film and the biography film, *Miracle*, about the United States national team beating the Soviet Union for an Olympic Gold medal. When the Ducks are losing going into the third period of their final game against Iceland, Coach Bombay attempts to boost team morale by chanting "Ducks fly together." Despite the fact that half of the team was assembled for the United States junior team, they are still inspired by the message of the Ducks and willing to represent them while simultaneously representing their country. By making the Ducks team synonymous with the American team, Disney not only shows that it values patriotism but implies that to be American is synonymous with being Disney. Hans, the equipment manager for the team exclaims "new Ducks and old Ducks must unite under a new banner," and unveils the new uniform for the team to wear in the final period of the game. They emerge from the tunnel onto the ice wearing the uniforms of The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim NHL team. The scene was filmed in Anaheim Arena, where the NHL team hosts its home games, and electric banners in the stadium read "TEAM USA Go Ducks." Beyond equating what is

American with what is Disney, this scene emphasizes that through the Ducks, Disney is even more unifying than an appeal to American nationalism. Placing the fictional Ducks in the uniform and arena of the actual Mighty Ducks further blurs the line between what is real and what is Disney and promotes the Disney-owned NHL team as America's team. In its many connections with athletics, Disney has attempted to make itself representative of the universal American experience, and it uses the Ducks in *D2* to further craft this idea.

The relationship between the film versions of *The Mighty Ducks* and The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim reveals that Disney believed that the promotion of Anaheim as a city would increase consumerism in the city to which the company has become inextricably linked. The marketing of Anaheim through the NHL team indicates Disney's desire to attract people to its hometown, but the films themselves provide information about who exactly they are attempting to attract. The themes of greed and wealth as well as the discussions of race and class in *The Mighty Ducks* reveal that Disney values wealth and attempts to attract White upper-class individuals into Anaheim to better sell products, park tickets, and other branded experiences. *D2: The Mighty Ducks* expands this demographic beyond just race and class to the promotion of patriotic individuals. Coded in patriotism is an endorsement of American systems and oftentimes a discouragement of questioning the possible issues in that system. This is an important evolution because it implies that Disney seeks to avoid the conversation about who its ideal parkgoer is with respect to race and class and to appeal to those who would not acknowledge the ways in which *The Mighty Ducks* serves to uphold racial and socioeconomic power structures in American society and to enforce the Disneyfied version of the American Dream.

Thirty years after the film's release, Disney continues to market *The Mighty Ducks*, revealing the significance of the film that sets it apart from the many other sports films that Disney has created. For the 30-year anniversary, Disney and Adidas collaborated to release official jerseys for *The Mighty*

Ducks, featuring the Ducks and Hawks jerseys from the original film as well as shoes featuring the teams' colorways (Adidas Hockey). This collaboration comes just one year after the initial release of the newest edition to *The Mighty Ducks* cinematic universe, the Disney Plus original series, *The Mighty Ducks: Game Changers*. In appealing to adults who would have been fans of the original film as children through the nostalgic jerseys, Disney is able to use this collaboration with Adidas to promote the new series to the children of these now-adult original fans. In making *The Mighty Ducks* now a family experience that extends from one generation to the other, Disney is able to enforce the values from the original 1990s films onto the children of today's world.

The Mighty Ducks as a film and franchise indicate an endorsement of wealth and success despite Disney's attempts to present itself as universal or as advocating for the underdog. The company enforces patriotism and childhood innocence that advocate for the unquestioning of power structures and the blissful ignorance towards inequities. Through the Ducks' success in each of the films, the company continually affirms that issues of race and class do not impact one's ability to succeed through a Disney version of the American Dream. Though they seek to ignore social issues of class, Disney still frequently affirms wealth through its films and partnerships. In *The Mighty Ducks*, this was shown through the transformation of the team through money and the success that came from the affluent saviors Gordon Bombay and Adam Banks. Outside of the film, this was shown through the company's desire to promote consumerism in Anaheim and through its many other athletic partnerships. Overall, Disney utilizes its status in American society through the image of itself as a universal part of the American childhood experience in order to impress ideas of the American Dream and an idealized America onto its viewers through the avenue of sports.

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