**‘It’s Spiritual Man’: *Eddie the Eagle* (2016) and English Amateurism**

**Abstract:**

The theme of amateurism has been persistent throughout the history of the British biopic, evidenced in films including *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948), *The Magic Box* (1951) and *The Flying Scotsman* (2006). *Eddie the Eagle* (2016), a film about ski-jumper Eddie ‘the Eagle’ Edwards and his preparation for the 1988 Winter Olympics where he finished 73rd out of 73 competitors, exemplifies how fascination with the amateur continues in contemporary biopic production. However, *Eddie the Eagle* represents the amateur ethos within a particularly unstable period for organised sports. The integrity of the Olympics and organised sports in general has been undermined by persistent corruption which centres on hosting rights, bribery, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs by competitors. This article traces the genealogy of the amateur in British biopics, before considering the wider context in which *Eddie the Eagle* was produced. It then employs textual analysis of key sequences to illuminate the film’s representation of amateurism and how it is constructed through oppositions: the value of amateurism against professionalism and the struggle of the outsider against the sporting Establishment. It suggests that *Eddie the Eagle* continues a theme at the heart of various British biopics, namely, the integrity of the amateur, the value of taking part and ‘doing one’s best’, at a time when the integrity of organised sport is increasingly under threat.

**Keywords:** biopic; amateur; sport; Olympics; nostalgia; Eddie Edwards; *Eddie the Eagle*

Though analysis of the British biopic forms part of numerous studies (Polaschek (2013); Brown and Vidal (2014); Minier and Pennacchia (2014); Cheshire (2015); Epstein and Palmer (2016)), the two major monographs of the genre centre on Hollywood production (Custen (1992); Bingham (2010)). Recent studies have sought to address this marginalisation by analysing the history of biopic production in Britain and its cultural specificities (see Robinson 2016). *Eddie the Eagle* (2016), a film about Olympic ski jumper Eddie ‘the Eagle’ Edwards, exemplifies certain ideologies which differentiate the British biopic from the paradigms proposed in studies of Hollywood production. ‘Eddie the Eagle’ at first sight may appear a strange subject for a biopic. Coverage of international sport concentrates on athletes who are at the pinnacle of their sport, celebrated as representatives of their country, and sporting biopics might be expected to reflect similar values. Yet Edwards won no medals; on the contrary he finished 73rd out of 73 ski-jumping competitors in the 1988 Winter Olympics. The success of the film *Eddie the Eagle* in fact reflects other themes: the value of amateurism against professionalism; the importance of taking part and doing your best; the struggle of the outsider against the sporting Establishment; and a nostalgia for an era, partly imagined, before the rampant commercialism of sport and the use of drugs and sophisticated technology to bring success.

The film may be seen as part of a wider tradition of, and affection for, amateurism in English culture, reflected also in, for example, the phenomenal success of the televised amateur baking competition *The Great British Bake-Off* (2010 –), and the various programmes which adapt the concept, including *The Great British Sewing Bee* (2013 –) and *The Great Pottery Throw Down* (2015 –). In *Eddie the Eagle* the amateur spirit is celebrated and the representation of Edwards’ struggle to achieve his ambition of Olympic participation provides a soothing, nostalgic tonic in a climate when the integrity of sport has been damaged. Ultimately the film conveys that Edwards’ integrity, if not his ability, was never in question.

The amateur ethos versus professionalism

*Eddie the Eagle* can be grouped with a number of British biopics that focus on British sporting achievement, including *Champions* (1984), a film about horse racing jockey Bob Champion, *Space Riders* (1984) focusing on motorcycle racing and Barry Sheene, *Best* (2000) and *The Damned United* (2009), which depict footballer George Best and manager Brian Clough, and *Risen* (2010), a biopic about Welsh boxer Howard Winstone. However, these subjects won the Grand National, the Grand Prix, the European Cup and the boxing world championship respectively, whereas Edwards never won an Olympic medal. Therefore *Eddie the Eagle* needs to be placed in a different tradition of achievement which is present more generally in biopics and not limited to the sports sub-genre: amateurism.

The development of an amateur ethos is Britain is usually associated with the practices of English public schools since the mid-nineteenth century. In this all-male environment sports and games were perceived to foster notions of team spirit and collective endeavour as well as respect for authority and the rules of the game, and being a sporting loser (see Richards 1988: 12-13). The public school ethos stressed character building and enthusing young boys with the ‘gentlemanly’ code of amateurism. Yet the cult of amateurism cannot be limited to Oxbridge and the public schools. Writing about amateurism in Britain during the Victorian period Richard Holt describes it as ‘a complex phenomenon with complex causes’ (2006: 353). He argues for a wider definition that takes into account shifts in the culture and conditions relating to mid-Victorian middle class life in work, changing attitudes to health and exercise, and a new aesthetic of masculinity. Holt describes amateurism as a set of specific sporting practices and values including ‘voluntary association, active and ethical participation, and repudiating both professionalism and gambling’ (Holt 2006: 352). These characteristics are highlighted in other scholarly work on amateurism. Martin Polley considers the Olympic runner Harold Abrahams, who won the 100 metre gold medal at the 1924 Paris Olympics and who was himself the subject of the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Though Abrahams benefitted commercially from roles within sport in writing and broadcasting, Polley locates Abrahams within a ‘voluntary tradition’ in English sports in which enjoyment and participation are prioritised over commercial gain: ‘the performance of the activity and its administration as worthwhile ends in themselves’ (Polley 2000: 82). Yet in *Chariots of Fire* Abrahams (Ben Cross) plays to win, hiring Sam Mussabini (Ian Holm) as his coach and adopting a disciplined training regime.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The film was produced in a period when athletics was undergoing a rapid professionalisation: in 1981 payment for performances was legally permitted which allowed individuals to make money from their participation in events other than the Olympics (Polley 2000: 83). The tensions between the ideals of the gentleman amateur and that of the professional are dramatised as Abrahams is challenged by the Masters of Caius and Trinity Colleges at Cambridge University, who take issue with his ‘professional attitude’ and use of a personal coach on the grounds that they are contrary to ‘the way of the amateur’ and not conducive to fostering *esprit de corps*.

Since the 1940s ideologies of amateurism have been embedded in various biopics which celebrate the integrity, patriotism and amateur spirit of figures whose achievements were overshadowed by others. *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) depicts Captain Scott’s team, who embarked on an expedition in 1912 to claim the South Pole for the British Empire, but were beaten by a rival Norwegian team led by Roald Amundsen and perished on the return journey in terrible conditions. They were memorialised as national heroes after the recovery in 1913 of Scott’s journals, which were seen to embody patriotism and the spirit of British masculinity. Within the film, the sense of man combating a hostile and threatening environment is conveyed through the recurring use of long-shots which frame Scott (John Mills) and the team against the vast white Antarctic setting and through the sound of the bitter wind as the team sit within their tents. The film foregrounds the British code of chivalry between men, Henry Robertson ‘Birdie’ Bowers is described as an ‘an undefeated little sportsman’, and emphasises that despite the various setbacks and illnesses induced by the severe weather, the team maintain a stoical and positive attitude with one another (see Chapman 2005: 158-162).

*The Magic Box* (1951) concerns the life of English cinematograph pioneer William Friese-Greene (Robert Donat), who perseveres with his inventions despite bankruptcy and finally drops dead at a conference of film industry personnel. In the final sequence, Friese-Green’s name appears on a memorial stating ‘A Pioneer of the Cinema’. The film foregrounds the inventor’s passionate, personal investment in developing cinematic processes rather than a commercial motivation and his determination draws comparison with the heroic failure of Captain Scott.

*The Magic Box* opens in 1921 when inventor Friese-Greene attends a film conference and recalls his life in flashback; meeting his wife, having children and facing various setbacks in his career. The flashback sequence emphasises the pursuit of his passion, most clearly manifested in the memorable scene in which Friese-Greene joyfully runs out into the street late at night and recruits an initially suspicious policeman (played by Laurence Olivier) to view his moving images of Hyde Park upon a white cloth. The film then returns to the narrative present of 1921 where Friese-Green collapses and dies. Conference members search his person for identification and find props which neatly summarise the subject’s life; a reel of film symbolising his life’s passion, a prism from his wife, enough money for a cinema ticket, and a pawn ticket reflecting his lack of finance. The film characterises Friese-Green’s boundless enthusiasm and technical competence as undermined by his failure as a businessman: he is constantly in debt and facing bankruptcy. In his essay on *The Magic Box*, Alan Burton identifies that both the Friese-Green biopic and *Scott of the Antarctic* foreground failure and Burton links this to the depiction of amateurism, noting that the amateurism of Friese-Greene is most clearly evoked in his disinterest in financial reward (2000: 168).

*The Flying Scotsman* (2006) forms a biopic which focuses on the life of Scottish cyclist Graeme Obree. Though it celebrates Obree’s ‘public’ achievements, breaking the one-hour record and winning the cycling world championship in 1995, it carefully foregrounds Obree (Jonny Lee Miller) as a passionate amateur cyclist. The film depicts Obree developing his innovative, hand-made, design of the ‘Old Faithful’ bicycle and contrasts this with frequent reference to Obree’s rival, the ‘professional’ cyclist Chris Boardman whose bicycle is designed on a computer. ‘Old Faithful’, constructed out of scrap materials, is met with scepticism by both Obree’s friends and the World Cycling Federation. The federation blocks his involvement in competitions, claiming that the home-made contraption is dangerous, that Obree’s aerodynamic ‘tuck’ riding stance is ‘ugly’, but also that Old Faithful’s effectiveness discourages people from purchasing conventional bicycles. Thus, the commercial motive, the antithesis of the amateur spirit, is aligned with the managers of organised sport. As with *The Magic Box*, *The Flying Scotsman* has a similar ‘eureka’ moment where the obsessive inventor makes a discovery. In *The Flying Scotsman*, the moment occurs as Obree watches the cycle of a washing machine spin and removes the bearings to utilise them in his bicycle design, reasoning that because they can handle 1,200 rotations per minute, the bearings will be effective in a bicycle. Obree’s eccentricity, passion and ‘outsider’ status are characteristics shared by Eddie Edwards in *Eddie the Eagle* but, unlike Edwards, Obree was a real winner and broke the world one-hour distance record in 1993 and 1994.

Eddie ‘the Eagle’ Edwards

These films evoke the amateur spirit and offer a genealogy for the ethos in British biopics. Edwards’ approach and achievements at the Olympics in 1988 placed him at the centre of media coverage and debates regarding English amateurism. Michael ‘Eddie’ Edwards became the first competitor to represent Great Britain in Olympic ski jumping since 1929 when, without any support from the British Olympian Association, he competed in the Calgary Olympics. Edwards finished last in both the 70 and 90 metre events, but as the sole British competitor he became Britain’s number one ski jumper. Subsequently Edwards, a plasterer from Gloucestershire whose entry into the Olympics was self-funded, gained extensive media coverage owing to his lack of success, underdog status and unusual appearance. He acquired the nickname ‘Eddie the Eagle’ when the president of the Olympic Organising Committee, Frank King, singled out Edwards in the televised closing ceremony: ‘You have broken world records and you have established personal bests. Some of you have even soared like an eagle’. Following the Olympics, which took place between February 13 and 28, the status of Edwards was the subject of continuous debate: some praised his amateur spirit but others considered him a laughing stock who made Britain look clumsy and unskilled. Simon Barnes, writing for *The Times* on 25 February 1988, highlighted these competing perceptions, noting that: ‘Edwards has provoked delighted affection and wild, irrational hatred: people are spitting with rage about his very presence at the Games. I find this odd. For, in fact, Britain has plenty of other no-hopers in Calgary’. Barnes went on to offer a defence of Edward’s participation in the games:

He just happened to be a journalist’s dream in an Olympics that was, for most of its audience, long on incomprehensibles [sic] and short on personalities … don’t condemn him for taking part in the Olympics and doing his poor best in them. Or are the modern Olympics not for the taking part but for the winning? (Barnes 1988: 44)

In previous Winter Olympics games Britain was represented by figure skaters John Curry (Innsbruck, 1976), Robin Cousins (Lake Placid, 1980) and Torvill and Dean (Sarajevo, 1984) who each was awarded a Gold medal but the lack of a clear gold medal prospect at Calgary contributed to the extensive coverage of Edwards. Both domestic and American publications foreground his unusual appearance for an athlete, citing his large glasses in particular. Peter Alfano wrote in the *New York Times* that Edwards is ‘an unlikely-looking athlete … at 5 feet 8 inches, peering through glasses with milk bottle lenses’ (Alfano 1988: 51). Writing in the *Independent* Neil Wilson located this unconventional appearance as a key factor in Edward’s growing renown:

Since this failed Alpine skier jumped first on New Year’s Day, 1986, he has become an international institution. His inability to finish in any other position but last - and his thick glasses and protruding jaw - have done nothing but good for his image. (Wilson 1989: 26)

Edwards subsequently wrote a book about his life, *Eddie the Eagle: My Story* (1988) and was interviewed by Terry Wogan on the BBC chat-show *Wogan* (1982 –1992) in October 1992. More recently, he won the celebrity diving competition *Splash!* (2013 –) and appeared on *The Jump* (2016 –), a programme in which celebrities compete in a range of winter sports. Edwards could be perceived as an unusual choice for biopic treatment: he finished last, he did not win a gold medal, and his exuberant post-jump celebrations positioned him a figure of fun to many. A film about his life could be understood as a ‘biopic of someone undeserving’, a category proposed by Dennis Bingham in his study of American biopics. This category comprised a series of films released since 1994 that feature unlikely or disreputable figures (2010: 146-168). Bingham cites *Ed Wood* (1994), a film about the director of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) who is depicted as enthusiastic and optimistic but lacking the talent to succeed as a filmmaker, as an example (see Bingham 2010: 147). However, the category of a ‘biopic of someone undeserving’ applies to Hollywood production and placing *Eddie the Eagle* in that category would miss the English sensibility, the celebration of amateurism, throughout the film.

Securing funding for a film of Edwards’ life proved difficult. The film was produced by Marv Films with a budget of £16 million (Staniforth 2016: 12), supported by €2.2 million from the German Federal Film Fund (DFFF), and was officially certified as British after passing the BFI Cultural Test. Hollywood production companies doubted that Edwards’ story would have commercial appeal, their scepticism reflecting the difference between American and British traditions of heroism and achievement. Screenwriter Sean Macaulay recalled that: ‘One production company wanted Ricky Gervais to play Eddie. Another said it would only work if Eddie shed his glasses and won a gold medal’ (Macaulay 2016). Thus *Eddie the Eagle* continues an attitude towards achievement at the heart of numerous British sports films by foregrounding a hero who neither deserves nor achieves success and whose significance lies in how they overcome prejudice (Jones 2005: 34). This also hints at the ideology that guides the choice of subject in British biopic production. Unlike the films analysed by Bingham, this is a *British* biopic which charts a theme which has endured in biopic production – amateurism – celebrating personal investment and participation as distinct from commercial motivations and the desire to win at any cost.

The contemporary climate of organised sport

*Eddie the Eagle* champions the amateur ideology within a particularly unstable period for organised sports in general. Screenwriter Simon Kelton discussed the dilemma of what to exclude in the story; it was impractical to include, for example, a Finnish mental asylum in which Edwards reportedly lived during an international competition. Kelton stressed his wish to celebrate Edwards’ do-it-yourself approach:

For one period, he slept under a ping-pong table in a scouting house where he was mowing the lawns to pay for his accommodations. When you think of the resources our top athletes get these days, with their coaches and millions of dollars they get to compete, it’s kind of nice to see someone who did it all himself. (quoted in Edwards 2016)

Kelton foregrounds that the world of organised sports and athletics was different in the late 1980s, when Edwards participated, and he emphasises a nostalgic context for the film of Edwards’ life.[[2]](#endnote-2) Though Kelton identifies the commercial gains made by the athletes themselves, the Olympics have also been undermined by scandals which centre on hosting rights and bribery. For instance, the scandal surrounding Salt Lake City centred on the crisis experienced by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1998 when it was alleged that the Salt Lake City bid committee transferred funds to IOC members in exchange for their support in the committee’s (successful) pursuit to host the Winter Olympics in 2002 (see Wenn and Martyn 2006: 64-90). But corruption can be seen as a systemic problem in organised sports generally. Sepp Blatter was elected President of FIFA (Fédération International de Football Association) in 1998 and was reselected five times. During the period 1999 to 2015 he also served as a member on the IOC. During his tenure, FIFA faced numerous allegations of corruption and bribery (see Jennings 2011: 387-398). In 2015 Blatter was suspended from football for eight years following a Swiss corruption investigation.

A further ‘resource’ available to athletes which Kelton does not mention explicitly is the availability of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs). The ideology of the amateur and the value of participation are challenged by the contemporary discourse on sports and athleticism and specifically by high-profile instances of doping and corruption. In the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul the 100-meter race was initially won by Canadian Ben Johnson, months after Edwards had competed in the 1988 Winter Olympics, but Johnson was subsequently disqualified following a doping test and his gold medal was handed to the American runner Carl Lewis, who finished second. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) whose motto is ‘Play True’ was established in 1999 by the IOC with a remit to tackle doping and the use of PEDs. However, the sophistication of doping strategies and the ability of scientists to render drugs undetectable by the authorities have made this a constant challenge. For instance, on the eve of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi WADA director general David Howman responded to claims by German broadcaster Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) that an undetectable new muscle-growth drug was available in Russia and scientists were willing to administer it to Olympian athletes: ‘It would be naive to believe that all athletes in Sochi are clean. There are many who are convinced that the substance they’re taking cannot be detected’ (quoted in Gibson 2014).

Arguably the best known instance of the use of PEDs concerns cyclist Lance Armstrong. The US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) released a report in October 2012, based on extensive research into Armstrong and testimonies from his teammates, that detailed his use of PEDs and he was subsequently stripped of his titles and banned from professional sports for life. The public exposure of cyclist Armstrong, one of the most prolific sportsmen of the twenty-first century and seven-times winner of the Tour de France, generated immediate worldwide coverage, especially his public confession on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986 – 2011) in January 2013. Though various doping cases had been present in cycling previously, for example in 2004 and 2005, these failed to register attention outside cycling, but public interest in doping was ‘piqued by the bigger catch’ (Dimeo 2014: 955). *The Program* (2015) formed a biopic of Armstrong based on *Seven Deadly Sins: My Pursuit of Lance Armstrong*, written by the journalist David Walsh who uncovered Armstrong’s doping programme (Walsh 2012). Other high profile cases, including Olympic athletes Marion Jones and Tim Montgomery who were charged as part of the Bay Area Laboratory Cooperative (BALCO) scandal in 2002, lend weight to the perception that PEDs are a systemic and institutional problem for the Olympics and organised sports generally: ‘Even though the gentle trickle of revelations is slowly making the general public somewhat accustomed to the thought that doping is part of the reality of sport, it is apparently not prepared to accept it’ (Møller 2010: 58). Reviews and opinion pieces, and the comments by viewers and cinemagoers on the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) website, suggest this multifaceted climate of corruption, centring on commercial benefit and performing enhancing drugs, was the contemporary context through which *Eddie the Eagle* was understood.

*Eddie the Eagle* and the amateur spirit

The film follows a linear structure, representing Edwards as a child (played by Tom and Jack Costello) and his subsequent attempts at different Olympic sports. Edwards’ father Terry (Keith Allen) encourages him to become a plasterer but Edwards (played as an adult by Taron Egerton) pursues ski jumping after learning that Britain has not been represented in that competition since Hector Mooney jumped 22.9 metres in 1929. He travels to the International Ski Jump Training camp in Garmisch, hoping to qualify for the 1988 Olympics in Calgary, and former ski jumper and snowplough driver at the camp Bronson Peary (Hugh Jackman), a fictional character, agrees to coach him. Peary embodies the conventional washed-up former athlete who had natural talent but a poor attitude, and the film depicts Peary’s coaching of Edwards as key to his recuperation with former coach Warren Sharp (Christopher Walken). Edwards enters the European circuit under the guidance of Peary, and though he crashes in Oberstdorf the judges register his practice attempt of 61 metres and he qualifies having surpassed the minimum 60 metres required by the British Olympic Association. Edwards goes on to finish last in the 70 and 90 metre jumps in the 1988 Winter Olympics but nevertheless establishes a new British distance record and garners press attention for his exuberant celebrations. Edwards returns to England to a hero’s reception, and in the final scene at the airport Terry states how proud he is of his son, vindicating Edwards’ ambitions.

*Eddie the Eagle* utilises various generic conventions and thematic patterns associated with the biopic genre and its ‘claims to truth’ (see Custen 1992: 51). Against a black screen, the opening caption claims that ‘The following is based on a true story’, an avowal to accuracy and truth typical of the biopic. In addition, the film blends archival footage of the Olympic Games with the re-enactment of Edwards’ experience there, including the closing ceremony speech by Frank King which references him individually. These conventions act to reaffirm that this is ‘how it was’. Other visual conventions include the use of montage editing which in the classical Hollywood era of production typically asserted a figure’s progression and advancement in a specific field (Custen 1992: 184-186). In *Eddie the Eagle*, montage works to condense Edwards’ training for the Olympic Games. This is a feature familiar from *Rocky* (1976) but one which is present in almost all sports films and works to condense long periods of exercise and preparation (Crosson 2013: 63). Indeed, the film features many other conventions and narrative tropes of the sports film: Edwards forms the marginalised ‘underdog’ attempting to achieve success through sport (Crosson 2013: 62). There is also the washed-up coach seeking redemption and the film concludes with a freeze-frame similar to films such as *Rocky III* (1982). In his analysis of sports films including *Cool Runnings* (1994), *A League of Their Own* (1992) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), Garry Whannel identifies a narrative trajectory in which ‘winning respect is at least as important as winning’ (2008: 86) and *Eddie the Eagle* similarly shows an outsider successfully overcoming barriers which prohibit their participation and gaining self-respect. Indeed, the final freeze-frame of Edwards being held aloft by fans after he has arrived at the airport secures this message. The film’s narrative structure also reflects a tendency of the sport film more generally to foreground the action taking place off the field as more important than the sporting event itself (Jones 2005: 34). This is evidenced in the relationship between Edwards and Peary: although Peary prepares Edwards to compete in the games, it is Edwards who rehabilitates Peary by teaching him that performing to the best of your ability is the true mark of an Olympian.

Edwards is depicted as a goofy, likeable figure, drinking milk rather than beer, and the film features slapstick sequences of his falling over on the slopes and failing to perform training routines with Peary. His status as ‘underdog’ is also conveyed visually: whereas the ‘professional’ Norwegian team wear skin tight lycra over their athletic frames Edwards is equipped with loose fitting wool sweaters and waterproof jackets over his bulkier frame and uses skis taken from his loft at home in Gloucestershire. His status as an underdog is visually connoted through the frequent interplay of shots and mobile camera-work which shows Edwards looking at the slope either from the top or from below. For instance, a close-up shot from a high-angle of Edwards’ staring at the slopes in Garmisch is then replaced by a long-shot of the slopes themselves, the camera tilting up to film the distance from the bottom to the top. Such sequences employ an ominous low, pulsating bass score to construct the amateur’s challenge and the slope’s looming presence. This score features in those sequences in which Edwards is filmed from the top of the slopes, with additional sound effects of wind whistling, and over-the-shoulder images of Edwards staring down the slope. Mobile camerawork is continuously employed; before the 90 metre jump at Calgary, the film’s major event, a point-of-view shot from Edward’s perspective as he gazes down the slope is achieved by pulling the camera away but zooming in simultaneously, a disorientating effect made iconic in *Jaws* (1975).

Challenging the establishment

As well as the physical dangers which Edwards faces, the film also constructs a further, bureaucratic, challenge which he must overcome: the British Olympic Establishment. The story of Edwards is depicted through a key narrative theme typical of the biopic genre in which the individual faces resistance from a community which underestimates or refuses to believe in his ability (Custen 1992: 188). This typically takes the form of an individual’s challenge to the status quo through a revolutionary invention or other innovation. Though Custen’s study centres on studio production, this thematic structure is present in numerous British biopics as well; but whereas in Hollywood biopics the individual’s ability is eventually demonstrated and they have the opportunity to prove doubters and pessimists wrong, in *Eddie the Eagle* this theme is mobilised through the conflicting ideologies embodied in Edwards, a patriotic amateur with no delusions of winning but desperate to compete, and Dustin Target (Tim McInnerny), head of the British Winter Olympic Selection Committee, who perceives the skier’s unskilled, graceless approach as an embarrassment and consistently blocks Edwards’ participation.

Their first meeting, in which Target is presented as Edwards’ opponent, takes place in 1987. Edwards is one of fourteen candidates for Britain’s proposed ‘down-hill’ team whom Target is introducing to local businessmen with the aim of securing sponsorship for the team to enter the 1988 Winter Olympics. After the other candidates have gracefully travelled down the slopes and formed a uniform row, Edwards travels down and bumps one candidate, producing a domino effect in which each candidate is knocked over in turn. Target informs Edwards that he will not be made a candidate for selection because he is not ‘Olympic’ material, despite Edwards’ run times being consistent with the other candidates. Visually, Target’s ‘Establishment’ credentials are conveyed in the upper-class British accent and blazer and establish an immediate socio-economic contrast with Edwards who, in earlier sequences, is shown attempting various Olympic sports in the terraced street outside his house.

In later sequences this generic theme of the individual in conflict with the community is more vividly realised. After qualifying for the Winter Games by jumping 34 metres at the Garmisch seniors contest, Edwards is summoned to the Olympic headquarters in London where Target informs him that a minimum distance of 61 metres has been set, and that this must occur in a tournament recognised by the British Olympics Committee. In an exchange of dialogue, these competing ideologies are established, with Edwards’ occupying the ‘true’ spirit of the games through his desperation to compete and represent Britain, against Target’s concern with commercial appeal. Target says it costs £4.5 million to send a national squad to the Olympics and that the bulk of that comes from sponsors who want to be associated with certain qualities athletes possess – excellence, achievement and victory – and claims ‘We will not have amateurs in the Olympics’, a comment which reflects the transformation of sport during the 1980s including the authorisation by the International Association of Athletics Federations in 1983 of payments to competitors (Cashmore 2008: 53). Typically in the studio biopic this dynamic of the biopic subject’s clash with existing norms and values takes place in the courtroom or a trial-like setting to signify the figure’s ‘public triumph’ and ability to shift wider opinion (Custen 1992: 187). In *Eddie the Eagle* the scene in the Olympics headquarters constructs this impression through the arrangement of the Olympics establishment at one side of a long rectangular table, with Target at the head flanked by members of the committee all dressed in blue blazers, while Edwards is isolated at the opposite end. A long-shot captures this dynamic, taken behind and to the right of Edwards, a position which serves to emphasis the length of the table and the distance between him and the committee.

The encirclement motif established in this sequence is a recurring device to frame Edwards as the antithesis of Target’s commercial ideology and snobbery. When Edwards qualifies for the Olympics by jumping the minimum distance of 61 metres he overcomes the committee’s hurdle, but his status as an outsider is maintained. The scene opens with Edwards being measured for the Olympic blue blazer. Beginning with an extreme close-up of the official Olympian logo on the chest pocket the camera then pulls back to show Edwards being fitted by a tailor while Olympic candidates stand around him, observing him with their arms folded. The camera continues to pull back and reveals one of the Olympian officials, Richmond (Mark Benton), on the right side of the frame. The camera continues to pull back as Richmond turns to address Target, who enters via the left of the frame, and Richmond suggests that Target was correct and that the minimum entry distance should have been longer to ensure Edwards was unable to compete. As this interaction takes place, attention is drawn to Edwards who occupies the middle of the frame and the mid-ground with the officials conversing in the foreground and the Olympian candidates still visible in the background of the image.

These brief sequences visually convey the conflict between the individual and the wider community, and the arrangement and movement of the camera also convey a sense of encirclement more typical of combat sequences and the war genre. An effective siege narrative requires the viewer to identify with one party at the expense of the other (Hall 2002: 122) and the framing of Edwards surrounded by the Olympic Establishment and British ‘elite’ is the clearest invocation of the underdog persevering through adversity with a ‘never surrender’ attitude. The Englishman as gallant loser encompasses many events in British history that acquired mythic status as heroic failures, including the events portrayed in *Scott of the Antarctic* and also the evacuation of Dunkirk (see Richards 1997: 53). British resilience in the face of overwhelming odds became known as the ‘Dunkirk spirit’, embodying patriotic sacrifice, triumph over impossible odds, and the ability to improvise (see Summerfield 2010: 789). The characterisation of Edwards as amateur, his stealing of his father’s camper van to compete on the European circuit, his second-hand skis taken from the loft, coupled with his challenging of an Olympics establishment that attempts to block him at every turn, all suggest an improvisation and resilience embodied in the ‘Dunkirk spirit’.

Challenging ‘professional’ sports cultures

Target and Edwards are constructed through competing ideologies, the commercially-driven sports administration contrasting with the patriotic amateur. The Norwegian ski jumping team form a further contrast with the self-funded amateur, reflecting the professionalisation of sports and the emergence of sports science. In Edwards’ first encounter with them he enters a Finnish sauna to seek out the Norwegian coach, Bjorn (Rune Temte), for guidance on landing. The scene begins with a close-up of water poured onto hot coals but the next shot is positioned in the back of the sauna with the Norwegian ski jumping team positioned across the frame.

Edwards walks into the sauna from the rear of the frame and into the middle, surrounded by the naked Norwegians, and his swimming shorts, pale skin and thicker build, contrast with their lean bronzed skin. Though he enters greeting the team, Edwards is taken by surprise and blurts out ‘Oh my God, nude!’ He is then ridiculed by Bjorn while the team sit in the sauna, glistening with sweat and massaging their legs, and eventually he flees from the sauna. Later before Edwards embarks on the 90 metre jump in Calgary two Norwegians enquire how he manages to garner media attention. They are framed in a medium-shot which shows their top-half of their athletic frames, suggesting that they are again naked, and Peary responds that the secret is ‘clothes’. In making the Norwegians’ nakedness a recurring joke, it suggests that one of the by-products of training professionally is an athletic physique which can lead to an attention to one’s own body rather than the sport itself.

The Norwegians represent the ‘professional culture’ of athletes and they use sophisticated training equipment and the findings of sport science to improve performance. After an altercation with Bjorn a drunken Peary leads Edwards to the Norwegian ‘Training Camp’. Crucially, this camp is inside a sports hall, rather than out on the slopes where Edwards has been shown practising. Framed in long-shot, the camp consists of miniature replica slopes, racks of exercise balls, numerous writing boards and blackboards which feature diagrams and graphs, labelled meticulously in degrees, detailing the stance ski jumpers should adopt to ensure they travel the maximum distance. Peary speaks disparagingly of their approach, suggesting ‘They wanna turn everyone into robots’ as he knocks the equipment over. The *mise-en-scène* of graphs, diagrams, exercise devices and model replicas represents the use of scientific methodologies while the indoor location of the Norwegian camp suggests a separation from the actual sport itself and the simple pleasure of undertaking it. Doodling on a blackboard Peary remarks that ‘it’s spiritual man’ and ‘you gotta free your mind first’. Visually, the sequence forms a critique of technology designed to enhance sporting achievement, similar to the contrast made in *The Flying Scotsman* between Obree’s hand-made ‘Old Faithful’ and Chis Boardman’s bicycle designed using a computer. Both biopics construct the role of technology in maximising performance as the antithesis of the amateur’s participatory ethic.

The scene, and the relationship between Edwards and Peary as one of coach and student, evokes a further generic theme of the studio biopic identified by Custen, the supportive friend: ‘The presence of an older figure, the bearer of conventional (sometimes limited) wisdom is a staple of many cinematic biographies’ (1992: 69). Though Peary, as a retired ski jumper, provides support and guidance in training Edwards for the Olympics, his status as an *American* is utilised to reaffirm that amateurism is distinctly English. Macaulay described the difficulties in pitching Edwards’ story to American film executives because Edwards never won a competition (Macaulay 2016), and Peary’s attitude constructs an ideological distinction between English and American attitudes to achievement.

This scene occurs after Edwards has competed in Oberstdorf and qualified for the winter Olympics. Whereas Edwards is represented as ecstatic in qualifying, Peary encourages him not to enter the tournament because ‘all you can prove is you don’t mind finishing last’ and advises they spend four years training for the next Winter Olympics in 1992 instead. Peary draws on his experience as an elite ski jumper who was dropped from the American squad by the coach Warren Sharpe. Peary’s exclusion from the team is explained in a scene where he reads Sharpe’s autobiography after Edwards has been hospitalised following a crash on the slopes in Garmisch. As Peary reads, Sharpe’s voice is introduced as voice-over stating that because of Peary’s natural talent he should have been a true Olympian but that he lacked focus and failed to grasp that ‘doing your best is the only option, even if it results in failure’. In the narrative conclusion, having supported Edwards on his final jump, Peary is congratulated by Sharpe, suggesting the American’s redemption is achieved through understanding that the amateur ethos is the true criterion by which Olympian participants are judged.

Nostalgia for the amateur

The sequences with Target, the Norwegian team and Peary all serve to characterise Edwards through a tradition of English amateurism that contrasts with the commercialisation, professionalisation and competitiveness of organised sports. Though the film celebrates this amateur spirit, it also firmly locates this within the past. Through the foregrounding of brightly coloured tracksuits, synth-led music score, and contemporaneous newsreel footage, the film invites a nostalgic viewing of Edwards’ struggles and consistently marks the period as ‘the past’. The film’s nostalgia is closely intertwined with Edwards’ commitment and desire to participate in the Olympic Games, and the intertextual score is frequently introduced as he attempts a slope. The montage of Peary training Edwards is backed by Hall and Oates’ *You Make My Dreams* (1980), and Edwards competes in the 90 metre jump in Calgary to the synth-score of Van Halen’s *Jump* (1984). In particular, this final scene uses the music to evoke the period and also to signify the successful completion of Edwards’ goal to compete in the Olympics, and his consequent elation. In celebrating Edwards achievements visually while simultaneously locating them in the past through layering the images with 1980s popular music, *Eddie the Eagle* suggests Edwards’ achievements in 1988 are worthy of celebration precisely because they took place in that period. This nostalgia for a time when a self-funded amateur could overcome various struggles to achieve his dream of participation was evoked in the comments made by screenwriter Simon Kelton when he reflected on the resources high profile athletes receive ‘*these* days’ and the pleasure in viewing an athlete ‘who *did* it all himself’ (quoted in Edwards 2016 emphasis added).

The film’s promotion of this nostalgic understanding of Edwards’ situation, historicised through intertexual references, is significant because reception of the film centred on how Edwards’ participation in 1988 symbolised a different era in organised sports, before the integrity of organised sports was undermined through the use of PEDs and rampant commercialism. Reports indicate that, overall, *Eddie the Eagle* was a commercial success, grossing over $46 million worldwide (*Box Office Mojo* 2016). The film was cited as one of the highest-grossing ‘independent’ UK films of 2016 with an £8.7 million share of the UK box office, bettered only by *Absolutely Fabulous: The Movie* (2016) which grossed £16 million (see Perkins 2017: 6).[[3]](#endnote-3) In America, despite an extensive promotion campaign, the film failed to perform as well as expected, earning $6.3 million in its opening weekend (Mendelson 2016). The response to *Eddie the Eagle* in America indicates the wider difficulty in producing biopics about people who are not known internationally (see Robinson 2016: 97). The representation of Edwards’ amateurism was at the centre of various responses. Prior to the release of *Eddie the Eagle* in Britain, Jim White wrote in the *Telegraph* that ‘Edwards epitomised the moral value of trying even if success is impossible. He was, in fact, the last of the great amateurs; we will never see his like again’ (White 2016). Here Edwards is constructed as a symbol of appropriate sporting behaviour, but White also hints at how organised sports have changed irrevocably and with negative consequences for their integrity. Nostalgia for the amateur spirit was present in reviews of the film itself and many publications contrasted the past as conveyed in *Eddie the Eagle* with the contemporary, on-going crises and corruption in organised sports. Writing for the *Guardian* Emma John commented that ‘it’s hard to imagine, in these days of never-ending doping scandals and institutional corruption, that Eddie the Eagle caused so much controversy simply by having the temerity to compete’ (John 2016). This implies that doping is a relatively new phenomenon when most accounts of doping activity consider its presence in sport since the 1960s and others suggest instances of doping can be traced back to the ancient Greeks (see Møller 2010: 32). There is a sense that organised sports have changed radically since the 1980s and the period when Edwards participated. Other reviews foreground Edwards’ integrity as the antithesis of contemporary, corrupt athletes and how his approach is vindicated by their subsequent condemnation:

The film closes with the softest of soft soap as it trots out the words of Olympics founding father Pierre de Coubertin: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.” Hokey maybe, but at least Eddie was not on drugs - other than selfbelief [sic]. And the last laugh has been his. After all, can you name another British hero of the slopes? (Tyers 2016: 16)

IMDb user reviews suggest that *Eddie the Eagle* contributes to the memory of Edwards as an underdog champion that the British nation was proud of, and not the divisive figure described by Simon Barnes. One British cinemagoer spoke glowingly of the film’s representation of the 1980s and Edwards’ triumph over adversity: ‘This movie reminded me of what i [sic] loved about the 80’s and i [sic] heartily recommend it to all you who lived through these events. It reminds you of how proud we were of our plucky underdog champion’ (anna-572, 2016). User reviews from American cinemagoers raise the issue of ‘participation’ trophies whereby candidates receive awards for participating in events, regardless of their position: ‘those who scoff at the state of sport today and make a stink about how competition is being scuttled by participation trophies are missing the point. Sportsmanship is not about beating the other guy, it’s about achieving your personal best’ (bkrauser-81-311064, 2016). OtherIMDb users expressed nostalgia for a period in which organised sports were untainted by commercialism and superstar athletes:

It’s been a long time since I felt the character and had tears come to my eyes but this movie helped me to remember when the Olympics had genuine athletes ... not those who seek fame and fortune but those who wish to participate and compete as an Olympian. (reviews1958, 2016)

The views expressed by reviewers and cinemagoers exemplify how *Eddie the Eagle* was considered in relation to contemporary discourses of sports participation, including corruption and PEDs, but also how its nostalgic appeal conveys a period before organised sports lost their integrity.

Conclusion

*Eddie the Eagle* continues a tradition of amateurism at the heart of many British biopics. Its significance lies in its representation of the past and of Edwards’ achievements in relation to the dominant contemporary discourse in organised sports. The depiction of the amateur contrasts with the increasing prominence of professionalism in sport and its ‘win at any cost’ mentality, a mentality conveyed through reports that describe the transgressions of various professional sportsman. The increasing emphasis upon ‘winning at all costs’ suggested by high-profile doping reports heightens the nostalgic appeal of the amateur, a figure who values participation in the sport over victory. Doping, corruption, and reports on the wealth of athletes undermine the integrity of professional sports. *Eddie the Eagle* constructs Eddie Edwards’ underdog journey as characterised by personal integrity within a wider cultural climate in which the integrity of contemporary sport is increasingly under threat.

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1. **Notes**

1. The film contrasts Abrahams’ professional approach and ethos – ‘I run to win’ – with that adopted by Lord Andrew Lindsay (Nigel Havers) who represents the ‘Gentleman amateur’ and participates for enjoyment: ‘To me the whole thing’s fun’ (see Chapman 2005: 292). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2. Eric ‘The Eel’ Moussambani was an Olympic participant from Equatorial Guinea who won brief international fame at the 2000 Summer Olympics after completing the 100m freestyle swim in the unpredicted time of 1 min 52.7 seconds. Various publications drew parallels between Moussambani, who trained in a hotel swimming pool and had never swam in an Olympic-size pool, and Edwards (see Robins 2000: 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3. An independent film is defined as one produced without creative or financial input from the major US studio companies (see Perkins 2017: 9)

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