

20 YEARS AGO TODAY...

Bull Durham captured us
when our city was new, and old.

BY JEFF MERRON



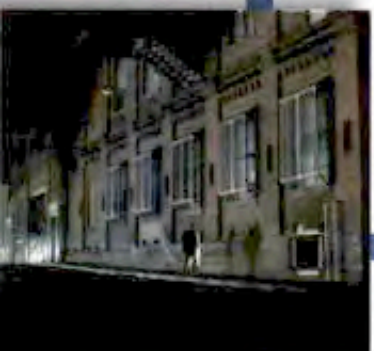


Two decades ago, a type of movie rarely seen before opened on big screens across the United States *Bull Durham*, starring Kevin Costner, Susan Sarandon, Tim Robbins and the City of Durham, had been pegged as a sports film, a movie about baseball, but that only told part of the story. Because what made *Bull Durham* different was its realism. Few sports movies before it had attempted to simulate real game action; the cast of *Bull Durham* included 10 current or former pro players and was written and directed by Ron Shelton, who'd played five years for Baltimore Orioles farm teams.

Few had used sports as the backdrop for bigger stories involving romance, friendship, maturity and life changes. And few had anchored the home team in so realistic a setting. *Bull Durham* portrays a fictional version of the 1987 Durham Bulls, and the movie depicts

Durham, in all its 1987 gritty, tobacco-stained, eclectic urban charm. The film connected with Durhamites on a visceral level, a feeling that continues in some form to the present. "Being in Durham and being able to experience a lot of locations in which the film was shot gives you a special affinity for it," notes Mayor Bill Bell, who was chairman of the Board of County Commissioners at the time of the film's debut. "When people are shooting in your own hometown and you see the sites, and you know a little bit about the history of the people involved, it gives a feeling that you're more a part of it than being just a viewer."

Despite its grittiness, or perhaps because of it, this city and that movie have shared a bond. Producer Thom Mount, a Durham native, who was running his own independent film company after a long stint as head of Universal Pictures, had kind of planned it that way. At the



COURTESY OF MGM HOME ENTERTAINMENT

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time a co-owner of the Bulls, along with Miles Woolf and Van Schley, Mount began working with Shelton while the script was still in its earliest stages. Annie Savoy, who would be played by Susan Sarandon, had yet to be added as a character. And the baseball team was located “in a generic Southern location,” Mount says.

In scouting for locations, Mount first suggested that Shelton have a look at Durham. But Shelton also considered Anderson and Charleston, in South Carolina, and Asheville before deciding, finally, but without a doubt, on Durham. “The good news was that the Bulls and the old ballpark were incredibly colorful.”

Mount knew Durham inside and out. He’d been born and reared in the city, and lived in five different neighborhoods by the time he was a teenager (going up in scale as his father, a lawyer, advanced in his career). He’d graduated from Durham High. His parents and sister still lived in Durham. And he got married in Duke Chapel.

“I grew up in an environment where downtown was vital. Three hardware stores and Amos ‘n Andy hot dogs and a main street with the young men’s shop. Tobacco auctions would be going on, and you’d see kids who came in from the country just to ride up and down in the elevator in the Hill Building because they’d never seen an elevator before.

“The town had, for me, romance. And Ron totally got it. He walked around and said, ‘I love this, I want this street, I want this building, I want the reflection of this thing, I want to be going by this part of the tobacco factory, I want this red brick wall.’”

In 1987, Durham was a city in early transformation. American Tobacco left town that year — a move that Reyn Bowman, the president and CEO of the Durham Convention & Visitors Bureau, characterizes as “a huge body blow.” Also in 1987, the city held its last tobacco auction. Just eight years earlier, in 1979, Liggett & Myers had moved its headquarters to New Jersey, laying off hundreds

were
classic.”

in the process. (Liggett would roll its last cigarette here in September 2000.) Tobacco warehouses were abandoned, and although the town never lost its vibrancy, its direction was unclear.

But the film helped Durham maintain its sense of place, says Bowman, who began working for the bureau in 1989. “The movie resonates. It was probably the first time we saw our essence, our character, on a world stage.” *Bull Durham* captured an “unpretentious, genuine, down-to-earth town that also has a lot of originality,” he adds.

Mount agrees. “Durham was certainly a city on the cusp of redefining itself, and unsure about which way to go,” he says. “One of the things that the movie did was help people appreciate the qualities Durham had that were indigenous, that people didn’t necessarily see because they were familiar with them. It gave us a new appreciation for the magic and romance of red brick tobacco warehouses, it gave us a sense of empty

The minor league capital of the world

In 1980, Miles Woolf purchased the Bulls for \$2,417, with Durham native Thom Mount — then the 32-year-old president of Universal Pictures — pitching in as an investor. During the 1988 season — the year *Bull Durham* came out — the Bulls drew more fans than any other Single-A team, setting a record with 271,650 fans in 1988. Souvenir sales popped from \$50,000 a year in 1987 to a half-million a year in 1990 — the same year the Bulls became the first Single-A team in history to top 300,000 in attendance. In 1990, Woolf and his co-owners decided the Bulls needed deeper pockets to keep growing, and sold the team for between \$2 million and \$4 million to Capitol Broadcasting Co., headed by Jim Goodman.

Woolf also purchased *All-America Baseball News* and moved it to Durham in 1983. The biweekly newspaper covers high school, college, and minor league baseball. It has spawned five annuals, and a comprehensive Web site that is widely considered to be the bible of minor league baseball.

USA Baseball, the national governing body of the sport, is also headquartered in Durham. Besides overseeing and promoting amateur baseball, the organization selects teams of major and minor league players to represent the United States in international competitions, including the Olympics.

And Minor League Baseball (MiLB), which oversees 175 minor league teams, has just completed an operating agreement with the town to run the old Durham Athletic Park as a training facility for employees. It plans to teach classes in sport turf management, concessions, merchandising, public relations and other business operations, and also use DAP to help train umpires and grounds crews. The negotiations continue as to whether Durham will get the MiLB Hall of Fame.

MiLB has already opened its Durham operations office. Long-planned renovation on DAP begin this summer and end in the fall, after which it will be open for business. While MiLB will manage the facility, DAP will remain home to the Bull Durham Blues Festival and World Beer Festival. **DM**



COURTESY OF MGM HOME ENTERTAINMENT

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“I think *Bull Durham* really created the national public awareness that you can’t buy for a city like Durham — the name of the city is in the title of a big hit movie, arguably one of the most successful sports movies of all time,” Mount says.

But *Bull Durham* didn’t do the heavy lifting in the city’s resurgence over the past two decades, Mount is

quick to add. “It’s not easy to turn a city around,” he points out, giving much credit to “some good mayors in Durham who worked hard to balance the preservation with new activity in the city.”

The compliments fly in circles. “To me, all that’s come from the movie has been very positive,” says Mayor Bell, one of the men to whom Mount refers. “It’s been one of the catalysts for the rebirth of downtown Durham.” **DM**

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When Thom Mount found himself in Hollywood in the early 1970s, he was a true *wunderkind*, hand-picked to run Universal Pictures after working only three years at the studio, at the age of 26. Between 1976 and 1983, the Durham High School graduate oversaw the production

of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, *Scarface*, *The Breakfast Club* and other landmark films. In 1983, he left Universal to become an independent producer. *Bull Durham* was one of The Mount Company’s earliest releases.

Mount is a true local, born in Durham in 1948. His father, Lillard, practiced law in the Bull City for more than a half-century, and became the Bulls’ lawyer when the

Fun Facts

Working title of script:
The Player to be Named Later

Number of days spent shooting
in Durham (fall 1987): **14**

Total spent by film company in Durham:
\$2 million

(source: Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau)

Total spent by Susan Sarandon at
The Regulator bookstore: **\$70**

Number of local extras:
approx. 2,500

Pay received by each extra, per day:
free lunch

Sales increase, garter belts, shortly after
movie's release: **15%**

(source: Frederick's of Hollywood)

Full production budget: **\$9 million**

Estimated revenue: **Grossed \$5 million**
opening weekend; total of **\$51 million**
in North America

Selected as **best sports movie
of all time**

by *Sports Illustrated* in 2003

Ranked 97th in the top 100 of
American Film Institute's list of comedies

The tavern in which Crash and Nuke first
meet: That's **Mitch's**, still going strong
and looking pretty much the same as it did
in the late 1980s. It's at 2426 Hillsborough
St. in Raleigh.

The pool hall where Crash goes near the
end of the movie: It's called **the
Green Room**. You can find it at
1108 Broad St. in Durham. The owner
of the pool hall at the time of the filming,
Joe Wilson, sold it not long ago.

Annie's House: At the time of the
filming it had been vacant for several
years. It was unheated (hence Nuke
needing to keep his socks on during the
"summer"). It's at 911 N. Mangum St.,
and it's called **the
Manning House**

team was revitalized in 1980. Bonnie and Lillard Mount had three children — Thom and his sisters Mary Mount, who still lives in Durham, and Elisabeth Mount Williams, who lives in Chapel Hill. Both his parents died in 2007 — Lillard in May at the age of 93, and Bonnie in December at the age of 92.

Mount remains strongly con-

nected to Durham. He has taught at Duke University. He is a member of the North Carolina Film Council, which has helped draw hundreds of film and TV productions to the state since it was formed in 1980. Though he lives in California, he returns to Durham frequently.

Durham Magazine's Jeff Merron sat down with Mount recently and

spoke to him about growing up in Durham and the genesis of his beloved classic, *Bull Durham*.

Durham Magazine: Was it difficult to make *Bull Durham*?

Thom Mount: It took some time. I started developing the movie when I was still running Universal Studios — it was one of a handful of



COURTESY OF DURHAM CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

projects I took with me when I left. It took a few years to establish the specific characters, to find the right actors, and to finance the film. We were told by many studios that the movie couldn't be made. They would say nobody cared about baseball movies, or sports films never worked, or Kevin Costner wasn't a movie star.

DM: Now that you've had 20 years to consider — and reconsider — the impact of *Bull Durham* on your hometown, what surprises you the most?

Mount: We had no idea we were making an enduring classic at the time. All we knew is that we had a very cool, very sexy movie that utilized sports as a metaphor and background for how people struggle to move from one act to another in their personal lives. It just endures — people will run into

me, recognize the connection, and say, "You know, candlesticks are nice."

DM: Since the late 1980s, minor league baseball has exploded as a business, with beautiful new ballparks being built not just in Durham but in scores of small cities across the country. Do you think there's a connection?

Mount: I think Bull Durham helped people think about baseball as a vital and normal part of everyday life again. That's a big shift. And with the Bulls, we sold the team because we didn't have the resources to manage its growth. When Jim Goodmon bought the team, he promised he would do his level best to get a new ballpark built. I think the threat of losing the Bulls to Raleigh woke people up. I am thrilled with the new ball-

park. I think they did a beautiful job. I think Jim Goodmon's been an unbelievable owner-operator.

DM: When you were making the film, did you think of Durham as a "character" in the movie?

Mount: Of course. But what I really thought about when making *Bull Durham* was I had a wonderful childhood there. I loved growing up in the town. More than once I said to Ron [Shelton], "If we can make a movie here that is some kind of love song to Durham, I would be forever grateful to everybody." And I think everyone involved in the film did that. They really captured, if not the specifics, they captured the feel, the spirit of Durham that still gets me. **DM**