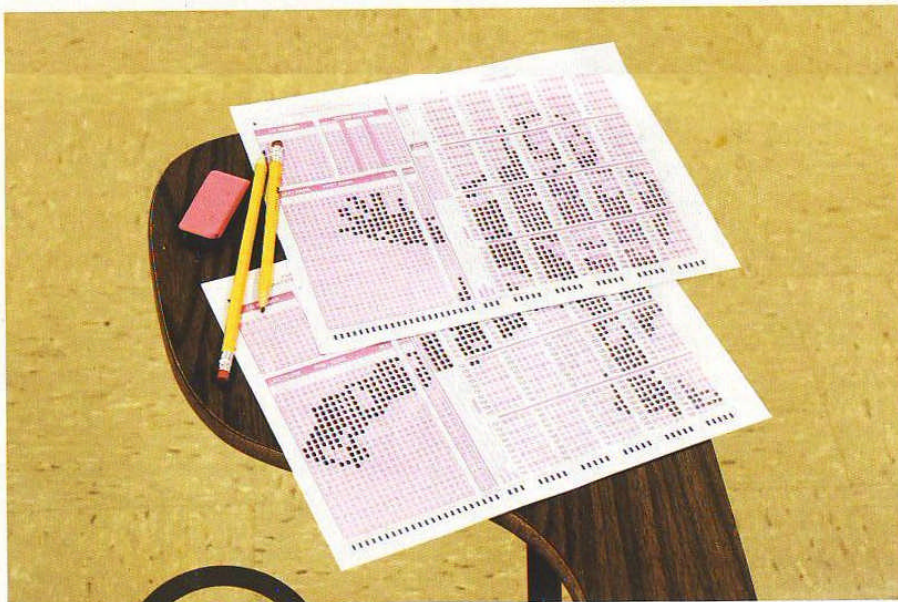


Varsity Video

MTV-style minifilms help student athletes preserve their glory days — and maybe win a scholarship.



Five minutes of glory can be excerpted from even the most ordinary life. Such is the logic of everyman highlight reels. Given hours of aimless footage — let's call that life itself — marketing services around the country now produce minifilms in which, to the tune of "Dream On" or "Whoomp! (There It Is)," average athletes complete every touchdown pass, execute every pancake block, turn crowds misty-eyed with adoration and generally trounce everyone around them.

These impressive videos — mostly commissioned for athletes, but also for aspiring actors, dancers, musicians and other performers — have become a standard component of college applications. Their ubiquity suggests the operating assumption of American teenagers, who, having been born to camcorders and graduated to camera phones, have become the ultimate multimedia curators, fanatical archivists and tireless autobiographers. If an experience is not uploadable to MySpace, it did not happen.

At the same time, athletic recruiters have evidently all but quit looking for the next Troy Smith or J.J. Redick at actual games in Cleveland or southwest Virginia. Instead, they expect players to come to them, submitting DVDs or links to video streamed from YouTube or sports-info trading posts, including iPlayers, Student-Athlete Showcase, Next Step College Sports, Get My Name Out or the monster sports sites Scout (which is owned by Fox), Rival (owned by Yahoo) and MaxPreps, which CBS acquired in April.

Typically parents justify the price of these videos, which range from \$300 to \$5,000, as an investment against a scholarship, one that might save a kid tens of thousands on annual tuition. Student-Athlete Show-

case, which was founded in 2003 by Rex Grayner, a former college baseball player, also offers clients a full-dress press package — a so-called E-Profile that includes a résumé, a highlight reel, stats and a selective bio that looks suspiciously like a pedigree (the athletic achievements of a student's dame and sire are underscored). As a sports matchmaker, Student-Athlete Showcase now boasts of winning clients an average of \$12,000 in scholarship money, or a total of \$1.7 million since the site's introduction.

But whether the highlight reels secure the big money, they serve as potent keepsakes for the young athletes, or maybe as video cocaine — something to deliver bright highs whenever a former M.V.P. needs a glory-days memory or a snort of self-love. In fact, I've been imagining the happiness I'd derive from having my whole adolescence recut by a professional highlighter: my first kiss at a hockey rink, a moment or two of harmony with my family and my one and only goal during a J.V. lacrosse game. All trivial humiliations and sulking close-ups would be edited out and left to decompose in the data-storage

crypt of my personal highlight production company.

Because too much gloss might spook some recruiters, several of the bigger production companies, including Student-Athlete Showcase, White Mountain Sports and the California-based College Recruiting Group, have found a visual style somewhere between home video and N.F.L. Films. Others, especially local companies that seem always to hire former wedding and bar-mitzvah videographers, serve up more visual schmaltz. But every service tarts up an athlete's record, cutting everything but the clearest coups and then adding surging chords, titles in showoff fonts and rack-focus shots of the scoreboard. Next come stats, fades, wipes, pans, zooms, slow-mo, fast-mo, shakes, rumbles, sound effects, gaudy graphics and canned interviews. Usually the haphazard sounds of the court or field are muted in favor of an up-tempo soundtrack (pop hits are regularly used without permission), but periodically a game or showcase is selectively miked to amplify the cracking, smacking and crunching sounds meant to signal to recruiters that at least one kid is giving 110 percent.

Backgrounds and animation sequences grabbed royalty-free from chaotic sites like Digital Juice cosmetically enhance the on-screen action. Violent royal blue whirls and swooshes seem to define the sports-hero aesthetic, while the ominous spotlight effect used to pick out a player on the field (as a dark cloud enshrouds her teammates) seems like a tool for a hit man. Alex Smith, of the Laguna Beach High School football team, used the old spinning-newspaper trick to show how regularly he made the local sports pages. His name and yardage were underlined in red.

High-end videographers — some of whom have filmed sports for ESPN or professional teams — shoot from the stands, the press box and even the field when they need close-ups of the decisive moments

Photograph by Kevin Van Aelst

like the coin toss in football. They also openly choreograph everything from portrait-style shots to staged action sequences to useful cutaways. And though the coaches' requisite testimonials lack the eloquence of the soliloquies on NBC's football show "Friday Night Lights," the spiels sound heavily scripted and rehearsed. "Kid has a lot of versatility, very strong leader and very smart kid," one says, robotically, in the highlight reel for David Blalock, left tackle at Providence High School. Many video producers counsel both athletes and coaches to prepare remarks for the camera. On sites where sports videographers exchange advice, they praise certain kinds of athletes — girls, especially — for taking direction. No one pretends that what they're shooting is *vérité*.

IPlayers started in 2002 as a Web anthology of the achievements of a single player, Michael Husted, who was a kicker for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and several other teams. When the site spread Husted's name like a charm, the company's founders came up with the idea of centralizing game film, soliciting and cataloging uploads and inviting recruiters to come and watch. A sleeper audience for their film, and especially the film at Rivals and Scout, has been participants in our new national pastime, armchair recruiting. These are the guys who study high-school highlights in order to match wits with paid scouts and sharpen their talents for fantasy games. As one New York devotee of fantasy football says, "Any Web-enabled amateur recruiting addict worth his salt at this point has probably looked at some highlight videos of high-school players."

Meanwhile, producers tap the standard anxieties of parents. As Broadcaster Marketing Services says: "Are you willing to risk your child's potential scholarship with a homemade videotape? Remember, first impressions last forever!" ■



Points of Entry

THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

CAN'T LOSE: "Friday Night Lights" could be the greatest football drama ever, the greatest network drama ever or the greatest hourlong series you've been missing. Find your own superlative while NBC is handing out the first-season DVD (looking good in anamorphic widescreen) for a mere \$20 — with a money-back guarantee. To get an even cheaper fix, you can stream episodes from Season 1 and new episodes from the second season on NBC.com.

JUMP-CUTS: The N.B.A. paired up with YouTube this year and now shows basketball highlights at www.youtube.com/nba. Hoop dreamers can also upload their trick shots and sick alley-oops — and discuss other people's moves — at www.youtube.com/group/nbapostup.

LET THE DOGS BACK OUT: Pipe the stadium into your headphones with "Arena Rock Classics" — a CD that includes not just "Na Na Hey Hey" but also "Yea Alabama" and other college fight songs — as well as "ESPN Presents Stadium Anthems," a collection for the more discerning jock-jam fan. And you'd better believe that thumbplay.com will sell you the "We Will Rock You" ringtone.



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