



Script Surgeon

Title	XXXXXX
Writer	XXXXXX
Format	Screenplay, 94pp
Logline	Bend it like Bedlam (or One Flew Over the Keeper's Head)
Genre	Sports movie
Report by	Tom Salinsky

Summary

Dr Fiona Crompton is trying to secure further funding for her experiment in curing depression by making her patients play as a football team, but so far the team's lack of success only depresses them further. Joop, a new patient, is depressed but also very athletic and an experienced footballer. He may be just what Fiona's team needs, but he's initially reluctant to play with a team of "nutters".

At training, Joop meets some more of the patients. Pete is insecure and has some form of OCD which makes it impossible for him to kick a ball only once. Bish saves imaginary goals. Alan is a kleptomaniac. That night, Joop's partner Lisa is skeptical but doesn't stop Joop from taking part in the forthcoming match, which the team loses 7-2. Joop questions Fiona about the experiment and its possible outcomes. Fiona's father developed a happiness scale which is now very popular, but Fiona worries it reduces people to statistics. At dinner with her parents, this issue is discussed again. Fiona determines to prove her father wrong.

A match is coming up. Trainer Ted prepares the team and Joop scores an early goal, but Pete's OCD costs them another. Fiona meets David, a sports psychologist on the touchline. David does a quick NLP exercise with Robbo at half time, and develops a new strategy for the team, which proves successful as the team records their first win. Ted takes Nurse Claire for a celebratory drink.

With David's help, the team goes from strength to strength, but David appears to have an ulterior motive. Alan meanwhile has been using David's lessons of confidence in his shoplifting, forcing Fiona to go and bail him out, bringing David with her. David demonstrates his methods on Alan, apparently curing him of his kleptomania.

In the next game, David manages to cure Bish of his delusions and the team wins again. Joop is spending more time away from his wife and child, but isn't yet ready to go back to work. Fiona is falling for David and keen to learn more about NLP. The final is coming up and it could be Joop's old team they play against. With funding still hanging in the balance, Fiona is able to persuade the old professors who hold the purse strings to come and watch the next game. Fiona and David now turn their attention to Ted's drinking as their own relationship develops and deepens. David takes Ted out and gets him drunk while implanting suggestions designed to attack his alcoholism. He also reveals to Ted that he has bet against Fiona's team. Ted tells Fiona who warns him off attending the final and unleashing his secret subliminal message.

The day of the final – against Joop's old team – arrives and Fiona's parents have agreed to come and watch, in part to meet Fiona's new boyfriend. The team is anxious about David's absence and Joop's ex-team mates are scornful. Play starts and Bish gets confused again. They end the first half one nil



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down. In the second half, Robbo is sent off but he is able to help Bish regain his focus. Joop repeats one of David's exercises and the team is reinvigorated, finally able to score the winning goals. Everybody celebrates – Lisa embraces Joop, whose ex-team mates are contrite, Fiona's parents congratulate her and her professors seem cautiously impressed. David appears, but now it seems as if he bet on the team, not against them. David's own doctor, Dr Larson, has lost the bet and now has to provide funding for the team and for David's NLP research for the next two years.

Overview

This screenplay has a strong idea at its core, and the combination of sports movie and triumph-over-clinical-adversity is interesting and fresh, but the plot doesn't test the characters sufficiently, there is too much emphasis on issues of clinical data which feel dry and uninvolved, and – fatally – the apparent hero is almost entirely passive throughout.

Theme and structure

Sports movies are almost always triumph-over-adversity stories. Audiences empathise with underdogs, so Rocky begins the movie an unknown up against the heavyweight champion, the women in *A League of Their Own* have never held a baseball bat before and the team in *Cool Runnings* have never even seen snow, let alone a bobsled. Having a team of clinically depressed patients playing football as a form of therapy is a fun – if slightly hard-to-swallow – concept, but despite much talk of “finals”, the “next round” and so on, it's not clear from the script exactly what kind of competition they are playing in, nor how much time Fiona has until her funding is pulled. (Nor, actually, what that would mean in practical terms. Just who has to pay for what in order that eleven men can kick a football around?) This urgently needs to be clarified so we clearly know just how high the footballing standards of this competition are.

There is a trade-off here of course. The greater the gulf between the underdog heroes and the quality of the opposition, the higher the stakes and the more exciting their eventual victory – but also the harder you have to work to overcome issues of credibility. I'm not suggesting you rewrite this and pit your team of outpatients against Manchester United in the FA Cup Final, because there's no way you could write that and make me believe it!

But winning or losing sports events is not what sports movies are really about, anyway. The sporting event, like the mountain to climb or the bomb to defuse, is generally a device to reveal character. Winning the big game is possible only because the characters have overcome their personal problems, and this is something which you seem to understand well. But as well as this triumph-over-absurdity plotline, there are other themes clamouring for attention: the issue of the Crompton scale is a debate about clinicians' views of their patients; on top of that we also have NLP vs psychiatry; on top of that we also have the ethics of experimentation vs treatment, and none of these themes is pulling in the same direction. There is also a lack of clarity about what Fiona's experiment is intended to prove or whom it's trying to help. There's a lovely irony at the beginning, when we are told that the goal is to cure patients of depression, but since they are incompetent footballers, every game they lose depresses them even more. However, when we meet them, they turn out not to be depressives, but instead, a kleptomaniac, an OCD sufferer, a fantasist and someone with anger issues. This isn't hard to clean up, but cleaned up it should be.



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Fiona

The story centres on Fiona. She is the reason the team exists in the first place, and as the movie opens she is desperate to secure funding. But who is Fiona and what does this game mean to her? How does her investment in it cost her, and how does she gain from its success? Two possible answers are presented. One is that she will be able to demonstrate to her father that his understanding of how to measure happiness is fatally flawed. But the Crompton Scale is never seen to be used by anyone, so this demonstration cannot take place. And even if it did, it would feel like the solution to an academic conundrum and not the ending of an emotional journey. The other answer is that she will secure her funding and be able to continue her work, and while that would be satisfying and pleasing to her, again it doesn't feel like it would be a life-affirming achievement. This cannot be a story about securing funding, a mere financial goal, it needs to be about much more than that. True, Fiona is also fond of her patients, but as the screenplay unfolds, we hardly see her interacting with them, so this can't be about her relationship with them either. Ultimately, running this team costs Fiona nothing, and its success only benefits her and moves her in very modest ways, and so the stakes feel very low.

Early in the script, another possibility occurred to me. Joop is a wonderful candidate for inclusion in the team, because not only is he suffering from depression, but he is an experienced footballer, and his inclusion might lift the team. But we don't get to see Joop turn the quality of the team around, because David is brought in to perform that story function, so the whole introduction of Joop late in the process does nothing except he raises the quality of play a bit simply by his presence.

What if instead, Fiona brings him in as a ringer? What if he's not depressed, but Fiona becomes so desperate for her team to win a game, any game, that she brings in an ex-professional or experienced amateur player, tells him how to fake his symptoms of depression and then thanks to his magic feet, the team is successful? Then she's conflicted between her professional ethics on the one hand and her need to steer the team to victory on the other. You can develop that further if it's the hospital board who then see the potential of this team to bring kudos and good PR to the hospital, and they insist on the team playing again and again, when Fiona had thought she'd got away with the deception and was about to disband the team, or at least let her ringer go back to his life. Now he'll be under pressure to maintain the deception, and not to let the rest of the team down, she'll be trying to cover her arse and save her career, and the hospital board will be seeing the whole thing not in terms of patient care, but just in terms of good publicity for them. The stakes are higher for everyone, and the question of the point of the football team is posed more acutely.

As it is, once David is introduced, Fiona becomes entirely passive. Strong stories almost always present us with heroes with strong goals who suffer in pursuit of those goals. Fiona has only a modestly strong goal – to see her team win. She takes almost no action in pursuit of that goal after recruiting Joop, and never suffers because of any of her actions. Her relationship with her funding body and her parents is essentially static, and while she does start to fall in love with David, she never makes any strong decisions about how to achieve that, she simply discusses medical issues with him in a rather dry and abstract way.



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David and NLP

Much of this screenplay reads like an advertisement for NLP, and I am struggling to eliminate my own skepticism about NLP from the picture. That caveat aside, to all intents and purposes NLP is here presented as a magic wand which cures all ills and David as the all-powerful magician wielding it. But we like heroes to be good at their jobs and Fiona – supposedly an experienced clinical psychiatrist – just stands back, dumbly watching in amazement as David repairs longstanding psychological issues with a few simple words. If Fiona had been working with depression and other conditions for long, and this was a world in which NLP worked as simply, as effectively and as easily as it is portrayed here, it is impossible to believe that she would have never heard of it and never used it. The reality is that NLP is not often used in clinical settings, because none of these outcomes has ever been demonstrated, and so its use is generally confined to life coaches and the like, where empirical data is less often demanded.

But, even given that you could convince an audience of the magical powers of David's approach – regardless of whether you call it NLP or not – the introduction into the narrative of this psychological wizard doesn't do anything to help the story except answer the question of how these sad-acts could ever hope to play a decent game of football. It doesn't challenge Fiona's core beliefs about how psychiatry should be done, it doesn't usurp her position as the team's mentor and it doesn't have any unwanted side-effects, except very briefly when Alan steals a leather jacket.

Let's look at David's NLP like The Force in *Star Wars*. The Force is required to make Luke's final attack on the Death Star credible. The shot on the Death Star is incredibly difficult to make (good, so the stakes are high) and Luke can only do it because he uses The Force (good, so we understand how he was able to accomplish such a difficult task). Similarly, in your screenplay, for this group of patients to play effectively as a team is very difficult, and David's NLP makes it possible and credible that they should eventually succeed. So far, so good. But *Star Wars* also gives us a voice of skepticism – Han Solo, who believes that this talk of The Force is just so much mumbo-jumbo – and so Luke's loyalties are divided between Han and Ben. Then, just as he is beginning to develop his Jedi powers, Ben is taken from him, which leaves him feeling more helpless than before. And finally, developing the power of The Force comes at a cost – you may succumb to the Dark Side. Almost no-one is skeptical about David's NLP (so any skeptical readers have no-one on "their side"), its introduction creates no conflict in anyone else, and there is next-to-no drawback to using it. It's just magic, and so it's dramatically rather weak.

The other players

Eleven players is a lot to keep track of and so, I guess, it makes sense to focus on just a few. Joop, Alan, Bish, Pete and Robbo all have their own problems, and the structure of dealing with each at a time is quite effective. As with other ensemble movies, each has their own little story, and you can set each one ticking and then detonate it, like a series of timebombs. But too many of these stories read like case-studies and not engaging drama.

Joop is probably the person we know most about and he's the only one we ever see off the pitch. We see his home life, and we understand why he has a personal reason for wanting to play in this team and help them to victory. But we have no sense of how depression has impacted his life (his relationship with his wife is a little cool, but this doesn't look like a marriage on the brink of



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collapse), we get references to a job he might or might not be going back to but we are never told what this job is, and his feelings about playing against his old team are very straightforward: this is my new team, and you're my old team. So again, his journey is very simple and easy and linear. He has no difficult choices to make, no internal conflicts and doesn't haul himself out of a pit of depression over the course of the screenplay. He begins sounding functional and skeptical, and ends happy to have played a good game of football. That's not a profound turning point in the life of a rich and complicated character. Compare this to say, Tom Hanks in *A League of Their Own*. He begins the movie a washed-up alcoholic opposed to the idea of a women's baseball league, despite the fact that he has to coach them, is horrified at the stunts that the girls pull to get publicity, quits the team when he thinks he's just there as a figurehead, finally realises that these girls could actually play real baseball if he's prepared to sober up and help them and is finally able to celebrate their successes at the end of the film. His characterisation and the film's plotting are both designed to get him into positions of internal conflict and to finally resolve that conflict having made him suffer throughout. And he's just a supporting character!!

Even closer to home, have you ever seen the eighties Michael Keaton film *The Dream Team*? In this movie, a clinical psychiatrist, frustrated at the way his patients can never make progress while insulated from the real world, obtains permission from the board to take a small group on a "field trip" to see – funnily enough! – a ballgame. The group consists of a pathological liar with aggressive tendencies (Keaton), an OCD sufferer who believes himself to be a doctor (Christopher Lloyd), a former advertising executive with a messiah complex (Peter Boyle) and an autistic who endlessly repeats baseball commentaries (Stephen Furst). Their doctor's claim is that the hospital environment itself is stopping his patients from progressing, and that the risk of taking them outside is very small. This claim is tested when he takes them outside the hospital, but then they are separated from him, so he can no longer guarantee their safety. When they not only survive, but eventually save his life from two crooked cops, this claim is validated. Each of the patients' weaknesses eventually becomes a form of strength, even if only temporarily.

Your players are always safe and secure – none is ever a danger to himself or to others – few of them are invested in the game for any personal reasons beyond the fact that winning is nicer than losing and none of their psychological problems is presented as anything other than a barrier which needs removing. The one exception to this, and one of the most satisfying sequences, is where Robbo's delusion is used to relieve Bish of his.

And at the end of the game, what has been demonstrated to whom? That the team won without David there seems to be proving that they didn't need his NLP wizardry – except that Joop performed his own version of one the incantations. But Fiona's claim wasn't that her patients could do it for themselves, on the contrary it seemed to be that the football game was essential to their recovery (and that this recovery is perceivable but not measurable on standardised scales). Neither of these claims is put to the test, so there's no resolution to Fiona's storyline. Finally, at the end of the story, a brand new theme appears: is Fiona's football team therapy or experiment? But this doesn't pay off anything which has been developing up till now. And the old pros who are mildly humiliated at end don't seem to have done much to deserve it. They, quite reasonably, argue that one hospital can't fund every request that's made of it, but they don't condemn Fiona's experiment, nor do they forbid her to continue with it, so there's little satisfaction in seeing them have their status lowered.



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Subplots – Ted and the bet

Finally, more work needs to be done to tie the two subplots – Ted’s relationship with Nurse Claire and David’s bet with Larson – more firmly in to the main plot. Good story design means that subplots are more than what some of the characters are doing while the main plot takes a breather. *Back to the Future* has as its main plot a science-fiction adventure story about a mad scientist, a bolt of lightning striking a clock tower and a magic car that has to be driven at excitingly high speeds. But the movie is really about family, and it’s in the subplot this is seen most clearly, as Marty gets to witness and alter how his father first met his mother. Notice that the main plot creates the subplot. Marty can’t just concentrate on getting back to 1985, he has to make sure that his father dances with his mother or he himself will wink out of existence. And in taking action in furtherance of that goal, Marty initially gets himself in to more trouble, as his mother starts falling in love with him! Take away any of these characters: Marty, Doc, Mom, Dad, and both subplot and main plot collapse. But take either Ted or Claire out and the main plot continues, pretty much unaffected. There’s some attempt to tie Ted’s story in to the themes of NLP-as-cure-all and happiness-through-good-mental-health but this is the wrong way round. It’s usually more productive to play a variation on the theme through the subplot, and have the subplot generated out of the main plot, rather than have the subplot independent of the main plot and there restating the theme, as in your design.

The bet too is hard to swallow. What does David mean when he says to Ted “If she fails we win”? It’s never explained. Nor is David’s failure to tell Fiona what was going on. It isn’t even clear at the end if his affection for her was genuine or not. Hiding information from the characters generates suspense, and then revealing it can generate catharsis and empathy in the audience. Hiding information from the audience which at least one of the characters knows very well is a much riskier proposition, and the information when revealed needs to be staggering or the audience will be cheated and/or manipulated. Alfred Hitchcock eschewed whodunits because he recognised that they tended to be emotionless crossword puzzles rather than exciting stories.

Other quick notes

- Fiona: That’s dribbling isn’t it? Makes Fiona sound as if she knows very little about football and/or patronising to her players.
- It isn’t clear from Ted’s introduction that he is coach and not player.
- Joop’s scenes with Lisa and Fiona’s scenes with her family sound expositional, contain a lot of information we’ve already heard and little in the way of dramatic situations. It’s not enough just to give your characters someone to talk to, they need to put in situations which are important in their lives, and then react to these situations.
- Also beware of scenes, like those between David and Fiona, where characters simply articulate an intellectual point of view.
- At some point you should do a quick de-cliché pass on your script, and eliminate occasional shopworn phrases like “ye of little faith”, “get into her knickers” and a few others.
- Just why are the Hind players such arseholes? Who pissed them off so much?
- After a while, the football games become a little repetitive. Can you do a little work rearranging scenes so as to reduce the number of individual matches? Maybe combine a few in to a montage? I think you need five at most, and preferably only three or four as opposed to the eight or nine you have at present.



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- Larson is introduced very late in the day, not described on his first appearance and his name is spelled two or three different ways. He's a bit of a *deus ex machina* character and you almost certainly don't need him.
- Is Ted's alcoholism cured? It's not addressed again after his scene in the pub with David.

Recommended next steps

You seem to have some strong opinions about sports psychology, the treatment of depression and the uses of NLP. Nevertheless, I wonder if a little more research is needed. Research is the enemy of cliché, and talking to clinical psychiatrists, sports coaches and depressives (if you haven't already) may give you fresh insights and revealing details which will lend your script texture. More fundamentally than that, you need to figure out what is most interesting to you about these issues, and design a story which focuses on and tests that. At the moment, it's not clear whether the intellectual underpinning of the story is about experiment vs therapy, or NLP vs traditional psychiatric interventions, or self-belief vs belief in the power of another, or the need to measure vs the need to feel, or simple physical remedies vs pharmaceutical solutions. Clearly establishing this theme will make much of the rest of the writing process much simpler. You then need to focus on the goals and beliefs of your leading character(s) and find ways to put them under stress. Your characters need to take action in furtherance of their goals and suffer as a result. They need to be conflicted and make moral choices to resolve those conflicts. In some of your patients' sub-plots, these processes can be seen at work and they are very effective. The next draft should be about streamlining the story design, building up Fiona as a stronger and more complex character and making the NLP material more credible.

Final thoughts

Much of this screenplay is an entertaining read, and the detail of the football games is well thought-out and exciting, even for me, someone who has never watched a single game of football from beginning to end. Off the pitch, the story is less successful. I pointed out before that taking Ted and Claire out of the story hardly damages it. The fact is you can pretty much take Fiona out of the story without damaging it too much. This is often a problem for the coach character in a sports movie, which is precisely why their attitude, and their investment in the team, has to be drawn so clearly and strongly. You have a great concept for a movie, but only an okay script at the moment. If you reject all my other thoughts about the credibility of the NLP interventions, the clarity of the theme and the design of the subplots, you have to give Fiona something to do, or redesign the story without her, as the story of a leaderless team of mental patients looking for a football coach, who discover David and then have him let them down.

Movies to watch (or scripts to read)

- Cool Runnings (w. Lynn Siefert, d. Jon Turteltaub, 1993)
- The Dream Team (w. John Connolly, David Loucka, d. Howard Zieff, 1989)
- A League of their Own (w. Lowell Ganz, Babaloo Mande, d. Penny Marshall, 1992)

Thank you for using Script Surgeon. I really hope this report is helpful to you.

Tom Salinsky