

All About Sports Fiction for Teens

by Jennifer Brannen

What is Sports Fiction?

Sports are an integral part of many teens' lives. At the very least, teens are likely to be familiar with sports, whether or not they participate. Sports fiction is a sub-genre of realistic fiction. Sports, in all of their glory, mess, action, and detail, take center stage as the setting, drive the plot, and enable the characters to develop. Sometimes it's all about the action and grit, where the author takes the reader into the thick of a particular sport, which is central to the plot. Sometimes the sports shift a little more into the background and what becomes important is the personal growth of the protagonists and how they respond to situations within and around the sport they play.

What happens in teen Sports Fiction?

At least one of the protagonists is usually an athlete -- not surprisingly! The story may focus on the action and excitement of the sport, with the plot revolving around the competition and the build-up to games and play-offs. In more character-driven sports fiction (think books by Chris Crutcher or Rich Wallace), the sport may be the path out of poverty, desperation, or a dysfunctional home life; it becomes a method of survival. Matt de la Peña and Walter Dean Myers have explored that plot to excellent effect. In other stories, the sport becomes a catalyst for hard, moral decisions and growing up. Carl Deuker's *Night Hoops* explores steroid use and Robert Lipsyte's *Yellow Flag* is about the ramifications of a boy choosing his passions of music and helping the family business in racing for Nascar.

Common themes and characteristics

- Sports fiction, even with a focus on character development, tends move briskly, which makes it appealing for reluctant readers.
- Underlying social themes can be quite dark, and sports are an outlet and an escape from some of the challenges that the characters are confronting.
- Sexism and the challenges that teen girls face in sports and in their lives have become increasingly common themes. *Dairy Queen* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock features a female football player in rural Wisconsin.
- The needs of the individual versus the group, peer pressure, sacrifice, and authority issues are common moral themes in sports fiction.
- Race and racism are also frequently explored in sports fiction. Paul Volponi's *The Final Four* is a good example.

Why do teens like Sports Fiction?

- The action and the excitement draw in many teen readers.
- Because sports can be a concrete way for teens to demonstrate their skills and acumen at a time when they may not have many opportunities otherwise.
- Sports stories offer great opportunities for their characters to wrestle with big philosophical questions that have real-life implications.
- Characters come of age and start to learn who they are without a romantic sub-plot required.

Key Sports Fiction titles



Crackback

By: John Coy

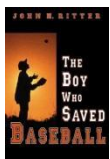
Football has always been Miles' life, but with an aggressive new coach and a best friend who starts pushing steroids on him, it's just not as much fun as it once was. When he spends some time on the bench and meets a new girl, Miles starts to discover that there's more to life than football.



Pop

By: Gordon Korman

When Marcus meets Charlie, he's found a perfect football mentor in the former NFL player. But when Charlie's behavior grows increasingly erratic and odd, it becomes clear that something is wrong that Marcus can't fix, no matter how much he tries.



The boy who saved baseball

By: John H. Ritter

The fate of a small, rural California town depends on the outcome of one baseball game in this surprisingly magical and charming tale.

Key authors to know

- **Chris Crutcher:** His books focus less on the sports themselves than sports as a means for emotional survival for the teens playing them. His characters are diverse and the issues they're working through intense, but his writing is still laced with humanity and humor. Get started with *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* and *Whale Talk*.
- **Carl Deuker:** His books mix sports, social issues such as domestic abuse, crime, and drug abuse (including steroids), with the complications of family and coming of age. Get started with *Night Hoops* and *Night Heat*.
- **John Feinstein:** While he writes sports nonfiction for adults, his specialty for teens is the mix of sports and mystery. His Steve and Susan Carol sports mysteries feature two teen reporters, who become entangled with mysteries in a variety of sports. Get started with the first title in the series, *Last Shot: A Final Four Mystery*.
- **Mike Lupica:** Warm and humane depictions of complicated families, financial stressors, and underdog heroes are the hallmarks of a Lupica story. Get started with *Heat* and *The Big Field*.
- **Rich Wallace:** Across a variety of sports, Wallace's carefully crafted coming-of-age stories balance humor and awareness with the excitement and tension of sports action. Get started with *Shots on Goal* and *Wrestling Sturbridge*.

Crossover with other genres

Sports make such a good secondary plot or background for character development that it's natural that they should turn up in a variety of genres.

Mystery

Some sports fiction writers such as John Feinstein specialize in sports-mystery crossovers, while some mysteries feature athletes as characters who become involved in solving mysteries that take place well outside playing fields.

- *Cover-Up* by John Feinstein

African American Fiction

Sports (especially basketball, football, and boxing) are often a way out of rough schools, neighborhoods, and limited options for the future. But success doesn't come without a cost . . .

- *Slam!* by Walter Dean Myers
- *True Legend* by Mike Lupica
- *Tears of a Tiger* by Sharon M. Draper

Realistic Fiction

Sports are not the point of these stories but they are a catalyst for individual and even community growth.

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie
- *Bullrider* by Suzanne Williams
- *Dairy Queen* by Catherine Gilbert Murdock

Historical Fiction

Sports make for a good story in a variety of historical contexts, as these novels demonstrate.

- *Shoeless Joe and Me* by Dan Gutman
- *Yard War* by Taylor Kitchings

High/Low Series

Teens who want fast-paced, easy-to-read stories about the competitions close to their hearts may enjoy the plethora of high interest series with sports themes.

- *Challenge at Second Base* by Matt Christopher
- *White water* by P. J. Peterson
- *The Drop* by Jeff Ross

Crossover with Nonfiction

This genre even crosses over with nonfiction. There are several nonfiction categories to keep in mind for the avid sports fiction reader, including:

Biography

The trials and successes of famous sports figures -- contemporary and historical -- have the power to compel and inspire even reluctant teen readers.

- *Jackie Robinson breaks the color line* by Andrew Santella

- *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board* by Bethany Hamilton
- *Babe Didrikson Zaharias : the making of a champion* by Russell Freedman