

TOP SPIN



GRADES 5-12

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TEACHING THE FILM:

Top Spin is a documentary film about three teenage athletes with Olympic dreams in competitive ping pong. A class screening of the film may complement a Health or Language Arts curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will challenge students to think critically about balance, competition, and what it means to make sacrifices in pursuit of a dream. Discussion questions and supplemental materials facilitate further research into related topics such as peer to peer interactions, American culture and the transition to adulthood.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **Top Spin**. Support

materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

Set against the backdrop of one of the most under-appreciated sports in America, three teenagers battle their way through the world of competitive ping pong. While facing the unusual challenges coming of age in a niche sport, their journey reveals the passion it takes to pursue their Olympic-sized dreams.

{ Mina T. Son and Sara Newens (USA, 2014)
80 minutes, Color, English
Grades 6-12 }

Recommended Subject Areas:

Asian Studies
Health
Peer/Youth Issues
Social Science
Women's Studies
World Affairs

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Athletics
Balance
China
College Admissions
Competition
Culture
Family
Friendship
High School
Olympics
Ping Pong
Pressure
Selfhood



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

Athletes will easily identify with this film, as will any student who has a serious commitment outside of school hours. In preparation for a screening, you might ask students to reflect upon sacrifices they have made in pursuit of excellence, either within the classroom or in an outside activity.

- Think of an activity that is important to you, either in school or outside of school.
- What does it mean to reach your personal best in that activity?
- What kinds of sacrifices (time, missing social events, physical strain, rigorous practice, studying, etc.) have you made in order to improve your performance in that activity?
- What rewards have you received in exchange for your sacrifice, both in the form of accolades and awards from outside, and in the form of personal growth?

Keep your own experiences in mind while watching the film.

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Character and Story

1) Who are the competitive ping pong players who are featured in **Top Spin**?

- Describe each of the young athletes and their different personalities.
- Can you identify with these high school students?

- How are they like you and your peers, and how are they different?

2) What decisions do Ariel, Michael and Lily face as they balance ping pong, school and their personal lives?

- What sacrifices do these young people and their families make in order to compete at a high level?
- Are these sacrifices that you would be willing to make to achieve a goal that was meaningful to you?
- How do the complicated lives of the ping pong players compare to the complicated lives of regular high school students? Are they facing any of the same issues that you and your peers face?

HAVE YOU
EVER HAD
TO COMPETE
AGAINST A
FRIEND?

3) How does competition affect the friendship between Lily and Ariel?

- How do Lily and Ariel balance friendship and rivalry?
- Have you ever encountered a situation in which you had to compete against a friend?
- What qualities of a friendship will allow it to survive competition?
- How can you be a good friend, even when you are feeling jealous?

4) Describe the families that you met in **Top Spin**. How are they like families that you know and how are they different?

- What role did the athletes' parents play in developing their children's affinity and skill in the sport?
- How do Ariel, Michael and Lily's parents feel about their children's success?
- Do these young people feel pressure from their families?
- What do these parents want for their kids?



5) **Top Spin** follows Ariel, Michael and Lily through a very intense period in their lives.

- What lessons do these teenagers learn during their preparation and their competition at Olympic trials?
- How does each of the characters grow and change during the course of the film?
- How do their values and goals change?
- What advice do you think Ariel, Michael and Lily could share about what to do in the face of competition?

Context

1) How does the Chinese attitude towards sports and competition differ from the American attitude?

- What is Michael's experience when he goes to train in China?
- How does the Chinese coach view Michael's training regime?
- How do you think Ariel, Lily and Michael's experience would be different if they were ping pong champions in China instead of in the US?
- Do you think Ariel will one day beat the Chinese champions?

2) Ariel talks in the film about the loneliness of practicing an individual sport, and her desire to be part of a team.

- How is the experience of being a solo athlete, like a runner or a swimmer, different from being on a team?
- What are the benefits and challenges of being a solo athlete?
- To what extent can the US National Team become Ariel's team? In what ways is she still on her own?
- Do you think that athletes who play team sports feel a desire to stand out as individuals?

- How do athletes balance the desire to stand out with the desire to be a supportive and supported member of a team?
- What applications do these balancing skills have outside of sports?

3) During the film, Michael faces a decision about whether or not he should go to college.

- What is valuable about a college experience is valuable for someone who knows that he wants to be a professional athlete?
- Do you think that all young people should go to college? Are there people for whom college is not the right choice?

- For Michael, the decision to go to college relieves some of the pressure on him, but college is often a source of stress for high school students. What could high school students who feel pressure about college admissions learn from Michael's experience?

4) What does it take to compete at a high level?

- What qualities do you see in these young people and in other young people who are focused and dedicated to high achievement?

- How do these athletes prepare for their matches?
- What is the 'mental game' that Lily's coach describes as her challenge?
- How do athletes combine mental and physical preparation to raise their game and to win?
- What kinds of pressure do these athletes feel? What pressure comes from outside sources and what pressure comes from themselves?
- How do these athletes manage their disappointment?
- What can non-athletes learn from the way that athletes handle competition and pressure?

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO COMPETE AT A HIGH LEVEL?



5) Ariel, Lily and Michael have a very different childhood and adolescence than their peers.

- Would you want to have this kind of a different life if it meant that you could achieve a big dream?

Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) How did you respond to **Top Spin**?

- Did you enjoy this film?
- Do you think that the story it tells is important?
- What made this story interesting?

2) How did the film show the passage of time?

- What imagery and graphics did the filmmakers use to show the countdown to Olympic trials?
- Did you feel that you spent a long time with these characters?
- What other tricks might the filmmakers have employed to show time passing?

3) How did graphic imagery and sound add to the story?

- What did you notice about the music?
- Where did graphic imagery help you to understand facts or context?

4) When a filmmaker begins a documentary project, it is impossible to know how the story will end. How do you think the makers of **Top Spin** chose their characters?

- Where did they film in order to paint a full picture of their characters' lives?
- What did they tell you about Ariel, Lily and Michael outside of the world of competitive ping pong?

5) What did you think about competitive ping pong before you watched **Top Spin**?

- Why do you think the filmmakers chose to tell a story about these young ping pong players?
- Was this story surprising in any way?

- Do you think there is a message in **Top Spin**?
- What thoughts, memories and insights will you take away from this film?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

Filmmaking Exercise

Shoot your own documentary about a sports team at your school.

- Students may break into groups and interview one another, either on-camera, with microphones, or simply with pen and paper. Smart phones with internal microphones can be used along with video cameras to enhance the quality of the audio.
- Student filmmakers may choose to focus on a particular sports team, athletics at the school, or to feature a student athlete.
- You might collect these short videos as a graded assignment, or watch them together as a class.

For more information about filmmaking exercises in the classroom, and a useful worksheet outlining different shot types and camera angles, visit FilmEd.sffs.org.

Journaling Activity

Reflect on the film.

What were your impressions of **Top Spin**?

What can the experiences of these young people teach us about balance and the process of becoming an adult?



California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 6:** Standard 1.9 Identify persuasive and propaganda techniques used in television and identify false and misleading information.
- **Grade 7:** Standard 1.8 Analyze the effect on the viewer of images, text, and sound in electronic journalism; identify the techniques used to achieve the effects in each instance studied.
- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's Henry V with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 5-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed.</p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used? What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</p> <p>Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language.</p> <p>What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</p> <p>Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</p> <p>Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Table Tennis:

USA Table Tennis: <http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Table-Tennis>

International Table Tennis Federation: <http://www.ittf.com/>

Table Tennis History Project: <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall04/baksh/history.html>

Team USA History of Table Tennis: <http://www.teamusa.org/USA-Table-Tennis/History/History-of-USATT>





REVIEWS

Variety

The road to the London Olympics is paved with Ping-Pong balls for the three teenage hopefuls in Mina T. Son and Sara Newens' documentary.

by **Ronnie Scheib**

The road to the Olympics is paved with Ping-Pong balls for three teen hopefuls in “Top Spin,” Mina T. Son and Sara Newens’ quick-moving, kinetically edited sports documentary. At this level of play, speed and coordination prove paramount — qualities that are reflected in co-helmer/editor Newens’ choice of scenes, which concisely capture aspects of her subjects’ personalities and training at progressive stages in the countdown to the Olympic trials. The film doesn’t so much avoid clichés as brush off any sentimental excess, briskly maintaining narrative flow. Given the pic’s agreeable chronicling of high-level excellence in an under-documented sport, cable could give “Top Spin” a whirl.

Son and Newens focus on three young Ping-Pongers — California girls Ariel Hsing, 16, and Lily Zhang, 15, respectively Nos. 1 and 2 in the national rankings, and Long Islander Michael Landers, 17, who at 15 became the youngest-ever American male champion. Their brand of table tennis bears little resemblance to the family rec-room variety: Play attains such a fast and furious pitch that viewers might be tempted to check out non-combatants in the background to verify that the action isn’t artificially sped up.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that athletes must undergo hours of daily intensive physical training to

navigate the table with the requisite agility. Hsing’s father commits himself fully and professionally to be her coach, while Zhang relies on non-family trainers. The girls are both friends and rivals, though Hsing consistently triumphs in their head-to-heads. Neither visibly experiences any difficulties in reconciling their extended tournament-related absences and marathon practice hours with keeping up at school or maintaining ties with classmates, most of whom have little concept of the girls’ double lives. Hsing’s transition from high school to college transpires without a hitch.

For Landers, however, choices involve more stress. He takes time off before college, traveling first to China, where the isolation from friends and family and the exhaustive nature of the training regimen take their toll, then to New York, where he enjoys celebrity status at the Ping-Pong game room/bar Spin. Since, to quote an American-Asian colleague, he is “young, Caucasian and good,” this fame soon expands to include magazine spreads, TV appearances and his photo appearing on a Kellogg’s Cornflakes box. His parents are leery of his decision to postpone college but careful to stress that they feel it necessary that he pursue his dream — even though making the U.S. Olympic team would be highly unlikely to result in a medal (the US ranks 45th) or translate into a career.

Meanwhile, neither Hsing’s nor Zhang’s Chinese-born parents harbor any such reservations about their daughters’ wholehearted immersion in the sport. The girls’ sportsmanship attracts the notice of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, seen clowning around with giant paddles to compete with them, but such illustrious contacts bear no hint of serious networking.

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The filmmakers contrast the American players' marginality with the game's omnipresence and prestige in China, where, as location photography reveals, parks and public spaces virtually teem with rectangular tables in wood, stone and marble — more than explaining the country's hegemony in the sport.

The U.S. trials, followed by the North American trials, increasingly structure the film — but not all the featured kids make it to the Olympics. Son and Newens build suspense not from point to point within individual games, but by opposing different styles of play (Hsing and Zhang, with their fast-paced volleys, vs. the “choppers,” who systematically “chop” away at opponents' rhythms). Highlighting virtuoso bursts of energy and edge-clipping shots that cinch a game, “Top Spin” goes a long way toward building a mystique around the little table at the center of all those blink-of-an-eye flurries.