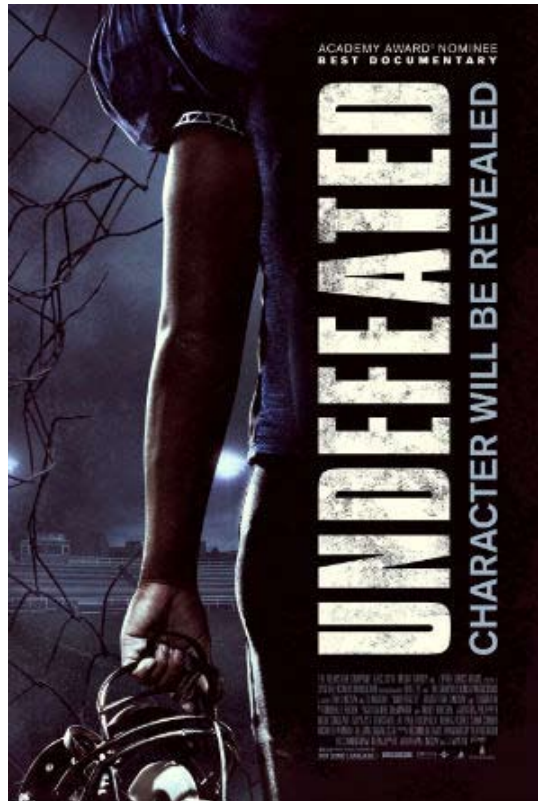


SportsLetter Interviews

February 23, 2012

Directors of Oscar-nominated documentary “Undeclared”

Since the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science began awarding Oscars for the Best Documentary feature film in 1943, 16 documentary films involving sports have been nominated for the honor: “The Conquest of Everest” (1953), “Torero!” (1957), “The Horse With the Flying Tail” (1960), “La Grande Olimpiade” (1961), “The Legendary Champions” (1968), “The Olympics in Mexico” (1969), “Jack Johnson” (1970), “On Any Sunday” (1971), “The Great American Cowboy” (1973), “The Man Who Skied Down Everest” (1975), “Going the Distance” (1979), “Hank Aaron: Chasing the Dream” (1995), “When We Were Kings” (1996), “One Day in September” (1999), “On the Ropes” (1999), and “Murderball” (2005).



To that prestigious list add “Undeclared,” which was nominated as Best Documentary feature in 2011. Co-directed by Dan Lindsay and T.J. Martin, “Undeclared” follows the fortunes of the Manassas High School football team during the 2009 season. This intimate and inspiring film focuses on four personalities: Coach Bill Courtney and three players -- O.C. Brown, Montrail “Money” Brown (no relation) and Chavis Daniels --

as the Tigers attempt to break the school's 110-year playoff jinx.

Like many of the other Oscar-nominated titles, "Undefeated" is a sports documentary in name only. Lindsay and Martin use a season of high-school football to chronicle the lives of three adolescents on the cusp of manhood as well as the relationships they forge with their coach. The four come from vastly different backgrounds: Courtney is a white, middle-aged, successful businessman; his players are African-American teens whose inner-city neighborhood of North Memphis is reeling from unemployment and violence. And yet, as Lindsay and Martin show, coach and players transcend the seemingly enormous chasm with respect and compassion.

Wrote Eric Sondheimer in the Los Angeles Times: "If you want to know how playing high school football can teach lessons in life, the documentary 'Undefeated' is a must see. . . . 'Undefeated' captures the contradictions, the struggles, the successes and the failures with a realistic, compelling presentation."

Lindsay and Martin previously tag-teamed on "Last Cup: Road to the World Series of Beer Pong" (2008). "Undefeated" premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival in March of 2011, and then was acquired by the Weinstein Company. One of its producers is Seth Gordon, who directed the acclaimed video-game documentary "The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters" (2007).

SportsLetter interviewed the two Los Angeles-based directors by phone as they made the media rounds required of Academy Award nominees.

-David Davis

SportsLetter: You previously worked together on "Last Cup," about the "sport" of beer pong. Were you looking to do something different after that?

Dan Lindsay: I don't know that we were actively trying to find something different tonally or story-wise. For us, a good story is a good story, and then that story tells us what it's going to be and what form it's going to take.

There are some similarities between "Last Cup" and "Undefeated." They

both deal with a moment in your life when you're transitioning to another aspect of your life. In "Last Cup" it was about guys trying to give up their college lifestyle and move into the adult world. "Undefeated" is a film about adolescence and moving beyond high school.

SL: What attracted you to the story of the Manassas High football team?

DL: There were a couple of things. Number one, we're really interested in doing experiential documentaries, where as an audience member you're hopefully going to lose yourself in this world. The only way to do that is to have films where the events unfold in front of the camera. In other words, we wanted to avoid documentaries with talking heads who are telling anecdotes about things that happened in the past. We wanted something where it was going to play out almost like a scripted narrative. So, this was a perfect opportunity.

We didn't know what was going to happen when we went down to Memphis, but from the stories that Bill [Courtney], the coach at Manassas High, told us about things that had happened with the team and the players, we knew that if we moved there and lived there -- which we did for nine months -- we would be there for everything and hopefully capture interesting things as they happened.

T.J. Martin: We also felt that, a lot of times with high school sports documentaries, they're not around for the whole story. We told Bill that for us to do this right we need to be able to film everything -- from team meetings to school assemblies to private moments -- to be able to show what a real high school football season is like.

Having said all of that, what really interested us were the characters and the themes of fatherhood and resilience that we were going to be able to explore through them. It was Bill and Chavis and O.C. and Money that really drew us to the film. It is a sports film, and it's ostensibly a high school football film, but really it's a film about characters.

SL: How did the coach, Bill Courtney, and the three players emerge as the central characters in the film? Was it a conscious decision or an organic one that occurred during the filming?

TM: Our producer, Rich Middlemas, read an article in the Memphis Commercial Appeal newspaper about [offensive lineman] O.C. Brown living part-time with his coach, Mike Ray. That's what drew our interest and that's what brought us into that world. From day one, we wanted to make a coming-of-age film, a verite film, so we knew that the best way to frame O.C.'s story was to find someone who was a counterpart to him. Then Money presented himself, and he was the best counterpart to O.C. On the one hand, O.C. is an amazing athlete and through his athletic prowess has been given these opportunities to have a tutor and get his grades up, so that he can be eligible for a college scholarship. Whereas Money is not such an impressive athletic specimen. He's an incredible student who's doing everything he can in the classroom, and yet there's this looming question about whether he's going to get into college and the nature of his financial situation. So, that's why we decided to get Money on board.

We chose the characters based on who was going to have an effect on each other and who was going to have an effect on the team. As Dan mentioned, we set out to make something that was almost scripted in approach, with various storylines, where each player had an obstacle and a trajectory that we could capture in a short amount of time. We did shoot a couple other storylines, but because they deviated from the general arc of the film they did not end up in the final cut.

SL: Was it difficult to leave out those other stories?

DL: Absolutely, because everybody had such compelling life stories and situations. For us it boiled down to trying to present the tightest story and the tightest narrative possible, so that at the end of the viewing experience the sum is greater than the parts. It is a football documentary in terms of genre, but the themes that are explored are universal and go beyond sports. We wanted to make sure that those themes stood out.

SL: The film shows O.C. receiving special help with his academics because of his athletic talent. What was it like to watch that develop?

TM: As Coach Ray says in the film, if you're a piano teacher and you

see that one of your students has the potential to be an amazing concert pianist, wouldn't you reach out to that person? That's literally what it was all about: an opportunity to help out a kid in the community that they saw so much potential for.

The other thing was, as we were watching O.C. getting all this attention for his athletic prowess, it allowed us to explore what it means for others who don't have the same skill set that O.C. has but are still striving to go on to higher education, which is Money's situation. Money has the academic side, but he does not necessarily have the talent on the field. So, where does that leave him and what kind of options does he have to get out of North Memphis?

DL: I think it's important to note that in the film we're not making a judgment call on this. We just wanted to present what was happening. But what is someone to do: are they supposed to not help O.C. just because he does have an opportunity? For us, it's very complicated issue. We were hoping that the film would be the beginning of the conversation, instead of us trying to end the conversation.

SL: People have compared the O.C. Brown part of the film to "The Blind Side," about offensive lineman Michael Oher. Were you aware of "The Blind Side" when you went to film in Memphis?

DL: The book [by Michael Lewis] was already out. Our producer Rich, when he found the original article about O.C., asked us if we were aware of the book. He was like, "I always thought if somebody had been filming that when it happened it would be an incredible documentary." So, both T.J. and I picked up the book and read it and were very enthralled by the story. But we were already living in Memphis and making "Undefeated" before they even went into production on the movie of "The Blind Side."

SL: What's valid about the comparison and what's not?

DL: There are some obvious comparisons. They both take place in Memphis, and Michael Oher grew up in Hurt Village [a housing project], which is right next to Manassas. But, when people are making comparisons between the two, I think they're talking about the emotional

and inspirational qualities of “The Blind Side” and how that relates to ours -- because the storylines of the two films are totally different.

TM: I think people relate the two with the most accessible thing that they can grasp -- and that is the race dynamic. Because, as Dan said, we view the storylines of the two films as vastly different. “Blind Side” the movie is essentially a love story between a surrogate mother and son. Whereas O.C.’s story is just one of the many storylines in the film, and it’s about a community of people coming together to support him and about him taking advantage of the opportunity.

SL: You captured intimate and even embarrassing moments during the film. How did you gain the trust of the kids?

DL: I think the biggest decision we made was to be there every day, to show up every day at school, at events that we knew weren’t necessarily going to make it into the film. Just to show a commitment to these guys that we were there to tell their story honestly and truthfully. We weren’t there to do some sensationalized piece about how violent North Memphis is or a “what’s wrong with kids today” film.

With someone like Chavis, we just took a lot of time with him. One night we went over to his house and did a three- or four-hour interview. One time we went and watched him while he was recording some music. None of that is in the movie, but it allowed us to break down some walls between us. Of all of them, Chavis was definitely the most suspicious of us. But once we showed him that we were interested in him as a person, he was fine with us.

I think another big thing was our age. That really helped us with the film. We’re in our early 30s. We’re kind of right in between the age of the coaches and the age of the players. We were old enough where we got enough respect from the coaches where they would open up to us and take us seriously. And, with the players we were young enough where they felt like we could relate to them.

SL: Do you think that today, with reality TV and YouTube, kids are more comfortable with having cameras around them?

TM: When we showed up and said to the kids, “We want to tell your story, we want to make a documentary,” the first thing a lot of the kids said was, “Oh, like reality TV.” So, clearly, they’re aware of that. But, it was just three of us on the ground – Dan and myself shooting, and our producer Rich. Once we embedded ourselves with the team, we consciously made an effort to disappear.

But it was funny. After we were there for three-four months, one of the kids came up to us and said, “So who’s going to play me in the movie?”

SL: How was Coach Courtney able to reach the kids on the team?

DL: By his showing up every day and never giving up on this team -- that went the furthest for him in terms of building that respect. This is a community where there is not a lot of consistency in the players’ lives. A lot of them jump from house to house. They’re not always sure where they’re going to be living. There’s also a lot of promises made about things that are going to happen, about things that are going to get built, that never really come through.

If you talk to Bill, he’ll tell you that it was a struggle to connect with the kids his first few years. They were very standoffish. But once they saw that this guy was going to be there every day, that he’s not going to give up, that he’s walking the talk, that brought trust. They could see that Bill cares a lot about them. Every day at practice, any time he’d talk to a kid, he’d talk to them and then hug them and say, “I love you.” That simple gesture went a long ways.

TM: I was always impressed that Bill didn’t talk down to the kids. He treated them like young adults, and not like kids. He had expectations for them, and that brought them up to his level. He always says, “Respect has to be earned.” I think we basically followed his lead with our approach in terms of being there.

SL: Bill announced that he was leaving as coach of the team at the end of the film. Did it feel like he was abandoning the players?

TM: It was a pretty amazing reveal, but I wouldn't say it was a surprise because he wrestles with this during the film. On the one hand, he's someone who is committed to working with young people, especially after having had such great experiences with his own coaches growing up. And yet, because his father was not there for him growing up, he doesn't want to play into the irony of not being there for his own kids on account of spending so much time with the kids at Manassas. It was a surprise for us that it happened that year, but it was inevitable that he was going leave Manassas to be there for his own kids.

DL: I would never characterize it as "abandoning them." But it was hard for us to see happen because we knew what that would mean to the program. The foundation that Bill started to work with the kids, "Man Rise," still exists, but Bill is such a unique, special person that I don't think you can ever replace him. The decision was hard on Bill personally. He said it was one of the most difficult decisions he ever had to make in his life. But for the sake of his family, he had to move on.

SL: Many of the coaches in the film were volunteers. What was their motivation to volunteer in the inner city?

DL: The volunteer coaches were out there for different reasons. It was a collection of different people. A couple of the guys were friends of Bill that he was able to convince to come out and help. There is a church that supported the team by making pre-game meals, and a couple members of the church that had played college football volunteered their time as well. There were also members of the community who came out -- one was a police officer whose son was on the team.

SL: Were you concerned about the racial component of the team, with this small army of white adults coaching African-American teens?

DL: We were initially hesitant to make the film because we didn't want to tell a "white knight" story, which is something that Hollywood does all the time. It was not of interest to us. But just being there two-three weeks, you quickly see that that has nothing to do with it. Bill happens to be white, and the players happen to be African-American. But he's their coach, and that's it. The fact that it's not a big deal to any of them meant

that it was very important for us that the film not make it a big deal. It's there and it's present, and people watching the film will bring their own ideas and own thoughts to that, but for them it wasn't an issue. So, we didn't make it an issue.

TM: With that said, we didn't shy away from the realities and the dynamics from that area of Memphis. We wanted to make the issues of race and class our stage, and then tell a human-interest story within that world. Hopefully, the film is the beginning of that conversation.

SL: Why did you decide to call the film "Undeclared"?

DL: The title came from one of our producers, Glen Zipper. T.J., myself, and Rich, our other producer, had been banging our heads against the wall trying to figure out what to call the movie. We actually had a whiteboard in our office, and we would write down any idea that came up. We wanted to find a title that reflected resilience, never giving up, because that's really the major sub-textual theme of the film. We literally had a title up there that said, "Cannot Be Defeated." Anyway, Glen was in the office one day, and he poked his head out and was like, "What about 'Undeclared'?" That was it.

We knew that a lot of people walking into the film would assume by the title that they were going to watch a high-school football team go undefeated. We like the fact that the team loses its first game. It makes the audience go, "Wait a second. What is this now?" That also reflects the structure of the film. It's a pretty straightforward first act -- you meet the people, you understand that this is an underdog team -- but it's not until the second and third acts that the film starts to differentiate itself from other, traditional football documentaries.

SL: What most surprised you during the filming of the movie?

DL: I think the most surprising thing was the emotional candor that we were able to get not only from the players, but the coaches and the people in the school. Right from the beginning that happened, and we were able to garner this trust. It was surprising, but once we were in the situation, it was like, well, we're here to tell their story and they're allowing us to do that.

SL: What was the biggest challenge?

TM: The biggest challenge for us is actually getting people to go see the movie. We have this joke: given a description of the film, we probably wouldn't go see our own film because on paper it sounds sort of trite or like something you've already seen before. It's such an experiential film you really have to be in the theater to understand why it's not your run-of-the-mill sports story.

SL: "Hoop Dreams" was among the first documentary films to follow the lives of youth athletes. Has it been an influence on your work?

DL: "Hoop Dreams" is an influence in every documentary I'll ever make. It's the greatest documentary ever made. The most amazing part was the patience of [director] Steve James: just allowing the story to unfold, letting the story evolve and grow, not trying to tell everything about every character in the first beat. If you watch the first 10 or 15 minutes of "Hoop Dreams," you might think it's going to be this clinical, non-emotional film. But if you give it time and you sink into it -- and it's over three hours long -- you understand there's this really complex narrative arc happening.

SL: Were there other films that influenced you with "Undeclared"?

DL: We watched several war films to help us find the structure of the film. One, in particular, was "Glory." That may sound surprising, but the reason for that was, oftentimes, war films have a group of characters that need to learn to come together and then go into one final battle. That's how we always saw the structure of "Undeclared." We knew that our different storylines were going to have to complete themselves before the last game.

We watched "Murderball" a lot. That's just a finely edited documentary [directed by Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro]. Another one was "American Movie" [directed by Chris Smith], one of our favorite docs of all-time.

SL: What's next for you and are you going to keep working together?

TM: Yes, we're going to keep working together. We're actively looking for our next project, in both scripted and documentary formats. We're less concerned about the form; the story itself will tell us the approach. At this point in our career, it's best story wins.