

April 17, 2009

Roy Hobbs hits the home run at the end of “The Natural.” Jimmy Chitwood makes the jump shot at the end of “Hoosiers.” Even Willie Mays Hayes scores the winning run on Jake Taylor’s bunt at the end of “Major League.”

It’s so common for the good guys to pull off the miraculous win in sports movies that filmgoers who attend the world premiere of “Faded Glory” at the Atlanta Film Festival on April 23 or 25 will likely expect the National Network team to stage a stirring ninth-inning rally in the semifinals of the National Amateur Baseball Association (NABA) World Series in Phoenix in 2007. They’ll be surprised.

But Sandy Springs filmmaker Rick Cohen said his documentary isn’t about winning; it’s about the experience of a journey of self-discovery.

“If we had won, I don’t know if it would have been that great a movie,” he said.

In some ways, “Faded Glory” is a communal midlife crisis played out against the backdrop of a baseball diamond. It shows what happens when five friends who played adult amateur baseball get back together 17 years later in search of a championship season. In the course of resurrecting their relationships on and off the field, they manage to rebuild their lives.

Cohen is the catalyst behind and in front of the camera. The New York native moved to the Atlanta area in 2000 after a decade in Los Angeles, where he was an actor and a screenwriter. He performed mostly in commercials, and he wrote 14 screenplays,

The team won a couple of local championships but broke up after its members moved around the country.

Encouraged by the crew, Cohen decided adult amateur baseball could make an interesting documentary, so he raised about \$29,000 and took a three-man crew to Phoenix for the 2006 NABA World Series. He said the footage was good, and he put together a segment on injuries and another on what

after years on the soap opera “Guiding Light”; Chris Bruno, who also was in California with a successful acting career that included playing the sheriff on the USA TV series “The Dead Zone”; Chad Brown, who was traveling the world as a top pro player in poker tournaments; and Terry Gatens, who also had followed his acting career to California but had been estranged from Cohen since 2000 and was doing a 90-day rehab stint at the Betty Ford Clinic for drug and alcohol addictions when Cohen started trying to

character. Cohen said Davidson hadn’t worked on the show for a year before that, and he hasn’t acted since. But the juxtaposition between the death of his acting career in New York and the rebirth of Network in Phoenix proved to be a powerful addition to the movie, the filmmaker said.

All of the guys also got something more than competition out of the experience, Cohen said. Four of the players in their 40s got married. Gatens has remained sober, although he and Cohen are again estranged, in part because Gatens wanted parts of his story cut from the film after it was done. Startoni has stayed out of jail and gotten a legitimate job.

“The story is my journey, but it’s really all our journeys,” Cohen said. “It’s a collective thing.”

Cohen feels as if he’s on the right life path again, including the recent launch in Sandy Springs of Endorphin Athletes, which makes recruitment videos for high school athletes seeking college scholarships. It’s a companion company to Endorphin Entertainment, the partnership between Cohen and Chris Pullaro that produced “Faded Glory” for less than \$100,000.

“I say the film has the seven I’s, and the seven I’s are incarceration, intervention, infidelity, incompetence, injuries, illnesses and insanity,” Cohen said. “Give us 16 years, and it may have incontinence.”

What the film doesn’t have is a happy ending. After a miserable opening game, which Cohen said was the best thing that could have happened to Network, the team won five consecutive games before losing 10-8 in the semifinals.

MIKE TOLLIN

Producer/Director - Credits include: “Bronx is Burning,” “Radio,” “Coach Carter.”

“Rick Cohen’s film is a work of true passion, a timeless story of hopes and dreams and one last shot at glory. Rick has captured a wild and wondrous journey that is a treat for anyone who thinks life should be lived to its fullest.”

ROGER TOWNE

Writer of “The Natural.”

“Roy Hobbs and the New York Knights live in Rick Cohen. I’ve not seen so much blood and guts, self-less honesty, despair, pathos, passion, honor, and above all, -- so much bravery in filmmaking. Rick’s poignantly invested and dramatized love for his friends and the game of baseball shows clearly in this documentary.”

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LEIGH STEINBERG

Legendary Sports Agent who inspired the character of “Jerry McGuire.”

“This is THE documentary that resonates and connects with the deepest hopes and fears of males throughout the country and is a landmark event--Rick is a truly gifted talent! Faded Glory offers an unique opportunity for women to experience the locker room environment and psyche of men in an alternative habitat. It should not to be missed!”

PETER GILBERT

Co-director. Producer. "Hoop Dreams."

"An important look into how men use sport to bond and relate to life itself."

DAVID ANSPAUGH

Director of both "Hoosiers" and "Rudy."

“Best Sports Documentary since Hoop Dreams!”

MORGAN SPURLOCK

Director of “Super Size Me.”

"A little film with a LOT of heart."

ANGELO PIZZO

Writer of both “Hoosiers” and “Rudy.”

“A compelling documentary with authentic, well-earned emotions.”

selling one and having two others optioned but never seeing one make it onto the big screen.

“I would have never made this film without leaving Hollywood,” Cohen said of “Faded Glory.”

Among other issues, Cohen felt as if he was disappointing his father, a self-made man who started working at age 13 to support two younger brothers and went on to found one of New York’s largest accounting firms, Mahoney Cohen, in 1969. But Rick Cohen didn’t parlay his Ivy League education into the career as a doctor, lawyer or investment banker his father would have preferred.

“I came to Atlanta to sort of change my life, get away from the rat race of Hollywood and raise my kids,” Cohen said. “But I really didn’t know what I wanted to do. That was all my wife’s doing at the time.”

That marriage ended in divorce, and he went through a series of jobs, including a year as an assistant football, wrestling and baseball coach at The Lovett School in Buckhead.

“I was in another corporate job, and I was just really dissatisfied with my life. I was in my second marriage; that wasn’t working out. And I just decided to give it all up,” Cohen said. “I said, ‘What am I doing with my life? I’m not doing what I was born to do, which is make movies, write moves and eventually direct a movie.’ ”

He produced a series of six do-it-yourself videos on tile installation and design and regaled the crew with tales of the amateur baseball team he played for and managed in New York in 1990, National Network, whose name came from the aspirations of most of its members to land roles on network television series.

baseball means to the middle-aged players. “But there was no story there.”

The story, it turned out, was Cohen’s own.

A friend suggested he try to find his National Network teammates and make another run at diamond glory. Cohen thought it was a great idea; his second wife of less than a year thought he was crazy.

A Jack Kerouac exhibit they visited at the public library in New York settled the matter for Cohen. It included a display on baseball.

“Jack Kerouac, to my unbelievable surprise, was the originator of fantasy baseball. He was making up rosters and teams and competing against other friends of his back in the 1950s. Who knew?” Cohen said.

He then read Kerouac’s “On the Road” and decided that just as Kerouac set out on a “journey across the country to sort of find himself and find his friends and write about his trials and

tribulations and his thoughts,” so would he for a documentary.

The first cut of “Faded Glory” included Kerouac and began with a quotation from him, but Cohen cut out his inspiration. “I didn’t want to be that pretentious filmmaker who uses the overwrought quote at the beginning or the end of his movie.”

Cohen said he didn’t need Kerouac; he already had plenty of characters. “If I can really pull this off and get back this sort of motley crew,” he said he realized, “it will be like ‘The Blues Brothers’ meets ‘Field of Dreams’ meets ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.’ ”

He started with five of the 13 original Network players: himself; co-founder Jim Davidson, who was in California trying to keep his acting career going

contact him again.

The next five players on the roster were men who had ties to Cohen and at least one of the other four core Network players: Troy Startoni of Virginia Beach, Va., fresh out of jail after a conviction for manufacturing and distributing marijuana; Brien Blakely of Charlotte, N.C., a local news anchor for the Fox-TV affiliate; former Reds and Pirates pitcher Mike Roesler of Fort Wayne, Ind., a mortgage broker who had to deal with the declining housing market and his wife’s degenerative nerve disease at the same time; Scott Bailey of rural Castaic, Calif., who lived as a recluse with his girlfriend in a trailer he



bought on eBay for \$4,000, venturing into civilization only to fix computers and play baseball; and Pat Armstrong of Santa Monica, Calif., who coached baseball at Crossroads High School by day and ran a seedy Internet chat site by night.

The final five players came from an Atlanta-area team with which Cohen played, the Bulls: Terry Loe, a Kennesaw State professor who made the last out of the 1981 College World Series for Mississippi State with the bases loaded in a 6-5 game; Josh Davis; Bobby Atwater; Coca-Cola executive Pat Zapp, who had a pacemaker implanted after a heart attack in 2005; and Manny Vargas, a Persian Gulf War veteran who died of a heart attack one month before the World Series, providing extra inspiration to the team.

Each of the players had individual roadblocks in the way of their participation, building drama, as well as what Cohen calls “the madness and the magic.” Davidson wound up missing the World Series so he could shoot the scenes killing off his “Guiding Light”

“After the game, it was really amazing because we all realized it wasn’t about winning,” he said. “It was about the journey and coming back together as a team and renewing our friendships and everybody sort of finding through baseball hope and redemption. And as sad as it was to lose, we almost felt like we were fulfilled.”

Almost.

They also had the itch to try again, a feeling Cohen said is echoed by the not-quite-right ending. So there’s an epilogue that covers the return of National Network to the World Series in 2008 with a revamped lineup and a dream ending: Cohen with the championship trophy, Bruno with the Gold Glove award and Davidson with the MVP award after driving in the championship-winning run in the 11th inning.

That undefeated tournament run included one inning pitched by Darien Smith, an Atlanta-area man who was playing baseball for the last time before getting deep-brain stimulation surgery at Emory to treat his worsening Parkinson’s disease. Cohen said the inspiration of Smith provided the final piece of the triumphant puzzle.

After the final win, Cohen said, “we were in the parking lot, and he just broke down and cried.”

Now Cohen hopes for a similar happy ending for “Faded Glory.” After the Atlanta Film Festival, he is taking it to festivals in Newport Beach, Calif., Los Angeles and Delray Beach, Fla., and is aiming for other festivals later in the year, all in search of a distribution deal for the documentary. In addition, Cohen wants to built buzz to support a proposed feature film based on the National Network story.

“If you want to see yourself up on screen in some way, shape or form,” he said, “come see my movie because you’ll find yourself in my movie, male or female.”

-Sandy Springs Reporter

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