

LeBron: The Early Years

A documentary on LeBron James and his high school teammates reveals much about friendship, loyalty and teamwork



BOB LATHAM

At the 2008 Toronto Film Festival, a little-known movie called "Slumdog Millionaire" won the grand prize. Finishing as runner-up was the documentary "More Than a Game," directed by Kristopher Belman.

I saw "More Than a Game" last fall and had a chance to speak with the director. Belman had the good

fortune to be from Akron, Ohio, hometown of LeBron James, and to be a film student at Loyola Marymount at the time the LeBron story was building at St. Vincent-St. Mary High School in Akron. So, needing something to do for his film class, Belman went back to his hometown to capture on film the magic around the high school basketball team.

The film, which will be released on DVD February 2, tells the story of James and his teammates, from fourth grade through their senior year in high school, and it does so in a poignant and efficient way. As Belman is quick to point out, the buzz percolating around James in high school was as much about the team as it was about James himself. Belman was determined to make a movie that would reveal the story of the team of friends that stayed together, rather than exploiting his footage of the young James to make it The LeBron Story, which he had many offers to do.

I went to the movie expecting a variation on "Hoop Dreams," the 1994 film about two inner-city Chicago kids trying to see how far basketball would take them. As good and important a movie as "Hoop Dreams" was, "More Than a Game" was richer. Whereas "Hoop Dreams" had a single theme, "More Than a Game" has several: friendship, loyalty, teamwork, David versus Goliath, the coach-player relationship, the parent-son relationship, public school versus private school, and more. Belman's ability to meld these themes makes "More Than a Game" superior to "Shooting Stars," the autobiography James wrote with Buzz Bissinger that also came out in the fall (win an NBA MVP award and you can have your life story published at age 24).

The movie obviously creates interest because of James, from not only his basketball prowess but also his personal revelations. As Belman says, a year into his project he had the facts; six years into it, he got the emotion. Thus he was able to capture living-room LeBron, not podium LeBron. But

you also get the stories of James' teammates for nine years, Sian Cotton, Dru Joyce III and Willie McGee, plus his teammate for four years, Romeo Travis. In fact, Joyce's father, Dru Joyce II, who was the junior high coach of James and his teammates (and later took over as their high school coach), may be the most compelling figure in the film. As the players grow up together, you see them learn lessons about life and sports, including the dangers of arrogance as they lose the state title their junior year. You see them recommit themselves to return to dominance as seniors. You see emotion as they talk about setbacks they had in eighth grade—an age at which the memory of a missed shot stays with you forever.

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Because James and his teammates chose to go to a private high school in order to remain teammates for four more years, the flexibility of the schedule they were able to play was remarkable. They played in UCLA's Pauley Pavilion as high school kids. They

played before 10,000 people with Dick Vitale and Bill Walton calling the game. You begin to wonder if they ever went to class. Belman volunteers in conversation that every one of the players graduated with a GPA above 3.4; James had a 3.6.

Belman acknowledges the various themes in his film; he included them so the movie wouldn't be just for basketball fans. It isn't; it works as a human story—a story of growing up and of childhood friendships. But it also works as a basketball movie and includes exhilarating footage of James as a middle-school man-child. It is noteworthy how much of the footage is of the young James making eye-popping passes, instead of thunderous dunks.

Belman, a 2004 college graduate, and thus only three years older than the subjects of his film, remains grateful for the access he had to the team. The players affectionately called him Camera Man because he was always around with a camera in the last years of their high school days. Well, Camera Man may be in the process of being upgraded to top-class documentarian. ■

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