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That Championship Season —22 Years Ago

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“Quantum Hoops,” a new doc about CalTech's long-losing basketball team, makes a slam dunk on the film festival circuit.

By Steve Coulter



“Success is a journey, not a destination... Not everyone can be number one.”

—Arthur Ashe

Those are the first words spoken by narrator David Duchovny in the opening scene of the CalTech basketball documentary, “Quantum Hoops.” His deadpan delivery is in lockstep with the innocuous sports footage dancing across the screen. It is, for all intents and purposes, the perfect start to yet another film about the spirited world of collegiate sports.

Then, just as the last word crosses his lips, the shot freezes, and we are reminded that this is anything but your average documentary. The scene fades on a tight shot of Braun Athletic Center's floorboards and these words materialize: “On January 24, 1985, CalTech defeated the University of LaVerne. They haven't won since.”

What immediately follows is a sequence that writer/director/producer/editor Rick Greenwald calls a “blooper ballet” – although he admits that these opening scenes might be a little misleading. “I had to show where they came from to show where they're going. Strangely enough, I had to go through hours and hours of footage to get those really bad, clowny bloopers.”

A SoCal native who has made a successful career of editing reality TV, Greenwald knows a thing or two about how to make other people look foolish for fun and profit. With “Quantum Hoops,” however, the self-professed sports fanatic found a story that revealed itself to him like the layers of an onion. It was a lengthy process that became a labor of love and ultimately appealed to his better nature.

The resulting film is much more than just a chronicle of chronic failure, and much less mean-spirited than the subject matter might allow. Sure, there are laughs – even “clowny” laughs – in the film, but “Quantum Hoops” offers none of the bleak voyeurism that passes for mainstream entertainment these days. That, says Greenwald, is by design.

“I’ve been in reality TV as an editor, and I know what we do – we manipulate,” he says. “The producer says ‘make this funny,’ so you cut something out of sequence and you lie to make it funny by making people look like idiots. I didn’t want that for this film. I had a responsibility as a documentary filmmaker to tell the truth.”

Greenwald officially began filming CalTech’s Beavers in January 2006, and by season’s end, he was convinced that he had a compelling story to tell. The team, after all, featured some of the world’s best and brightest young minds getting their clocks regularly cleaned by opponents from lesser institutions of higher learning – sometimes by as much as 60 points a game.

Among the starters on the 2006 team was a group of seniors with daunting majors the likes of which you probably wouldn’t find on most NCAA rosters. They included Day Ivy (applied mathematics and economics), Jordan Carlson (physics), Dean Reich (applied physics), Ben Sexon (mechanical engineering) and Scott Davies (applied physics and economics).

The entire 2006 squad featured only six players with high school varsity basketball experience – and none of them, according to the film, received offers to play for any other colleges. For dedicated head coach Roy Dow, “recruitment” at CalTech primarily consists of open tryouts, only the first step in a season full of uniquely frustrating challenges.

It is the Beavers’ enthusiasm and drive in the face of such overwhelming odds, according to Greenwald, that makes their story so compelling – especially when you consider the daunting scholastic workload required of students at a school regularly ranked among the top five

academic institutions in the world.

“These kids are geniuses,” he says. “They know the plays inside and out, but they just can’t always get their bodies to do what their mind is telling them to do. The reality is that CalTech basketball is purer than Little League Baseball.”

So far, “Quantum Hoops” has garnered a fair amount of attention on the festival circuit, including an Audience Choice Award at the 2007 Santa Barbara International Film Festival. The film has also been shown several times on the CalTech campus and recently had its official theatrical debut at Laemmle’s One Colorado in Pasadena. Plans for a DVD release are currently in the works.

Says Greenwald: “This is more or less my version of a science experiment.”

For more information, visit www.quantumhoops.com