

McFarland, USA (2015)

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hours 8 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Proverbs 31:8-9

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...

Luke 1:51-52

Sports films are always about underdogs struggling uphill against seemingly impossible odds, and this Kevin Costner, set in the late 1980s and “based on a true story” film is no exception. It is also a truism that the best of these films usually involve issues of race and racism (think [Remember the Titans](#); [Coach Carter](#); [Pride](#); and [42](#)).

In what amounts to a prologue, we see Coach Jim White (Kevin Costner) berating his losing football team during halftime. When one youth sasses him back the angry coach hurls a cleated shoe in his direction, the cleats cutting the boy’s cheek when the shoe bounces off the locker. Cut to White, his wife Cheryl (Maria Bello), and their two daughters, teenage Julie (Morgan Saylor) and preteen Jamie (Elsie Fisher) in their packed car entering McFarland where he has a new position as an assistant coach and science teacher. This is the bottom of the barrel for him vocationally, we learn. No one in the car is impressed

by the looks of the run-down town of small stucco houses. The only residents are Latinos who harvest the vegetables growing in the vast fields surrounding the town. The restaurant they stop in does not serve the burgers they seek, only tacos and other Mexican dishes. The house they will live in is drab looking except for a large Mexican-style painting of a maiden in the center of a living room wall. The family is at first startled by such an unusual decoration, but if you guess that they will not paint over it, you will be right. The fate of the painting and their feelings toward it are symbolic of what happens to each of them in a town unlike anything they have experienced before.

At school the principal (Valente Rodriguez) is glad to see Jim but wary of his past record. When White runs afoul of the football coach during a practice session, the Principal keeps him on anyway as a p.e. teacher because it is so difficult to secure staff for his economically deprived school. The students are amused by Jim's last name and rather indifferent to his attempt to teach them. This changes when his daughter Julia points out what good runners some of the boys are, causing her father to look with renewed interest at the students and their abilities. The boys are roused out of bed by their mothers before dawn to work in the fields with their parents. Then they run the miles back to school so as to arrive in time for classes. While driving down a country road, White clocks a boy named Thomas Diaz (Carlos Pratts) at 12 mph. He points this out to him, and the boy accepts it matter of factly, as if to say, "That's what we do." At first he pays little heed to the teacher's invitation to help start a cross country running team. The principal does not share White's enthusiasm for such a project either. Jim has to admit that he has never coached anyone in the sport, but he persists, and the principal green lights the idea. White runs into roadblocks right away. Some students are interested, but Thomas, fastest of the lot, holds out. He shares his father's fatal outlook that they are doomed to labor all of their lives

picking vegetables in the hot fields. Seven members are needed for a team, so White is fighting an uphill battle. Even when finally winning over Thomas, another Diaz brother, and their chubby sibling Danny (Ramiro Rodriguez), there is Señor Diaz (Omar Levya) to contend with. White pays a visit to their home where Senora Diaz (Diana Maria Riva) keeps piling on his plate enchilladas and such. Later on the coach will try his hand at joining the Diaz family in the fields. He soon finds himself needing their help to survive the scorching sun and aching pain that stoop labor inflicts upon day laborers. Unfamiliar with such pain-enducing, even degrading, work, White gains a never dying respect for his students. As he will tell his team later, none of their competitors have faced and triumphed over the conditions that they have faced all of their lives. (I was especially interested in White's trying to work in the field because several decades ago when I directed a Migrant Ministry project around Bowling Green, Ohio, the 12 college student participants and I also tried our hand at picking tomatoes. We did this for just half a day, but all were worn out by the experience and possessed a deep respect for those who could not walk away from the fields as we did! We at least wore hats for protection against the torrid sun.)

At last White has his team, but they lose badly against a better-equipped team with more experience running a course that is far hillier than the flat plain surrounding McFarland. The only bright spot is that the heavy Danny refuses to drop out, even though he lags far behind the other runners. Thus begins the long, grueling, *Rocky*-like training period in which the coach makes the athletes run up and down the only hills in their area, a big collection of high, tarp-covered mounds of nuts (which these boys might well have helped harvest). As a carrot, White holds before them the possibility that if they are successful, they might earn athletic scholarships for college. During this period Thomas's fatalism almost gains the upperhand. In one conversation with his father, Senor Gomez puts down the notion that Thomas could go ever to college,

stating that his reading does no good out in the fields.

Of course, we know that matters will go better, else there would be no story and film. Our enjoyment, and inspiration, come from seeing how the hard-training students achieve their "impossible dream." The boys, and viewers, learn a real lesson also of corporate or communal achievement, one that rises peculiarly out of how cross country runners are scored. This is a team, not an individual sport. Points are awarded for the top five runners: first, 1 point; second, 2 points; third 3 points; fourth, 4 points; and fifth, 5 points. The team with the *lowest* score wins. (When White tells the boys that this is like golf, they laugh at his assumption that they know anything about this white man's sport.) In the Big Race guess who will come in just fast enough to bring victory to the team?

A worthy by-product of this film is the spotlight it shines on farm laborers and Hispanic culture. There is a delightful sequence in which their friends, discovering daughter Julie has had her 15th birthday, quickly organize a Quinceanera for her. Jim learns that the males driving their high-powered cars through the streets at work are not the sinister gang members he had first thought, but workers who sought relief from their hard lives through joining together in an auto club. We also see what it costs in human terms for the rest of us to have relatively cheap vegetables and fruit.

Hopefully you will go on to watch the bio film about the great labor organizer who adapted the tactics of Gandhi to the American scene—not just nonviolence but death-threatening fasting as well—[Cesar Chavez](#). We see what Liberation Theologians call "conscientization" taking place, both among the Mexican-Americans and the White family. This involves becoming aware of one's situation and coming to believe that something can be done about it, rather than fatally accepting "things as they are." Were this a fictional story, one might

object to this being another story of a white guy delivering dark-skinned folk from bondage, but it is a true story—and therefore hopeful in that it reveals that some members of “the oppressive class” can break ranks, much as did whites during the Civil Rights era.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the March 2015 issue of Visual Parables.