

# The Heart of the Game (2005)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- 3; L - 3; S/N - 2. Running time: 1 hour 37 min.

This exciting basketball film by The Heart of the Game Ward Serrill is a prime example that we are living in a golden age of documentaries. Mention must be made of film editor Eric Frith, who worked with the director to edit down some two hundred hours of film, shot during a period of over six years, to fit into the usual length of a feature film. The final film, as exciting and suspenseful as any fictional tale, is an astonishing achievement, so involving of the viewer that I noted at least four times when the audience cried out and burst into applause—during, not after the film. Mr. Serrill started filming at the time that Roosevelt High School hires Bill Resler to coach their women's basketball team, the Roughriders. This is an unusual hire, as Resler is a University of Washington tax professor with no prior coaching experience. It might be that no one else wanted the job of coaching a team that had been in the cellar of the league for so long—whatever, it

turns out that the professor (he keeps his main job) has some unique coaching ideas he is eager to try out.

Telling the girls that his game philosophy is, "A full-court press the whole game. No offensive strategy, just run like hell," he puts them through a rigorous, agonizing training regime so that their muscles and lungs will hold up after they have run their opponents into exhaustion. His team members are shorter than most of their opponents, so he starts everyone as guards. He institutes an Inner Circle, a time when only the girls meet to discuss important issues of relationships and other team concerns. Each season his motivation technique is based on a metaphor for the team, on which he bases his pep talks— Pack of Wolves, Tropical Storm, Pride of Lions. His pep talks belie his Kris Kringle-like appearance, so filled are they with such violent phrases as "tear into them," "eat them up," go in for the kill." During their wolf season he tells them to "stare into their eyes" in the hope of intimidating the opposing players. Pumped up by his motivational and training regimen, the team becomes an overnight powerhouse, almost winning a championship the first year, and earning the novice coach Seattle's "Coach of the Year award.

Although the film relates the sad story of a team member who was sexually molested by a private trainer, most of the attention is given to Darnellia Russell, so good at basketball that Resler approaches her for the varsity team even though she is a freshman. He almost has to force her to join, so shy and unsure of herself is she at first. She lives on the other side of town, but her mother believes that the academics are better at Roosevelt High, so she enrolls Darnellia there. The only African American on the team, the girl requires a lot of the coach's time, not just on court, but in getting her to bring up her class work in which she ought to be making As and Bs. As the years go by, her story provides as much drama as

the well photographed games themselves. Pregnant in her junior year, she drops out of school to give birth to her baby (she refuses an abortion), and then, hugely supported by her family, returns, but the athletic association (the WIAA) will not let her play ball. When returning for her fifth year, even though she has kept up her grades, the WIAA still disqualifies her as morally unfit to play, and remains opposed, even when a sympathetic lawyer appeals her case to a judge, who over rules the Association. When the WIAA announces that it will appeal, Resler turns over the matter of Darnellia's team membership to the Inner Circle. Now a "pack" or family that cares about each other, the girls agree that she should play, even though all their games in which she participates could be forfeited, thus ruining their realistic hopes of a state championship.

How all this turns out is as suspenseful as any sports film you are ever likely to see. The filmmakers direct our full sympathy to the Roughriders, but never demonize the opponents, especially their archrivals, Garfield High (the school Darnellia lives near), which defeats them on a number of occasions, and whom, in the cliff-hanging finale, they must defeat in order to win the state championship, the first time that both finalists were from Seattle. Screen time is justifiably given to the coach of the Garfield team, Joyce Walker, a legendary player who had played on an Olympics team and the Harlem Globetrotters (deserving of her own documentary). We might wish that something of Coach Resler's personal life had been included—mention is made of his meeting and marrying a woman, but we see nothing of her or of how he managed to juggle his time between his university teaching, his new family, and what could easily be a full time job at the high school. However, for those who love sports films with discussable issues of race and class, education and gender, and a debatable ethical issue of choice, this film cannot be surpassed. It is one of the few documentaries that I strongly recommend that youth leaders take their youth to see. This film is worth a million Pirates of the Caribbean, and is just

as exciting!