

The AFI DOCS Interview: YEAR OF THE SCAB Director John Dorsey

Description

Posted by Larry Gleason

In September 1987, for the first time in U.S. history, replacement football players took the field amidst a union strike. Seen as a second chance for these unknowns or "scabs" the 1987 season became one of the Washington Redskins' most memorable. Using archival footage and personal interviews, filmmaker John Dorsey highlights a forgotten moment in NFL history in YEAR OF THE SCAB. AFI spoke with Dorsey about the film, which closes AFI DOCS 2017.

AFI: What led you to pursue documentary filmmaking?

JD: Like a lot of great things, the point of entry was rock and roll. When you're a teenager, you're so impressionable and ripe for intellectual awakening and inspiration. I guess I was about 14 when I first saw THE COMPLETE BEATLES, an absolute, overlooked, out-of-print masterpiece. The economy of storytelling is perfection. If you changed a single frame, the diamond would be flawed. The Beatles legend as voiced by Malcolm McDowell? I mean! *come on!* Since then, there's always been a part of me that wants to print the legend when it comes to storytelling and make whatever story I'm telling feel almost mythic in stature.

When I was about 17, I was exposed to a totally different style through GIMME SHELTER, and what I later learned was direct cinema. I was still a teenager living with my parents but to this day, I can point to actual specific shots and beats and extremely understated choices in the film that remain a constant source of inspiration.

AFI: How did your career begin?

JD: I began working for feature directors such as Barry Levinson and Mark Romanek. Working on scripted features, I found myself particularly affected by certain true-life stories that seemed more potent than any fiction. During that time, I was finding inspiration in tales of ambition, folly and love chronicled in documentaries like THE CRUISE, the UP films and SOME KIND OF MONSTER. Ultimately, I set out to blend the narrative techniques and pacing from fiction films with the documentary form in a way that reflected the films that inspired me.

My first stab at documentary filmmaking was in my 20s, with a film about tribute bands called MOCK STARS. The idea was to make a true story about fake bands. The funny thing was, as I was shooting tribute bands that meticulously replicated the look and sound of their musical heroes, I found myself trying to meticulously recreate the look and sound of famous rock docs that inspired me. Ultimately, MOCK STARS got bogged down with the burdens of music licensing and was never completed. But [here's](#) a sample. It was made in 2000 so it was done with crude tools but there's a lot of passion.

AFI: What inspired you to tell this story?

JD: My best friend and business partner, Andrew Stephan, suggested the idea of making a film about the scab experience during the NFL strike of 1987. The idea needed a focus and the obvious choice was Washington. Their replacement players had gone undefeated without the help of a single veteran player to cross the picket line and laid the groundwork for a Super Bowl run. Hollywood took a stab at dramatizing the story in 2000 with THE REPLACEMENTS, but they changed the names of both the team and its replacement players and took dramatic license to produce something that didn't deliver on the promise of the story. In making so many changes to the real-life story, I felt they missed a golden opportunity because the true story is much more potent than the fiction. As such, there was a real opening for a doc to present the story as it happened and as it was meant to be told.

I learned that despite going undefeated and helping set the team up for a run at a Super Bowl title, the replacement players never got Super Bowl rings. It was an indignity that was brought into focus by the fact that people in the team's marketing department and front office, who never stepped into the field of play, did get rings. Something just seemed wrong about that to all of us. It turned out they were worse than just replaceable — they were disposable.

AFI: What happened as you began to find your subjects?

JD: As we started tracking these replacement players down for pre-interviews, I became fascinated by the idea that these guys are in all walks of life — that today, they are walking among us — hiding in plain site. You don't know that your neighbor, or your kid's high school football coach, or your commercial real estate broker, had his moment on the biggest stage in sports because they've been conditioned by life not to bring it up.

We like to say they thought they were getting the golden ticket — but they ended up with a scarlet letter. They would always be scabs, not football players. It was an experience that should have been a badge of honor, but it ended up being a tremendous emotional burden. Every time they bring it up, people were quick to diminish the experience. — Oh, you were just a scab. — Not knowing they ended up playing against — and beating — a team like Dallas with 21 legitimate NFL players who themselves crossed the picket line, including two first ballot hall-of-famers.

But where it really transcends sport and becomes simply a great story is that like any graduating class of young guys with 25 years of water under the bridge, they've dealt with life's challenges with varying degrees of success. I was really motivated to track them down and see where life has left them. Today, they're living lives of quiet dignity. Ultimately, we were excited to offer them a second shot at having their moment in the sun and give them the credit they deserve.

AFI: What was a particular obstacle you faced while making the film?

JD: Tracking them down was hard. But convincing them that I was going to give them a fair shake and allow them to tell their own story was the real challenge. Even when we did find them, they weren't exactly eager to reopen old wounds. For them, it's the scab that never healed. We won more battles than we lost in that regard. But there were some guys for whom no amount of cajoling would convince them to participate. I suspect those that did decline might see the finished film and regret that decision.

AFI: What do you want audiences to walk away with after screening your film?

JD: That you aren't defined by the recognition you receive in life. Life is not about the wins. It's about how you deal with losing.

AFI: Why is Washington, DC, a valuable location to screening your film?

JD: This one's obvious. Back in 1987, the fans in Washington embraced the replacement players while they were playing. They saw echoes of their own dreams in these guys and lived vicariously through them. But fans and fame are both so fickle. The sad part is that in the excitement of Super Bowl season, those same fans lost site of the everyday heroes who helped get them there. Today, there's an entire generation of sports fans in town who probably have no idea that this happened. It's a story for the ages, but today the story is largely forgotten. I'm excited to see the hometown

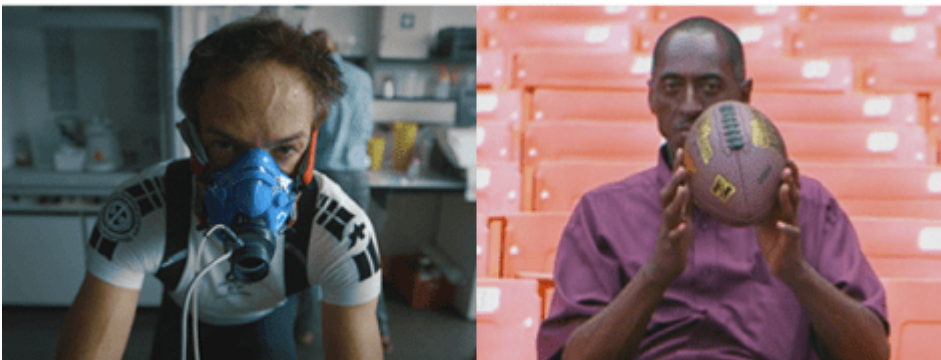
crowd get a chance to embrace them again.

AFI: Why are documentary films important today?

JD: It's one thing to see a reflection of yourself in a character and it's another to see a reflection of yourself in another human being. Authenticity is an overused buzzword applied to conversations about everything from corporate marketing to a millennial's preference for vinyl and Polaroids and anything analog. But there is something about our collective need to experience something real these days that has set the stage for what is, without question, the golden age of documentary filmmaking. It's extremely fulfilling to be a part of it.

I'm extremely proud to screen this film at the Newseum, a monument to our desire to make sense of real life, at a time when that impulse is more important than ever before.

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