

The Heart of the Game

USA 2005

Director: Ward Serrill

Certificate 12A 93m 11s

As any documentarian will tell you, a good documentary cannot forego the basics that make a successful feature film. It has to have some kind of story (here, the rise and fall and rise of talented athlete Darnellia Russell), exciting imagery (not really, though there are plenty of talking heads and endless shots of teenage legs running up and down the basketball court), an ending (this it does have – Darnellia's team, the Roosevelt Roughriders, win the state championship), and engrossing characters. It is on this last point that *The Heart of the Game* falls flat. Although we come to admire coach Bill Resler – notwithstanding all his new-age talk of 'magical journeys' and 'fighting like warriors' – he's not a charismatic lead. Darnellia is strong and determined, and we root for her, but she is an emotional blank. Worse still, her innumerable teenage teammates – with their rows and rows of perfect teeth and their high swinging ponytails – are so alike as to become indistinguishable. Is this Lindsey? Is it Devon? Who can tell them apart? A few minor roles, among them Joyce Walker, former star and dedicated coach to the rival basketball team, offer fleeting moments of personality, but the film ultimately suffers from our scarce enjoyment of the characters on screen, and from its relentlessly repetitious imagery. Russell spends five long years in high school, but it feels more like 50 to us viewers who frankly can't wait for her to graduate just to get a change of scenery.

The Heart of the Game works best as an (occasional) exposé of American society. When teenage Darnellia has an out-of-wedlock baby, the sports authorities and plenty of others seem perfectly ready to consign her to the human garbage heap, actively preventing her from getting her life back on track, in school or on the basketball court. Her desire simply to play ball again seems much more a *cause célèbre* than the sexual molestation of another teammate by a 'professional'

■ **SYNOPSIS** Seattle, the past decade. The true-life account of coach Bill Resler, a former college tax professor who becomes coach of the Roosevelt High School girls' basketball team, the Roughriders. With his unconventional, high-energy approach, Resler quickly coaches the team to success. Into Roosevelt's predominantly white environment comes Darnellia Russell, an inner-city black girl with an exceptional talent for basketball. Her dream is to be the first person in her family to go to college; courted by innumerable colleges with the promise of a sports scholarship, her success seems assured. After initial resistance, Resler and Russell lead the team to triumph.

All is put in jeopardy when Darnellia falls pregnant by her long-time boyfriend; she chooses to keep the baby, and quits school. The following year, with the toddler cared for by her supportive extended family, Darnellia returns to Roosevelt keen to finish school well, but is deemed ineligible to play basketball by the state sports authority. Ignoring the decision, the team and Resler continue to play with Russell and to win, despite the occasional setback, particularly at the hands of arch rivals the Garfield Bulldogs. After a court battle, an overturned verdict and an appeal, and when the Roosevelt Roughriders finally win the state title, the case against Darnellia is dropped. She goes on to attend a community college, but she is no longer offered the prime scholarships.



Balls up: Bill Resler, Darnellia Russell

coach who is quickly tried, convicted and forgotten. The difficulty of paying for American higher education, and the underprivileged classes' desperate reliance on sports scholarships and the like just to gain a future, is patently illustrated in this film. Moreover, we marvel at the vast expense, media coverage and enthusiasm given over to American high-school sports – surely greater than the entire athletic budget for some developing nations. And luckily for film-maker Ward Serrill, our team really does win the title, Darnellia goes to college, and these happy endings provide a certain filmic gratification. But throughout the film, every other game seems to end with a dramatic two-point lead – scored in the final seconds of play! – dampening the effect of yet another miraculous win.

"Those who can't do, teach; those who can't teach, teach gym," the Woody Allen saying goes. This is a film for any self-defending gym coach looking for a hero; Resler is an absolute goldmine of inspirational soundbites ("draw blood!"); he spends the last ten minutes of the film screaming "Look in their eyes!" to his pumped-up team – and this strategy actually works, leading the Roughriders to triumph. The girls seem really to love him, and to benefit from his smart guidance. *The Heart of the Game* probably hoped to be not just a film about basketball, but one about life. Maybe, but you'd better really enjoy amateur basketball to get through this one. ♦♦ **Gilda Williams**

CREDITS

Directed by Ward Serrill
Produced by Ward Serrill
Liz Manne
Written by Ward Serrill
Director of Photography Ward Serrill
Edited by Eric Frith
Music by/Original Music Produced by The Angel
Original Music Composed by Angel C

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Production Companies Miramax Films presents Woody Creek Productions in association with Flying Spot Pictures
 A film by Ward Serrill
Executive Producer Larry Estes
Associate Producers Amelia Stodghill Richard Palacios Lois Greenberg
Story Consultants Katherine Bragdon Matt Clarke Tricia Cooke Steve Hay David Hunsaker David Liu Michael McManis
Additional Cinematography David Fox Diana Wilmar
Additional Camera Ray Woodhouse Bruce Hutson Ryan Purcell Kirk Miller Aaron Stadler Wendy Jo Carlton Richard Palacios Charlie Kirkwood Katherine Bragdon Hilary Seidel Scott Seidel
Additional Editing Kurt Feldhun Tiffany Verzal Tim Harader
Additional Music Kurt Feldhun Joe Zajonc Daisey Zajonc
Music Supervisor Sue Jacobs
Soundtrack "The Small Death" – Richard McFarland; "Right Now" – Mocean Worker; "Skip Dat, Pop Dat"; "All the Way" – The Angel; "Believe It" – The Angel featuring Mystic; "Howlin' at the Moon"; "The Heart of the Game" – Bill Resler (Guitar), Ward Serrill (Harmonica)
Sound Ward Serrill
Narration Recording Pat Cockburn Steve Heinke
Sound Mix David Howe

WITH

Darnellia Russell
 Bill Resler
 Devon Crosby-Helms
 Meghan Miller
 Jade White
 Lindsey Wilson
 Mike 'Riderman' Silva
 Emily Watson
 Hillary Seidel
 James White
 Aaron Jack

Mona Mendoza
 Keasha Beard
 April Swafford
 Maude Lepley
 Joyce Walker
 Joel Waters
 Marjorie Russell
 Jerry Ronk
 Shannon Costello
 Jenny Wild
 Alex Jessup
 Emiko Harris
 Leondrae Morris
 Betty Harris
 Urika Russell
 Leyla Khastou
 Tracey Leddo
 Secoy Clemmons
 Trekeyla Clemmons
 Kenyon Luce
 Malia O'Neill
 Mike Colbrese
 Kelli Cutright

The Roughriders
 Mackenzie Argens
 Molly Boyd
 Colleen Breese-Woods
 Alex Capelotto
 Jen Cheun Boudry
 Korleana Davico
 Ariel Evans
 Alaina Forbes
 Breanna Gaines
 Tammy Hartung
 Johanna Hase
 Mattie Hesch
 Corry Holme
 Libby Jansen
 Kimmy Kirkwood
 Jamie McIntyre
 Laura Mohler
 Colleen Mori
 Anne Moxon
 Betsy Neel
 Angela Nefcy
 Monica Nelson
 Piper Nims
 Rachel Nord
 Amanda Ostrom
 Morgan Patterson
 J'Nai Pich
 Erin Pursell
 Allison Reiman
 Anna Sarff
 Maggie Torrance
 Amber Warren

The Bulldogs
 Jamila Bates
 Kaneshia Brooks
 Delaney Conway
 Nicole Higgins
 Anna Johnsen
 Laura Kanter
 Jazmyne Kendrick
 Ashley Knight
 Briana Lewis
 Ashley Mitchell
 Natasha Neal
 Mitia Oliver
 Lacale Pringle-Buchanan
 Kanika Rogers
 Brenia Sherrod
 Tashara Simpson
 Tashara Ticeson
 Samantha Tinned
 Jessica Tinned
 Quanitta Underwood
 Laura Washington
 Robyn Williams
 Chanika Williams

Chris Bridges
 narrator

In Colour

Distributor
 Miracle Communications

8,386 ft +9 frames

The Holiday

USA 2006

Director: Nancy Meyers

With Cameron Diaz, Kate Winslet, Jude Law, Jack Black, Eli Wallach

Certificate 12A 135m 29s

Culture-clash comedy gives way to romance in this feature that draws heavily on successful romcoms such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Love, Actually* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Like the latter, it sees Americans falling for – in this case thanks to a house swap between American Amanda (Diaz) and British Iris (Winslet). Visually, *The Holiday* freely exploits the charm of the British countryside: Iris lives in a quaint, chocolate-box cottage in a setting similar to the rolling green hills seen in many a Working Title film. The film also makes sport of its clumsy, likeably flawed heroines. Amanda struggles up the country paths in her high heels, while Iris blushes and blunders her way through conversations with her ex, Jasper (Rufus Sewell), a roguish, well-spoken charmer reminiscent of Hugh Grant character in the *Bridget Jones* saga.

While Jude Law's character Graham is equally charming, he is less stereotypical: a womaniser perhaps but also vulnerable. His character's ability to surprise helps make his romance with Amanda both enjoyable and believable. Iris' Stateside bond with Miles (Jack Black), though pleasing, has less impact.

More time is spent on Iris' friends with ageing screenwriter Arthur (Eli Wallach), a plot strand that's initially endearing but ultimately overplayed. Arthur's fondness for classic Hollywood heroines leads to many pointed references: he advises Iris to watch Barbara Stanwyck and Rosalind Russell movies, and tells her to act more like the 'leading lady' than the 'best friend'. This postmodern self-referencing feels incongruous in a film that at the same time is trying to ape the classical virtue of the Hollywood golden era.

While fitfully amusing, *The Holiday* is at its best when going all out for old-fashioned romance. True, it's overlong and peppered with corny dialogue, much like director Nancy Meyers' previous romantic comedies *Something Gotta Give* and *What Women Want*. But with a likeable cast and credible romantic unions, it still has the power to move us as the credits roll over its shamelessly idealised closing scene.

♦♦ **Anna Smith**

CREDITS

Directed by Nancy Meyers
Produced by Nancy Meyers
 Bruce A. Block
Written by Nancy Meyers
Director of Photography Dean Cundey
Edited by Joe Hutshing
Production Designer Jon Hutman

Music
 Hans Zimmer

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Production Companies Universal Pictures and Columbia Pictures present a Waverly Films production
 A film by Nancy Meyers
Executive Producer Suzanne Farwell
Associate Producer Jennifer Eatz