

The 8th annual Canadian Sport Film Festival satisfied a city's craving for inspiring sports stories during the May long weekend

Over the Victoria Day long weekend, the 8th annual Canadian Sport Film Festival screened 23 films: two World premieres, one International premiere, five North American premieres, three Canadian premieres, four Toronto premieres. It's next stop: Winnipeg in 2017.

For three days in Toronto during a hot May long weekend, TIFF Bell Lightbox sizzled screens and welcomed hundreds of film enthusiasts. With 15 premieres and panel discussions that included both international and local filmmakers, the festival was a favourite for sport fans and film enthusiasts. They experienced 23 thought-provoking stories of people and sport on the big screen.

The first night of the festival honed in on boxing chronicles tied to stories of immigration, troubled youth, violence and addiction. Opening night kicked off on Friday with the short film *'Champion'*. It looked at the career of an Iraqi boxer who fled his country for a better life in the United States, sacrificing his dream to be a world-class fighter. *'Fighting for Peace'*, Friday's feature film, took us to one of Rio's poorest, most violent and drug riddled favelas. The documentary followed two young boxers trying to make a career out of the sport. *'Fighting for Peace's'* film directors Joost van der Valk and Mags Gavan flew in from the Netherlands to join a panel following the screening, which was hosted by Toronto Star sports writer, Morgan Campbell. *'Sully's'* a film about a legendary Toronto-based boxing gym was also screened as part of the Opening night package. The audience was entertained with stories of boxing from the past along with a sense of where the sport is heading into the future.

For eight years, the Canadian Sport Film Festival showcases powerful stories that highlight the ways in which sport, recreation and play matter in the everyday lives of people and offer opportunities for social change. Films feature the remarkable resilience of people in challenging circumstances who find hope through sport. *'In The Turn'* was screened on Saturday. It looks at the life of a transgendered 10-year old and her zest for roller derby. Another film, *'Far From Home'* pulled viewers into the quest for Brolin Mawejje to become Uganda's first Winter Olympian; and festival-goers also saw how the closure of an elite high school basketball program in Toronto affected generations of athletes in the film *'Eastern'*.

Another one of Saturday's screenings looked at an historical and traditional piece on the evolution of *'9-Man'*, a hybrid volleyball game played in parking lots and schools. Torontonians David Ling, who features in the film briefly, said he's been waiting for years to see the documentary directed by Ursula Liang.

“Ursula is great storyteller. Historically, things get lost. At festivals like this, it’s nice to know people can learn about the history of the game,” said Ling.

Ursula Liang who is based in the U.S. joined the audience for a Skype discussion and revealed most of the archival footage used in the film was unearthed from Toronto.

“Those cities with less (visible) minorities, have less of a need for 9-Man,” she said, explaining why there are more committed 9-Man teams on the east coast as opposed to the west coast of America and Canada.

On Saturday afternoon, there were free workshops for children aged 8 to 12 where 36 kids created 10-second stop animation films on themes including the love of basketball and friendship in soccer. After the workshop, a set of films were screened for families such as the animation about an elephant who desires a bicycle; a film entitled *‘Go Daan Go’* about a young child who wants to become a swimmer; and a story about a teenager who uses journalism to fight the 2014 World Cup development that would destroy his neighbourhood called *‘Gabriel Reports on the World Cup’*.

After the family screenings, Chelsey Gotell, Canadian Paralympian and 100-metre backstroke gold medallist joined a panel to show the crowd her Paralympic medals and answer questions about her career. After being asked by one of the children what her biggest lesson was as an athlete, she told the young audience: *“Love whatever you do because if you don’t have passion for it, it’ll feel like a chore.”* Saturday night ended with a feature called *‘Scrum,’* a film that details the hardship the Sydney Convicts face as they compete in an international gay tournament.

The festival’s final day commenced with *‘Brother’s Body’* where director David Parel filmed his brother, who is a body builder, as he trained for the Arnold Classic. He said: “my brother thought I was making a doc about his body building experience – not about our relationship as brothers.” Closing night featured the world premiere of *‘Zanzibar Soccer Dreams’* directed by United Kingdom filmmakers Catalin Brylla, and Florence Ayisi. Zanzabari soccer coach Nassra Mohammed joined Ayisi for questions from an appreciative audience, many of whom were Toronto-based East Africans excited to see emerging soccer stars on screen. After the show, Ayisi remarked her film is not just about soccer but it’s about the value of belonging to a group.

The festival contained a blend of feature length films, animation and short-fiction documentaries. The mixture provided a balance where you could digest complex and heart-felt issues in a heavy long form documentary, but then switch your mood to enjoy a shorter, entertaining picture. The long weekend’s worth of films was a big, active cultural lesson of the diversity of experience that sports can bring.

May 27, 2016

You don't have to be a sports fan to admire the films shown at the Canadian Sports Film Festival. Nor do you have to be a film aficionado. With human-interest narratives aimed to arouse and educate viewers about a story untold, unheard of and not sighted in mainstream media, the festival has something for everyone. With the festival hitting Winnipeg next, if this festival is any indication, viewers there will be left with new perspectives they won't soon forget.

--Justin Robertson