

Shooting Stars

Reviewed by Carol Greene

Shooting Stars is a film of contrasts: youthful basketball players of the 1920s and 30s against the aging alumni of today; flat, blue-tinged footage of recent interviews against the golden-hued dramatization of the 'big game' in 1935; nostalgic dress and settings against a contemporary 1980s backdrop. The most unconscious contrast is between the humility of the women who played for the Edmonton Commercial Grads and the film's exuberant voice-over proclaiming the unsurpassed sports achievements of this Canadian women's basketball team.

A one-hour docudrama, *Shooting Stars* beautifully integrates alumni-interviews, archival footage and dramatic re-enactments of a cliff-hanger basketball game against the Commercial Grads' arch-rivals, the Tulsa Stenos. The film is a must-see for all Canadian sports and history enthusiasts.

The Grads were formed in 1915 by a group of women graduates from McDougall Commercial High School in Edmonton. Initially the team played local games for fun. After 1922, once they had challenged and won the Canadian Championship, they soared to the forefront of women's international basketball. Before the team

folded in 1940, it had won all but twenty of its 522 games; had held the World Senior Women's basketball title for seventeen consecutive years; and had won the Official World Championship at each of the four Olympics they had attended (1924, 1928, 1932 and 1936).

Their history is an extraordinary one. Their's are the most impressive statistics compiled by any basketball team — ever. But, as is often the case, these women's achievements have been overlooked in the historical record. Even when they were entered in the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, the Hall of Fame failed to inform them of the honour! They were formally re-entered in 1983. Recently a United States university team was hailed as an

international record-breaker when they won 61 consecutive games. The Grads won 147 consecutive games, lost one, and then continued on a 78-game winning spree. Another questionable record is that for the most consecutive foul-shots given to a highly paid professional player who sank 56. Margaret MacBurney of the Grads sank 61 consecutive foul-shots during a half-time exhibition in 1931. *Shooting Stars* corrects the text of our sports annals, giving the Edmonton Commercial Grads the pre-eminence they deserve.

Just as rare as their incredible sports record, is the opportunity these women had to engage in such a strong women's community. The bonding initiated during the 1920s and '30s has endured. The Grads, still a close-knit band, organize and attend reunions every three years. Of the original thirty-eight team members, twenty-eight are still living; the youngest is sixty-eight years-old, and the oldest eighty-six.

In an interview before the National Film Board's screening of *Shooting Stars* at the Royal Ontario Museum, Betty Bawden, the last member to join the Grads in 1939 and president of the Grads' Alumni Association, said there were "no



Still from *Shooting Stars*

Photo: NFB

stars on the Grads —we were a team.” To be chosen as a Grad you had to be an “unselfish player.” Commenting on the ‘professionalization’ of amateur sports today, Bawden said: “It’s not necessarily the athlete’s fault. It’s the politics of today’s sports. Athletes aren’t allowed to be amateurs if they want to compete at national and international levels.” Although the Grads’ coach Percy Page, and the players themselves had high expectations for the team, the players “had fun.” Because of the extreme pressures today’s top athletes face, Bawden doubts whether many athletes actually enjoy their sports anymore. Bawden mentioned, as does the film, that the Grads had all worked full-time (usually as secretaries), had no financial sponsorship, practiced in the evenings, and took their holidays from work when they had a tournament to play.

Lauded by all team members is the late

Percy Page. He was the teetotaling, non-smoking, bachelor teacher that the young women had asked to coach them. During his twenty-five years of coaching the Grads, Page never missed a game; lobbied tirelessly for the official recognition of women’s basketball at the Olympics and internationally; and fastidiously managed the team’s affairs so as to make possible the numerous playing trips abroad the team made. In Bawden’s words, “Mr. Page was a gentleman. Playing for him and accepting his standards made us better people.”

From Wilf Rowe’s staid performance as coach Percy Page, to the rampaging, stogey-smoking characterization of the Tulsa Stenos coach, Bawden said the film’s reenactments are authentic. The very arena they had played in was recreated for the film to capture the essence of the period. Laughingly, Bawden alluded to

the difficulty the filmmakers had finding actors/ballplayers “short enough to play the Grads — none of the Grads were very tall.”

At the 1988 Alberta Film and Television Festival, *Shooting Stars* swept the awards, taking Best Documentary; Best Director-Non-Dramatic (Allan Stein); Best Cinematography (James Jeffrey) and an array of other technical and musical-score awards.

This film is a wonderful addition to the growing list of NFB films about women. Videos can be rented for \$2.00 a day; call your local NFB library to reserve. The 16mm and commercial distributor for *Shooting Stars* in Canada is Filmwest Associates of Edmonton.

Produced by Stein/MacLean Productions Limited, in co-production with the National Film Board of Canada, 1988.

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