

## WALL STREET JOURNAL

### For a Football-Deprived Fall, The Inspiration of ‘Rudy’

A sentimental movie that many skipped when it came out in 1993 has become a fan favorite for its realism and timeless truths.

BY PETER TONGUETTE

For the first time in living memory, the coming of autumn doesn't bring with it the promise of wall-to-wall college football. Concerns over coronavirus have prompted top conferences, including the Big Ten and Pac-12, to jettison their games, and whether those teams that have elected to play can plow through an entire season remains an open question.

College football fans seeking succor can always turn, however, to the 1993 drama “Rudy,” which, at some point over the last few decades, turned into just about everybody's favorite football movie. Directed by David Anspaugh, the film recounts the true-life saga of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettinger (played by Sean Astin), a so-so Illinois high-school student whose spunk and effort got him admitted to the University of Notre Dame, where he won a walk-on spot on the famed football team. The film has the sweep of a sentimental symphony. We see Rudy's humble origins and modest athletic abilities; his awe standing on the empty field at Notre Dame Stadium; his grit in fighting for a place on the team; and finally, the satisfying climax of the story: his brief appearance on defense in a game against Georgia Tech, where he levels the opposing quarterback to the cheers of the crowd.

Both Rolling Stone and USA Today have published lists proclaiming “Rudy” the best football film ever made—admittedly, not the most robust category given the abundance of undistinguished football films out there. But even against stiffer competition, the film has fared well. In 2006, the American Film Institute included “Rudy” in its “100 Years...100 Cheers” list of most inspiring films, with “Rudy” sandwiched between grade-A classics “Shane” and “The Defiant Ones.”

The movie's many fans include the late Los Angeles Lakers superstar Kobe Bryant, who spoke of the impression the film made on him as a young man. “It's usually big guys—bug, hulky guys that might've played football,” Mr. Anspaugh, 73, said of the movie's fan base. “They kind of scoot you over to the side: ‘I just don't want to say this in front of anybody...every time I see that movie, I just come apart.’” The sports world has been the backdrop for countless movies— from romantic comedies like “Jerry Maguire” to dark dramas like “Million Dollar Baby”—but “Rudy” belongs to the main current of the genre, where athletic competition itself defines the lives of the characters. Other exemplars include “Rocky” and its progeny, like the martial-arts drama “The

Karate Kid,” and a slew of movies that present baseball in the most starry-eyed terms, including “The Natural” and “Field of Dreams.” But few others have had the staying power of “Rudy.”

“I really dislike sports movies generally, because usually they’re not done accurately,” said Mr. Anspaugh, who is something of the Steven Spielberg of the genre. Before making “Rudy,” Mr. Anspaugh and screenwriter Angelo Pizzo collaborated on another inspired-by-true-events sports movie: the 1986 drama “Hoosiers,” about an over-performing high-school basketball team in the boonies of Indiana. Both films are anchored in a naturalistic approach to presenting

their sports. In making “Rudy,” Messrs. Anspaugh and Pizzo set themselves the challenge of plausibly re-creating a thousand specific details. The film gained verisimilitude by winning the right to shoot at Notre Dame, whose campus appears as a vision of autumnal splendor, and keen-eyed casting, including the stocky, resolute Mr. Astin, Ned Beatty as Mr. Ruettiger’s father, and Jason Miller, a dead ringer for Notre Dame head coach Ara Parseghian.

Most important was Mr. Anspaugh’s decision to retain NFL Films to shoot game scenes using television-style, rather than movie-style, techniques. “Every- thing that’s shot in that movie was shot from the sidelines,” Mr. Anspaugh said. So when Rudy makes his move against Georgia Tech, Mr. Astin doesn’t look like a Hollywood type deposited into Notre Dame Stadium but a combatant in the action—a genuine golden-domed gladiator.

“Rudy” resonates not just because of its attention to detail but for expressing what its makers considered to be timeless truths. “It’s the whole thing of people saying, ‘You can’t do it. You’re not smart enough. You’re not pretty enough. You’re not athletic enough,’” Mr. Anspaugh said.

According to former Washington Post film critic Desson Thomson, “Rudy” has the contours of a work of mythology. “It’s not just an American Dream story,” said Mr. Thomson, who praised the movie when it came out. “It’s very Joseph Campbell, with all these figures sort of coming before you as either helpmates or adversaries.”

Ironically, back in the fall of 1993, the consensus was that “Rudy” itself wasn’t quite good enough. Critics praised the care that went into the movie, but many shrank from its open sentiment. Ticket sales were merely respectable. Netting just under \$23 million at the box office, “Rudy” never climbed higher than no. 5 on the charts. Even the long-forgotten film version of “The Beverly Hillbillies” did better that season. Given its appeal over the long haul, why didn’t “Rudy” barrel out of the huddle to become a blockbuster? To start with, the film lacked stars or any obvious hook besides its Notre

Dame connection—something that, Mr. Anspaugh said, might have caused TriStar Pictures to fumble the release. “A lot of the country...they hate Notre Dame,” Mr. Anspaugh said. “I think the studio, in a way, was afraid to take it out there.”

It all added up to a film that many considered skippable almost 30 autumns ago. Recently retired Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan, who filed a gently skeptical review of “Rudy,” said that it’s a mistake to think that all films find their fans during their theatrical runs. “A lot of people catch up to films later— and sometimes way later—and then they tell their friends, and it becomes kind of a mini-wave,” Mr. Turan said.

It’s no overstatement to say that “Rudy’s” reputation was revived thanks to Blockbuster Video. Audiences saw the film on home video, a technology also responsible for the late success of another notable box-office underperformer, “The Shawshank Redemption,” which came out a year later. “Maybe this was the opening wedge of what’s become a very modern phenomenon, which was films that do not work well in theaters working well at home,” Mr. Turan said. Perhaps the naked sentimentality of “Rudy” was better experienced at home rather than among rowdy multiplex-goers. “When it’s something you bring home...you don’t have to answer to anything,” Mr. Thomson said. “You’re just in direct conversation with your own heart as to what you want.” Whatever the case, the “Rudy” cult showed signs of gathering early on— within days, in fact, of Mr. Turan publishing his mixed review. “One of my all-time favorite responses to a review was a phone message that I got,” he said. “I pushed the button. There was no talking. Someone had just played for me the Notre Dame fight song.”

When we watch “Rudy,” we realize what we’re going to miss this autumn—not just the thrill of athletic contests but the nobility of pursuing improbable goals. *Mr. Tonguette is the author of “Picturing Peter Bogdanovich: My Conversations With the New Hollywood Director,” just out from the University Press of Kentucky.*

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Sean Astin as Rudy on the football field.

The title character in ‘Rudy’ is carried by his Notre Dame teammates.

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