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Sports films and faith

by Sr. Rose Pacatte



The Brazilian Formula One racing car champion Ayrton Senna is shown in a scene from 'Senna.' (Universal Pictures)

Sports films are the timeless cinematic metaphor for life. I think it is a fair question to ask which of them made you cry the most? Was it "Rudy"? "Field of Dreams"? "Brian's Song"? For me it's David Anspaugh's 1986 "Hoosiers."

Some new releases, whether based on fact or fiction, fuse sports and faith quite well and are entertaining and inspiring without falling into the "message" trap. They also avoid sentimentality, though are wrought with emotion and tension. "Senna" is one of those.

"Senna" is a brilliant documentary about Brazilian Ayrton Senna da Silva, a three-time Formula One racing champion, whom many consider him the best of all time. Formula One refers to a set of rules to which all drivers must adhere. Formula One racing takes place on racecourses and through city streets. It began in Europe in the 1920s; the current rules were established after World War II.

Both Formula One racing and Aryton Senna are virtually unknown in the United States but this film is sure to lift the sport's visibility as well as tell the story of an incredible talent lost too soon.

Sports films and faith part 2: Sr. Pacatte's review of the film "Warrior"

"Senna" won the World Cinema Audience Award for Documentary this year at the Sundance Film Festival. British director Asif Kapadia's films all deal with extreme conditions of life and the human capacity to survive, compete and thrive. "Senna" is Kapadia's first feature documentary. What is so extraordinary about the film is that Kapadia and writer Manish Pandey, allow Senna to be the man of faith that he was in a sport that demanded intelligence and talent.

For Senna, racing was most pure when money and politics were left out of it, and one could race for the sheer joy of it. Senna was a devout Catholic and indeed, as one of our sisters from Brazil told me, people there think he is a saint. His philanthropic organization has helped millions of Brazil's school children who live in poverty.

During my interview with Kapadia, he said "I discovered that Aryton was complex and no saint. But he was intelligent, eloquent, and deeply spiritual. Racing helped him to get closer to God. He seemed to let go of himself in search of something that would make him whole, something, someone richer in the sense of being fulfilled, than him.

At high speed a racer isn't aware any longer of what he is doing; he's in another place. Some drivers call it a 'zone' but for Aryton it was a transcendent experience. He wasn't racing himself but something bigger than him."

Senna is quoted in the film when he said in 1989, that "just because I believe in God, just because I have faith in God, it doesn't mean that I'm immune. It doesn't mean that I'm immortal."

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I got the impression from the film that although Senna was like a rock star who gave generously to children's causes in Brazil and inspired hope in his people, he had a creative, artistic soul in a mature relationship with God.

Senna did have a brief failed marriage to a childhood sweetheart, and has had many girlfriends. He also had professional rivalries, especially with his teammate, Alain Prost and a contentious relationship with the late Jean-Marie Balestre, president of FIA (Fédération Internationale du Sport Automobile; the governing body for Formula One and other motor racing events) who seemed to play favorites and apply rules arbitrarily to favor some drivers. Pride and power drive Formula One racing for many, but for drivers like Senna, it was a spiritual experience.

But as director Kapadia says so well, "Aryton was an outsider because of his faith and because of his integrity as a man in an extreme sport. When he lost a big race because of an arbitrary decision, everyone knew he was in the right."

The film is superbly edited, the racing sequences thrilling, the music haunting, and the argument for character, spirituality, art and sports becomes stronger.

Editor's Note: Watch this space for more review on the theme "Sports films and faith." As they say during the previews at the theater: coming soon.

[Daughters of St. Paul Sr. Rose Pacatte, director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles, reviews movies for NCR.]

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