

Film Tells of Field of Dreams in Far Flung India

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Still frame from “The Only Real Game”

By Annette Hinkle

Baseball has been America’s favorite pastime for generations — played in big cities and small towns from coast to coast, it’s as patriotic as hot dogs and apple pie.

But documentary filmmaker Mirra Bank (who has a home in East Hampton) has discovered another part of the world where baseball rules... and its in the most unlikely of places — a remote corner of India bordering Burma.

In Manipur, men, women and children of all ages take the field — and interestingly enough in this very patriarchal society, it’s the women who dominate, particularly in coaching positions.

Manipur’s passion for baseball is the subject of Bank’s documentary “The Only Real Game” which screens this Friday, December 6 at 8:15 p.m. at Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor as the opening night film in the Hamptons Take 2 Documentary Film Festival.

No one knows for sure how baseball became so ingrained in Manipuri society, but all signs indicate it dates back to W.W.II when American pilots and servicemen were stationed in the area. It was 1944 and the Japanese had bombed the Burma Road, the only passage linking the allies in India and China. To keep the supply chain open, pilots flew the “hump” of the Himalayas to provision the Chinese allies.

“Heroic pilots flew the Himalayas several times a day carrying arms, medication, mules and gas in and out of China and the jungles of Burma,” explains Bank. “It was the turning point of the war. Manipur, in terms of the Asian theater, was important because if the Japanese had entered there they would have overrun India and all of the Mid East.”

“In this part of northeast India, the army was working in support of the allies,” she adds. “These were the men who created airfields out of the jungle and played baseball in combat gear. The kids and the people there watched and some of them picked the game

up.”

“It’s been played intermittently ever since,” says Bank. “It has deep roots there.”

In fact, baseball has become one of the few safe outlets in a region marked by an unemployment rate of 25 percent and a political situation which for decades has pitted India’s military police against insurgency groups.

“It’s the Kashmir no one knows about,” explains Bank. “India has many extremists and groups all over creating disruption in the government. In the northeast, eight little states, all of which were princely states, were once sovereign and many were under British protectorate.”

But Bank notes that when the British pulled out of India in 1949 and Pakistan was created, the government hastily arranged plebiscites in many regions, including Manipur which was contested.

“They say the king was held under house arrest and forced to accede to India,” explains Bank. “When Manipur was forcibly merged into the Indian union, there was already a protest movement. By 1958, these groups were organized and disruptive enough that India imposed martial law through the Armed Forces Special Powers Act which rescinds anyone’s right to contest military action be it an arrest or a shooting.

“Essentially it’s a military occupation,” she adds.

On the other side is an insurgency which Banks notes is just as corrupt as the military with participants engaged in drug trafficking, gun running and black market trading.

“In some cases, insurgent groups and the government are in collusion greasing each others palms,” she says. “Every day folks are caught in the cross fire between the Indian government and the insurgency. Armed groups are holding the population hostage.”

The political situation makes it difficult for outsiders to visit Manipur which has no infrastructure, outside investment or jobs.

So while baseball is a sport practically unheard of elsewhere in India where cricket is king, in Manipur, it has become a way for parents to keep their children away from gun runners and drug traffickers. And the level of play has become a source of pride for the Manipuris, who are treated like second rate citizens elsewhere in the country. Excelling at sports has become a way for the people there to make their mark.

“The highest number of Indian Olympic athletes are from Manipur,” says Bank. “Baseball is a way of distinguishing themselves in international play and through coaching jobs. This is potentially a fresh resource for players as well.”

“For me a great piece of the story is that the dominate players and the most committed coaches are predominantly women,” she adds. “It’s because of the desire to keep their children away from the dangers there. It’s a kind of peace game, not about war. It’s unique, distinct and different — and for them it’s a way to distinguish themselves.”

A major part of the film’s storyline is the creation of the organization First Pitch, a non-profit venture based in New York City devoted to the promotion of baseball in Manipur.

The group partnered with Spalding to provide balls and mitts to players in Manipur and through its association with Major League Baseball International, clinics led by former major league coaches have been held in Manipur, which the film documents.

“We tried to get several kids to New York for a baseball exchange. That failed, but what developed was a much deeper understanding of the culture,” says Bank who adds that First Pitch is now working to build a baseball field for the players of Manipur.

“People for whatever reason play this game and get an incredible sense of joy,” says Bank. “They see it as a game that is not corrupt or corrupted, unlike cricket and their own government. There’s a spirit of unity and cohesion and politics fall away.”

“This game is as much about the individual as the team,” she adds. “There’s something deep and profound when you see the great American game have that resonance somewhere else.”

The 6th Annual Hamptons Take 2 Documentary Film Festival runs Friday, December 6 through Sunday, December 8, 2013 at Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor. A total of 22 documentaries will be screened over the three festival emceed by WPPB 88.3 FM radio personality Bonnie Grice and arts writer/film critic Andrew Botsford. Tickets are \$15 per film session. A gala at 7 p.m. on Saturday will honor Sag Harbor husband and wife filmmaking team D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus and feature a screening of their documentary “The War Room.” The Saturday night gala and film is \$30. A festival pass for all three days is \$100. Tickets may be purchased online at www.HT2FF.com. They can be purchased in person at the Bay Street Theatre box office on Long Wharf, by phone at 725-9500, online at www.baystreet.org or at the door.