

Vail Film Fest coverage: Major league dreams defy martial law in Manipur

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'The Only Real Game' documents how the people of a war-torn Indian state came to love American baseball

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Despite being very isolated, baseball is extremely popular in Manipur, a state in northeastern India. During the World War II, Manipur was the scene of many fierce battles between the Japanese and the Allied forces, which is the key to how baseball got to the area. You'll have to see the movie to learn more.

Special to the Daily

If you go ...

What: "The Only Real Game," a documentary about baseball in Manipur. Director Mirra Bank will lead a Q&A at the end of each screening.

When: This film screens at 4 p.m. Friday and at 4 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Piney Theater, Four Seasons, Vail.

Cost: Passes start at \$75 and go up. Individual \$10 screening tickets will be available for purchase at the screening approximately 20 minutes prior to start of show if there are seats available.

More information: Visit www.vailfilmfestival.com for this year's film schedule.

Spot a McDonalds in a quaint, medieval town like Siena, Italy and it's clear American culture has spread worldwide – the McDonaldization of the world, as some people have dubbed it. But not every thing from America that spreads overseas is bad. Like baseball, for instance, which is exceedingly popular in the crime-ridden Indian state of Manipur where the sport is one of the few positive things people fiercely hold onto. "The Only Real Game," a documentary directed by Mirra Bank, looks at how baseball is bringing hope to a troubled society.

"We programmed 'The Only Real Game' because it shows an unexpected and hopeful side of Manipur," said Erin Sheppard, the docs programmer for the Vail Film Festival. "You experience the daily reality of the Manipuri people living in a war-torn country through their love of a game that far outweighs the hardships they face."

Bank learned about the large and passionate baseball community there from Somi Roy, a native from Manipur who helped start First Pitch, a Manipur/U.S. baseball project based in New York City. Roy visited his mother after being away for two decades and found that all of his young relatives were obsessed with the game and begging for help getting equipment from the U.S. First Pitch asked Bank to make a film about their efforts in Manipur, and the project also enlisted Major League Baseball, Harlem RBI and Spalding Baseball in an "unlikely, hopeful mission to help a troubled society heal the decades-long wounds of drugs, guns and division through love for the Great American Game," Bank said.

The film screens at the Vail Film Festival this afternoon at 4 p.m. and again on Sunday at 4 p.m. Both shows take place at the Piney Theater in the Four Seasons in Vail. Bank will lead a Q&A session following the film, but we couldn't wait that long so we asked her a few questions of our own, which she happily answered.

Vail Daily: How long did it take to film the movie?

Mirra Bank: About six years including the editing process – Manipur is a essentially under Martial Law (until just last year it was a "restricted area" even for other Indians). Now Indians and foreigners can enter without the complex central government/military clearances, which we had to procure each time we went. It is still largely off limits to journalists and filmmakers. I was able to film on the first several trips as part of "documentation" of the approved U.S./Manipur baseball coaching program. No one can stay there for more than 7 to 10 days at a time. With that limitation I also worked long distance from NYC with my Manipuri crew – giving them certain assignments. Those tapes were then couriered out of Manipur by travelers to Delhi or Mumbai, and then sent via DHL to the U.S.

On my most recent trip I was able to secure (after months of work) full journalistic clearance for filming. thanks to a close association with Prabhu Dayal, then Consul General of India in NYC.

VD: What were the challenges that came with filming in a foreign country where there's so much hostility?

MB: Interestingly, for us, the only real problems related to infrastructure – there's no bus or train to Manipur from

anywhere else in India. One fully paved road runs the length of the state, one the breadth; there are constant blackouts, lack of gasoline, very little reliable electricity; no regular internet; no drinkable water (all water is bottled or delivered by trucks); great difficulty getting camera or other technical gear replaced with brand items; no regular sewage or sanitation system; terrible air pollution in Imphal, the capital. BUT — the people were wonderful, as you see in the film. And although we were required to have armed security with us whenever we were with the MLB coaches (kidnapping and extortion are rampant, along with various kinds of sabotage, blockades and gun violence) I frequently went off alone to film with our subjects in their everyday lives, traveling just with my Manipur crew in the camera car. No problems, ever. There are so few outsiders in Manipur — literally almost no westerners — that our very visibility was perhaps a protection. That, and primarily because this is a state with a proud tradition of athleticism and EVERYONE seemed to support the baseball initiative.

Hostility is more of an internal civil-war issue — Separatists in an undeclared war against the state — not directed toward visitors. Manipuris are elegantly hospitable.

VD: In Manipur, it seems baseball is just as popular with women as it is with men, which is different from here in the U.S. What, in your opinion, accounts for this disparity?

MB: One aspect of Manipur's ancient artist/warrior tradition is that traditionally men left home for weeks at a time to serve at the king's court. Women protected the home then, and were immensely adept at providing for their families in the absence of the men. Women drive culture in Manipur, as well as health and peace and justice initiatives. The Women's Market we show in our film is unique in India, and while Manipur remains a deeply patriarchal culture in many ways, the financial autonomy of women who make their living this way is unchallenged.

Women are still hugely vulnerable in Manipur, as everywhere in Southeast Asia; in Manipur they are everyday victims of rape, violence and the HIV/AIDS epidemic that still rages there. But they are also independent minded, tough and resourceful in every way.

The imbalance — odd as it may be — favors women as initiative takers and dedicated athletes.

In the U.S. we have so many well-equipped and well-run sports programs that women have a range of options — baseball not being at the top of the list. But everyone in India is exposed to cricket at birth, so everyone grows up knowing ball and bat skills.

VD: Did anything surprise you while making this film?

MB: Everything surprised me — we had to improvise every day. I love that way of working; so although it was exhausting and often stressful, it was incredibly rewarding. I was surprised as I uncovered the story of the amazing WWII heroes from the U.S. who flew the Himalayas to help the Allies in China, but then stripped down to combat boots and shorts and played baseball on the tarmacs during time off. Finding this “missing link” to the question “why baseball in this utterly isolated culture?” was thrilling. And the two war vets in our film are magnificent men.

VD: In the story, they're trying to build a real baseball field, but in the end it's not funded. Are they still trying to build a baseball field?

MB: I have been back and filmed since that ballfield wasn't funded — and they were still playing on the fields you see in the film. I'm convinced that when “The Only Real Game” comes out in India, which it will, that “field of dreams” in Manipur will get green lighted.

VD: Have you showed the film anywhere else? If so, what was the reaction?

MB: We had one earlier festival preview — at Cinequest — and I was astounded at how “clear” and meaningful the story was to people who knew nothing about it when they walked into the theater. They laughed, were wrenched, they understood absolutely what the stakes were — they got everything. That was so heartening!

I can't wait to bring the film back to the people who are its heart and soul. To show them how powerful and admirable they are in the eyes of the rest of the world, despite all their difficulties.

VD: What am I not asking that my readers should know?

MB: Manipur is a complicated place, like so many in the world. No easy solutions, no pure black and white or right/wrong in the separatist conflict. But that's why this — for me — is a story so worth telling. I hope your readers come to see “The Only Real Game” and ask a lot of questions. Then I hope some will want to pack up a glove and go play ball in Manipur.

VD: Do you know the current status — has anything changed with the people in the documentary?

MB: My information is up to the minute for only a few people - life is very much the same. Even with somewhat less restriction on travel, the lack of jobs, infrastructure, respectful treatment etc. are persistent drags on the society.

Geet and his family have moved to Assam. Lalit and Monteshori are still a couple, not yet married. Devika is saving and hoping to get her two daughters into a middle school outside of Manipur. Bhanu is the official baseball coach for the State Athletic Academy - both a high school and sports training facility. Bhanu — the “godmother” of baseball in Manipur — is one of the few in our story who are fully employed in sports training. She teaches all sports — but her special love is baseball — and she coaches the Manipur girls' baseball team, traveling with them to national tournaments.

VD: How did you find your subjects, including the specific team/league?

MB: Because we were working directly with native Manipuris, and because Somi's mother, daughter of the last king of Manipur, and a beloved figure in Manipur as an artist and peace activist, had spearheaded the baseball project locally — players and teams came to us.

It was then my job to identify a range of characters — young and old, men and women, kids and local coaches — who would be compelling film subjects and embody both the richness and trials of everyday life there.

This is an ancient culture; Manipur was an independent kingdom for 3,000 years before becoming a princely state under British Empire. After WWII it was forced to merge into the newly formed Indian Union in 1949.

VD: I'm curious about the women in the film. The women seem to be very strong and aren't afraid. What really struck you about the women in Manipur?

MB: What strikes me is how much community is innate to women in Manipur. They know that individually they have virtually no power; so they work together and they fight for every inch for the next generation.

A woman like Devika in our film raises kids, holds down at least two jobs, but spends free time giving back. Devika also coached girls and boys in her local 'leikai' (neighborhood). She herself had been an international athlete at age 17; she regrets that her chance for this kind of freedom has passed. But she is fiercely dedicated to passing along her knowledge and helping the young players. We found this over and over – Bhanu, Thoibi, MK Binodini Devi – women watch out for others.

I think they are appropriately fearful of the violence and inequities around them, but they've learned to live full lives, to be savvy and measured, but to stand up to authority and speak truth to power.