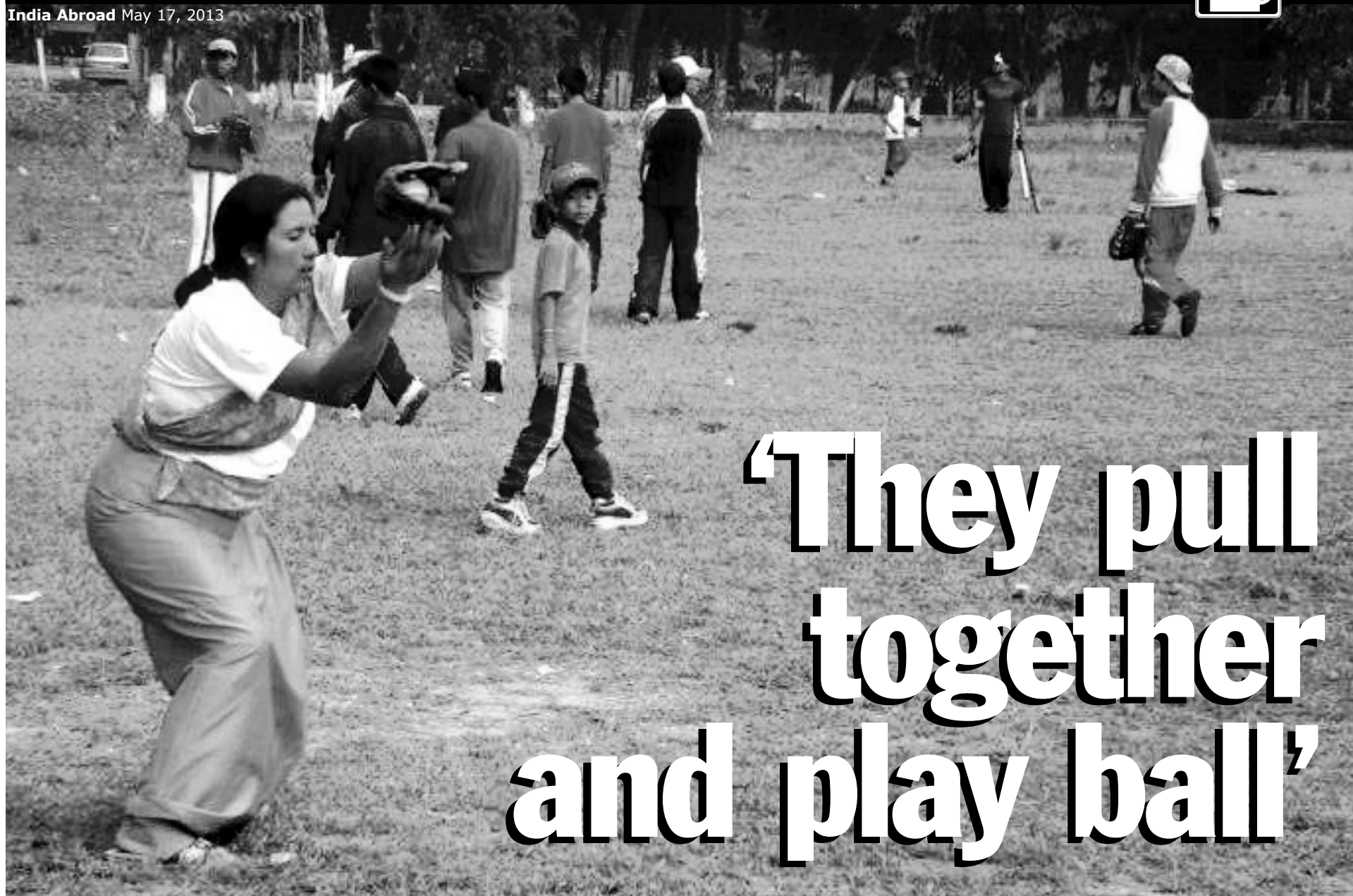




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# 'They pull together and play ball'

COURTESY: FACEBOOK.COM/PAGES/THE-ONLY-REAL-GAME/

The Only Real Game discovers how Manipuri women are really the leaders, both on and off field

The Only Real Game documents what baseball, which traveled to India with American soldiers during World War II, means to Manipur. **Chaya Babu** listens in as the filmmaker and others discuss the film

In 1994, filmmaker Steve James screened *Hoop Dreams* at the Sundance Film Festival. It was a documentary about two teenage boys trying to make it in the world of competitive high school basketball to get to college and perhaps one day the NBA.

But the film was about more than kids playing ball.

The young men were from poor, mostly black, inner-city projects of Chicago; aside from the game, they had little else positive or stable in their lives. The film shed light on a part of American culture that had never been seen so intimately — yes, people knew families struggled in the blight and racism of urban poverty, but *Hoop Dreams*, which was met with widespread acclaim, made their distant stories real. Through the lens of sports.

In *The Only Real Game*, screened for the very first time at the 13<sup>th</sup> New York Indian Film Festival, director Mirra Bank did just this for the people of Imphal, Manipur, a part of India that is largely marginalized in the popular imagination of India.

Bank used baseball, an unlikely sport to be played by people in the remote Northeastern corner of a South Asian country, to look at the lives of Manipuris living in conflict ridden terrain — or what the narrator, Oscar-winning actress

Melissa Leo, called “one of the most militarized parts of the world.”

The American pastime arrived in Imphal with American troops in 1942 when Japan bombed Burma. Though war ended and the troops left, the area has continued to be in political and economic turmoil due to border disputes with China, fights for liberation, and specifically the controversial India’s Special Powers Act of 1958, which granted special powers to armed forces in this tense part of the nation.

On top of this, Leo said, that more than 130 armed insurgent groups are functioning in Manipur.

But baseball remained a fixture in Manipuri culture through the unstable situation.

“There’s a lot of violence and a lot of danger,” Bank said. “And it may have been foolish, but there is a feeling that people want the best there; they’re having a terrible time in many ways but, well, first of all felt like everybody loved baseball. And I realize that that’s kind of naïve, but it didn’t feel as if it was, in the way one might think, a dangerous place.”

Bank got involved because one of the producers, Muriel Peters, had gone to Manipur and discovered the depth of passion for baseball among Manipuris, but then was disheartened at their lack of decent

grounds to play on or proper equipment — scenes show gloves with holes worn through the center if there were gloves at all.

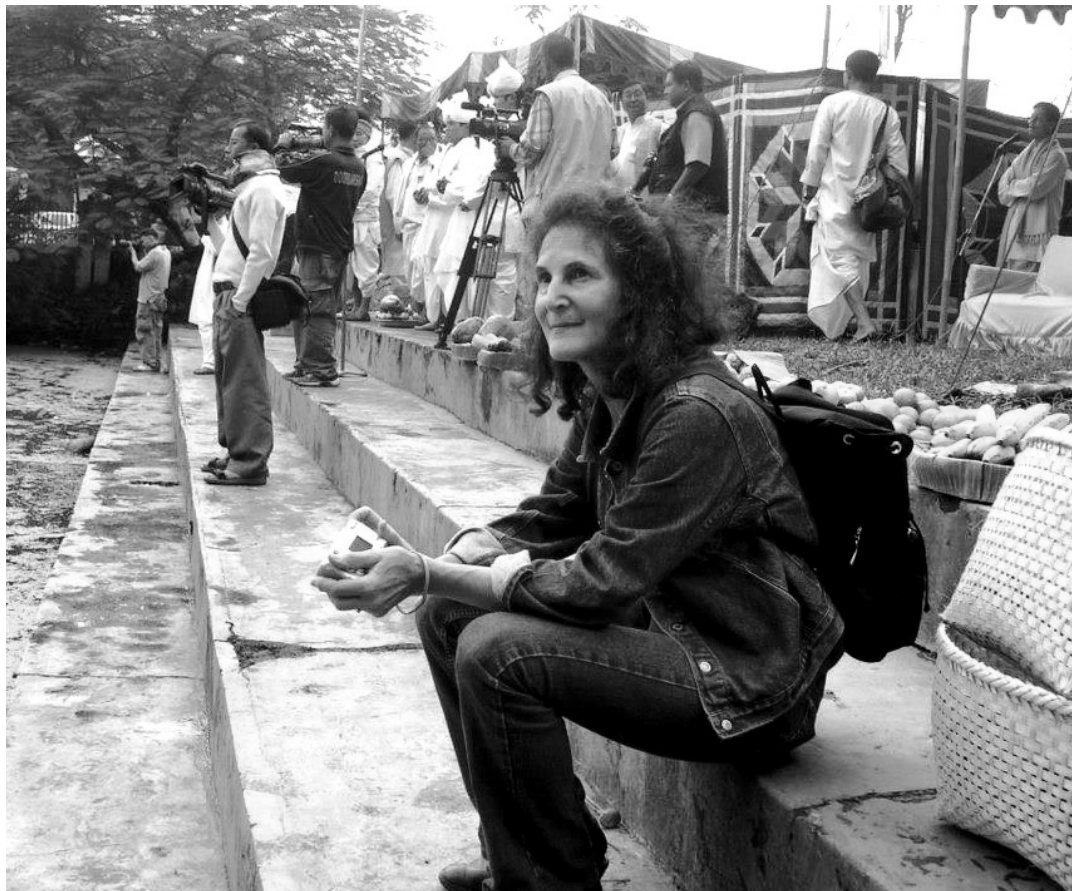
She came back to the United States and started a non-profit with a group of friends called First Pitch, to help the players with some of these needs, and knew it should be documented.

Peters said, “It might seem silly when so much else is wrong. But they really do come together over baseball. It’s this one good thing.”

On screen, the film brings to life the characters to whom baseball has been uplifting and has brought agency, strength, and most of all joy.

For Devika, Lalit, Geet, Pupu baseball is at the center of their lives. And it’s at the center of their community. Bank pointed out what is obvious to many who know Manipur: “Things are falling apart. They’re very disheartened and so there are sometimes long periods of time where people do nothing. But then they pull together again and they play ball.”

Scenes such as seeing the players sing *Take Me Out To The Ballgame* in Manipuri and the armed officers breaking away from their role to join the game are particularly



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Mirra Bank in Imphal during the shoot of *The Only Real Game*

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memorable. Baseball is a bridge between different people as well as between the small, strife-torn state and the rest of the world.

First Pitch worked with the Major League Baseball International Envoy program to send coaches to Manipur to train players and further develop the sport in hopes of building a local league. The work between MLB coaches Jeff Brueggemann and Dave Palese and the Manipuris takes up significant screen time, and the warmth of the relationships is revealed in these scenes.

“We never dreamed that we’d become so attached to these coaches in such a short period of time,” Brueggemann said. “Mirra captured some of this emotion, their tears and our tears, and it was real. It was very unusual for us and very unexpected.”

Out of the various MLB envoy initiatives throughout the world, the Manipur one was unique because instead of coaching kids, Brueggemann and Palese were coaching coaches. And from this experience, Brueggemann said, what stood out was how the women were really the leaders both on and off field.

Bank echoed this: “I had been to India before, but I think one of the great surprises for me, and this is in the film, was the degree to which women are just great engines of positive energy and tal-

ent. They’re largely, disproportionately victims of all the problems, but they’re such an enormous force for good there. So, that was really a magnet for me in the story and very important to me.”

Along with the training, the story also follows the path of the First Pitch-MLB project in attempting to get government funding for a baseball stadium, which, not all that shockingly, does not happen by the end of the film.

This is where the project stands today, with Peters and the First Pitch team still determined to help the players and see opportunities created for them through baseball.

Brueggemann shared an anecdote that is telling about the situation of trying to donate from the US: “We raised 680 lbs of equipment in the community (*he said of an event in Kansas*). None of it got to Manipur. We sent it through Heart to Heart; I think it got to Calcutta. And I think that’s as far as it got. And who knows what happened to it. But what I was told by a representative in Manipur is that it never made it to them.”

While Peters admits that hopes for a stadium may have been too ambitious — starting with a basic field without bumps in the ground or cows strolling through it might perhaps be a better start — she and the others have faith that the film can be a catalyst to awareness of the reality in Manipur, the need for life and economic prospects, and the existence of potential for this through athletics, which is already in the spirit of the people.

“My hope is, as a filmmaker,” Bank said, “to get this film out to India, get it to Manipur, let it shed some light, and hopefully it will generate what we’d love to have happen, which is a celebration of the good things that are going on there and the opportunity for people. They’ve certainly earned it.”

She is off to a positive start: Like *Hoop Dreams* receiving numerous accolades in the year it showed at Sundance and after, *The Only Real Game* won the Best Documentary Award at NYIFF. ■