HOOP DREAMS: THE GENESIS OF A DOCUMENTARY

By Jason Guerrasio

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Introduction by Jason Guerrasio

In January 1994, a group of filmmakers from Chicago went to the Sundance Film Festival to accomplish the impossible, by selling a three-hour documentary about two inner-city teens hoping to get to the NBA. By the time they left, their lives had changed, and so had the way non-fiction filmmaking is perceived.

Basketball fanatics Steve James, Frederick Marx, and Peter Gilbert originally set out to make Hoop Dreams as a half-hour doc for PBS that would focus on the culture surrounding streetball. But as quickly as they got on the blacktop, they left it. The dreams of their subjects, Arthur Agee and William Gates, were too grand for just the playground, and instantly, the filmmakers were immersed in the young men's lives, showcasing both the good and bad.

Hoop Dreams has grown into an iconic work. Its snub in the Best Documentary category at the 67th Academy Awards in 1995 led to changes in the voting process. NBA players treat the movie as their own life story. It's been added to the Library Of Congress' National Film Registry. And when looking back on the film's 15th anniversary, Roger Ebert declared it "the great American documentary."

Journalist Jason Guerrasio spoke to the filmmakers, subjects, and those in the industry who helped make a 30-minute PBS piece into a landmark film. (These interviews have been edited and condensed.)

Chapter 1: An Idea Born on the Court

Steve James (Director/Producer/Editor/Narrator): I played a lot of basketball in my life. I played organized ball up through one year of college, and when I was in grad school at Southern Illinois University in an MFA program in film, I would play a lot down at the rec center. I almost remember it like it was yesterday, I went down to the rec center on a Sunday in early 1985 for some reason—that's the day I usually didn't go. On that day, all three courts were used by African-American players. There were no white players on the floor. Instead of playing, I just sat there and watched. The gym seemed completely different that day. The rhythm of play. The energy. The camaraderie. I watched for a while, and it was there that I guess you can say I had an epiphany: It would be interesting to do a film about the culture of basketball in the black community.

Most of the players since junior high that I played with were African-American. But I had never been privy to the culture in any kind of real way. So that day in the rec center, I felt this strong vibe, and I remember thinking, "This must be what being on a playground in a black community would be like." I thought it would be an interesting film, but I tabled the idea. This came relatively late in my grad career, and I was going to be moving. And I remember very distinctly thinking Chicago would be a great place to look into doing this film, because I knew the city had a very rich basketball tradition: Isiah Thomas was from there, and the Bulls were coming into their own as Michael Jordan was entering his second year in the NBA.

I reached out initially to my grad-school friend who left SIU before I did, Frederick Marx. He played high-school ball and was a big basketball fan. At the time, Frederick was living in China teaching English, so I reached out to him via letters about the idea.

Frederick Marx (Producer/Editor): Steve and I were best friends at SIU. Whenever we weren't making films, we were down in the gym shooting hoops. We had never had a chance to work together on a film in grad school, but we would talk about projects for the future. I moved out to China in the fall of 1983, and that's when we started exchanging mail about collaborating on a number of feature films—we were working on a comedy script, so we would send each other drafts.

I came back from China in the late summer/early fall of 1985, and I settled back in Champaign, Illinois. We kept things going via phone and mail, and then in April 1986, we formally grounded the basketball idea.

James: I almost had the title before I had anything else: Hoop Dreams. Hoop was slang for playing the game, and then there's the dreams of kids. It just fit.

Marx: I remember the first meeting that was face-to-face was at my mom's house, and suitably enough, I had a basketball injury. I had just blown out my knee playing hoops, and was on crutches. And I remember in that conversation saying, "I love Hoop Dreams, but can we call it something else? Because two of my previous films had the word 'dreams' in the title."

James: For a minute, I had it called Hoopin', but eventually we realized Hoop Dreams was much better.

Marx: We hoped it would be a half-hour piece that PBS might broadcast. It was not nearly as ambitious as it became.

James: The topic back then was to focus on a single playground, to do a film that looked at the culture from that court. We'd look at young dreamers, washed-up dreamers, and then maybe ideally a great college player or pro that came from that playground.

Marx: In those early conversations, we basically agreed that Steve and I would both produce, he would direct the film because the idea originated with him, and I'd edit. Then on the next film we'd do together, we would reverse the roles.

James: I got an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in 1987, which was $2,000. Soon after, Frederick and I got a meeting with Gordon Quinn at Kartemquin Films. I remembered back at SIU Gordon's partner, Jerry Blumenthal, came down to talk about what the company was, and I thought it seemed cool.

Marx: On one hand, Kartemquin had this glorious reputation of vérité filmmaking, but we also talked about how we wanted to bring some narrative filmmaking standards to vérité. We had that notion from the beginning, putting a bit of narrative polish on it.

Gordon Quinn (Executive Producer/Co-Producer): In these kinds of meetings, I always looked for people who really had passion for the film they wanted to make. Steve and Frederick were just out of school, and they had what seemed like a really good idea for a film. But they also had a $2,000 grant, and that told me these guys were serious. So we got involved.

James: Originally, we were going to do the film in a total of six months, and we'd shoot for a couple of weeks on a playground. I was trying to be practical. Plus, we were going to shoot on film. People were just starting to shoot on video, but it hadn't taken over yet. And Frederick and I were film-school guys, so that's what we wanted to do. So we started raising money. But despite Kartemquin's name, we didn't get any money for a while. With only $2,000 from the Illinois grant, we decided we'd have to shoot on video—it was the only way we'd be able to shoot anything. So now we needed to find someone who not only could shoot it, but had their own gear, which back then, wasn't easy to come by.

I was in the Kartemquin offices one day, and the office manager at the time said, "I know the person for you—Peter Gilbert."

Quinn: He had an association with Kartemquin. It was the perfect match. Peter is obsessed with basketball.

Peter Gilbert: (Producer/Cinematographer): I had been working heavily with Barbara Kopple on American Dream. Jerry and Gordon called me and said, These guys came in and are doing this film about streetball." I grew up in Chicago and played streetball my entire life, and the neighborhoods they were interested in, I knew.

James: I called Peter up, and the very first conversation I had with him, we talked for, like, three hours. I told him about the film and my experience with basketball, and he told me his, we talked about the NBA. We just had a total basketball-fan conversation. And he had a camera!

Gilbert: I had worked with Haskell Wexler, and he told me, “You’ll never lose money on gear.” I don’t think Barbara [Kopple] had seen anything I shot before she hired me. Same with Steve—but I had gear.

James: So the plan was to go out and shoot for a week. We were going to find a playground, and Peter would shoot it, and we’d worry about how to pay him later. Frederick and I set out to scout which playground to shoot on. I mentioned to Frederick that it would be cool to shoot on the court Isiah [Thomas] grew up on, because we wanted him in the movie, too.

Marx: I think through my research, I tracked down his high-school coach at St. Joseph’s High School, Gene Pingatore.

James: We went out to meet Pingatore and told him about the movie and that we’d love to get Isiah involved, and asked if he knew what playground he grew up on. And he said he knew just the guy to talk to. He introduced us to “Big Earl” Smith, who knew where Isiah played, and also knew every playground in the city.

So Earl, Frederick, Peter, and I over the course of a couple of days looked at playgrounds. We stopped at this one, and Earl eyes this one kid and goes, “This kid is interesting,” and we’re like, “Which kid?”

Marx: I just saw one scrappy little kid among millions when Earl pointed him out.

Gilbert: I was like, “Are you kidding me?” I was totally not blown away at all.

James: We weren’t seeing it, but Earl was like, “He’s got speed, he’s got some skills.” The kid was Arthur Agee.

Arthur Agee (Subject of Hoop Dreams): I’m over at the playground by my house and these three goofy white guys come out of, I think, a Volvo and started setting up cameras. I was just thinking, “I hope they don’t get robbed up here for their equipment.”

James: We showed up in a rusty old Mazda hatchback that Peter fondly dubbed “the Mazdaratti.” We went over with Earl and introduced ourselves to Arthur and said “We’re doing a film, and we’d like to meet with your parents about you possibly being in it.”

Agee: I was gung-ho! Once they explained it, I said I’d love to be part of that. I went home and told my mom—she knew I would do practical jokes, so when I told her these three white guys want to do a movie on me, she was like, “Man, get out of here. Don’t nobody want to do no movie on you.” Then the next day, when they came over, she didn’t have her teeth in, so she ran back and put them in and came back like, “Hello, Arthur told me you’d be coming by.” [Laughs.]

James: I went to Arthur’s house with Earl, and I told them what we were doing, and Earl talked to them about having Arthur go out to St. Joe’s for Ping’s summer camp. Isiah was going to be there, so we thought that was great: “We have to shoot this.” But it wasn’t what we had set out to do at all.

Gilbert: Suddenly we’ve moved off the outdoor court, and we never really went back.

James: We go to the camp with Arthur. Earl and Ping meet him and interview him with his family, and Ping says to Arthur—it’s in the movie—“If you work hard at your grades and you work hard at basketball, then I will help you as far as going to college.” And we thought, “What an extraordinary thing to say to this kid you just met.”

Gilbert: Where I was able to help [the film] the most was that I came from a background of shooting vérité in scenes. Working with Barbara Kopple, it was more about “How can we make these things into scenes rather than interviews?” For me, that scene in Pingatore’s office, that’s the moment. There’s the story.

James: Peter really pushed Frederick and me to not be satisfied with good interviews and B-roll. And he really knew how to shoot basketball scenes. After that meeting in the office, we interviewed Pingatore and asked him how skilled he thought Arthur was. He said, “It’s too early to tell. But I have this other kid coming in that could be the next Isiah Thomas.” He said his name was William Gates. We asked if he was at the camp, and Ping said he was, but

he had twisted his ankle, so he wasn't going to play. But we thought, "With that kind of endorsement, we have to meet him too."

William Gates (Subject of Hoop Dreams; Gates declined to be interviewed for this piece. All quotes come from the credited sources): When Steve, Frederick and Peter came to [the Cabrini-Green housing project] and asked if I wanted to be in the film, they really earned my trust. I was 14 years old and someone wanted to do something about my life? Let's do it." [From a commentary track recorded for the 2005 Criterion Collection DVD.]

Gilbert: William was a man-child. He looked 18 years old. And his brother was famous in my neighborhood. I had been reading about Curtis for years—he was a phenomenon in Chicago basketball.

James: We didn't film William that day because we didn't have permission, but we did shoot Arthur playing Isiah. Pingatore helped us out by selecting Arthur to play Isiah among the kids.

Agee: I was in heaven! You see me walking out to him with a big grin. He gave me a pump fake and I went for it, I like jumped out of my drawers.

James: Isiah played a lot of kids, probably half a dozen, maybe more. We filmed them all, but for the movie, we just kept when Arthur played him.

Chapter 2: Finding The Story (And The Money)

James: My recollection is that following the camp and a week of shooting William, we all decided it would be great if we could follow these guys over a period of time. I thought it would be great that in four years we'd see if Pingatore would make good on that promise to Arthur about college. I wondered if William could be the next Isiah. That was our fantasy. Even though we didn't have any money, could we do that? I know Frederick has a difference of opinion on that.

Marx: My recollection is vastly different. There was no question that what Pingatore said to Arthur about college stood out and made an impact, but I remember we spent the whole first year trying to cut a demo. I was living in New York at the time, and flying back to Chicago to do shoots. I remember either the summer after freshman year or the start of their sophomore year, I said to Steve, "We should film them all the way through high school." My thinking was, "It's going to take a long time to raise money, and until then, we only have to buy tape stock." I don't believe it was until sophomore year that we sat down with the families and said, "We now have a clear vision of what the film is."

James: I remember presenting to the families that we'd only check in from time to time. We don't know how often, but it would be over a period of time.

Agee: When they told us they'd be coming back periodically, I just thought I was fortunate they picked me, so I was going to do anything they asked and be available. I thought it would be a nice project, and maybe it could help my basketball career.

James: With the $2,000 from the grant, we gave a little to Peter, who minimally paid off his partner who shared the camera with him. We didn't raise another penny on Hoop Dreams for two years. From time to time, we would do a little bit of filming and we'd cut stuff together to send to potential funders.

The usual reaction was, "This isn't serious enough, this is just kids who want to play basketball." And documentaries at that time were being made about serious, sobering issues. They were medicine. I remember distinctly having this conversation with a higher-up at

Corporation For Public Broadcasting [CPB] when we applied to them. He's an executive who is African-American. He said, "It's very interesting, but I don't feel the stakes in this." I said, "What do you mean?" And he goes, "If one of these guys became a drug addict or was killed, well, then you got something. Now that's a story." And I was like, "We're hoping neither of those things happen to these guys."

Somehow a public television channel in Minneapolis, KTCA [now called Twin Cities Public Television], heard about the project.

Quinn: They had come to Kartemquin to talk about what we were doing next, and if we could do something together. We brought up Hoop Dreams and they immediately jumped on it.

Catherine Allan (Executive Producer / Senior Executive Producer, Twin Cities Public Television): Gordon Quinn sent us a film that Kartemquin had produced, Golub, and we helped them get it on PBS. We met with them, and they showed us a 10-minute reel of Hoop Dreams, and it just had great scenes. They were looking for a producing station that could help raise money and ultimately get it on PBS. So we signed on for that.

James: Once they got involved, our proposals became much more professional, and we cut a new demo. That paved the way for us to get money from CPB. We got $70,000 from CPB and KTCA would guarantee another $60,000. So for $130,000, we'd deliver an hourlong film ready for broadcast.

Quinn: Steve and I went to Minneapolis to negotiate. It was a tough negotiation, because we were dealing with the CFO of the station. So he was looking at the bottom line, and we were explaining we needed this money to keep the project going.

James: It seemed hard for us to do the movie that we wanted for that kind of money, but we had no choice.

Quinn: They turned out to be a full partner in the film.

Chapter 3: “Higher Goals” & Growing Frustrations

James: KTCA had a guy dedicated to fundraising, so he set out to help raise money for the film, but he didn’t have any success. One of the things he heard a lot was, “Where’s the educational value?” So we came up with the idea of doing a short called “Higher Goals” that would be more educational in tone, and we’d use it to raise money for Hoop Dreams.

Marx: “Higher Goals” is much closer to what our starting vision was [for Hoop Dreams].

James: William is in the story as the rising star, Isiah Thomas is in it being the pinnacle, the NBA superstar, and a girl basketball player from Marshall High School named Kim Williams is in it. She went on to play some pro ball.

Marx: Then we had the near-miss, Skip Dillard, who was a star at DePaul University and almost made it on the Bulls. When we found him, he was in prison at Joliet.

James: We also did an attempt at comedy. We had Tim Meadows of Saturday Night Live fame to play a basketball-crazed high-schooler who learns the importance of an education.

Allan: We raised a lot of money and oversaw the distribution and launch on PBS. It even was nominated for an Emmy.

James: Immediately, the money was there to do the educational version. It helped pay the bills, but it didn’t raise any money for Hoop Dreams.

With no money, we literally shot five days in the summer going into freshman year. Then all of freshman year, we shot an additional seven days. In sophomore year, we shot a total of 10 days. It was whenever we could get Peter and his camera.

Gilbert: I left for a while and shot this 100th-anniversary film for Standard Oil, I’m embarrassed to say because of my politics. We went to 26 countries shooting at plants. The fact is, we could have shot it all in Gary, Indiana. Plants pretty much look the same anywhere you go.

James: So now along with not having any money, we didn't have Peter, so I was really frustrated. I think in the first two years, we only shot a total of like, 22 days. If you look at the movie with that in mind, the first two years are over by the 40-minute mark.

Marx: But that was the beauty of taking Peter on as a third equal partner: When any one of us was off making a living, there was still one or two of us to push this rock up the mountain. I remember when Steve couldn't make it to some of the early shoots, I would take over as director. But around freshman year at some point, Steve expressed that he did not like the fact that I was over his shoulder so much. He basically asked me to not come on some of the shoots. Our original vision was to collaborate and grow each other as directors. But I thought, "Okay, this is a request that I can honor." So it wasn't until senior year that I went back on shoots.

James: This was a tense time between Frederick and me, and all these years later, we have some different recollections of who did what and what was said. But it's true that at some point early on in the process, I did say to him I needed some space. I felt like he was looking over my shoulder a lot, and I felt somewhat insecure about just directing, period. So him doing that made me very self-conscious and nervous, but I don't remember ever saying to him, "You can't go on any shoots," or expecting him to never go on shoots again.

Chapter 4: Connecting With The Boys

James: As director, one of my jobs was to stay in touch with the subjects. Arthur lived 20 blocks from me and sometimes he didn't have a working phone, so I would just drive over to check in. This was around sophomore year, we weren't shooting much. I went over and talked to Sheila [Arthur's mom], and she told me Arthur had been kicked out of St. Joe's and was now enrolled at Marshall, the public high school. They never told me they were struggling with payments. So she told me when the next game was, and I went there and watched him play before the varsity game. He sat to watch the varsity play, and I went to him, and he was surprised to see me.

Agee: I just thought that because I wasn't at St. Joe's, that would be the end of my participation in the film. My whole self-esteem and confidence had fallen off. I had to sit out for three months of school, and didn't get into Marshall until January 1988.

James: And I wasn't coming from that scumbag documentary angle where every misfortune that happens to your subject is interesting. I felt really bad for him. I told him, "We didn't pick you to follow because we were convinced you were going to the NBA, we picked you because you have the dream. So we want to continue following you if you want us to."

Agee: That talk with Steve really assured me that they had my best interests, and they really wanted to be part of my life. That talk with Steve was like talking to my uncle.

James: So we scrambled together and shot Arthur at Marshall and Sheila explaining what happened. That was a significant moment in building trust with the family, because we didn't just pack up and go away. That was a breakthrough moment.

When Arthur got kicked out, that got us thinking, "How is William making his payments?" His family had as much money as Arthur's. Then we found out that William had a benefactor, the president of Encyclopedia Britannica, who is sponsoring him and making his payments. So suddenly St. Joe's wasn't everything we thought it was, and the film deepened in many ways.

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James: When we were filming with William, we would ask him from time to time, “Got a girlfriend?” We just always wondered. And he would be like, “No, no, no.” He was private about that stuff. I was talking to Emma [William’s mom] one day, and she said, “You know William has a kid?” And I was like, “What?” She said, “Oh yeah, Catherine has been his girlfriend since grammar school.”

Gates: They thought she was my older brother David’s girlfriend. And I didn’t even say anything. [From the Criterion Collection commentary.]

James: So I talked to William after that on the phone, and he goes, “Yeah.” And I wasn’t pissed off, I was just surprised, and I asked, “Why haven’t we met Catherine?” He said, “I didn’t want to tell you guys, because I felt like for the film, I’d come off like I’m just another black teenage kid having babies out of wedlock, and that whole thing that people look down on.” So I asked him what his plan was, if he was going to marry Catherine. And he said yes. I told him, “You guys are actually defying the stereotype, and that’s something that should be in the film.” I don’t remember if he agreed to it then, but obviously he agreed.

Peter, Fred, Gordon, and I talked a lot about this part of the film in terms of “How do we portray this?” And we decided that we wanted to spring it on the audience the same way it was sprung on us.

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James: I checked in with Sheila once, and she told me their power was shut off. She was on welfare for the first time in her life. She was pretty upset. I said to her, “We should probably come over and shoot.” She was concerned. She thought people were going to think the worst of them. I told her my hope was that people would understand their predicament. She let us come over. But I’m embarrassed to say I really mishandled this. I knew Arthur was upset about the power, and I was worried he would shoot us down if we asked to come over, so we purposely showed up to film when he was at practice.

Agee: I noticed their car was out front, so I'm thinking "They're waiting for me to film stuff," but they were filming in the house already. So that ticked me off, because I was embarrassed about the situation.

James: If you look for it, you'll see in the scene that he's pissed. Yes, he doesn't have electricity, but he's also not happy with us, and deservedly so.

Agee: But they were family to me, and my mom said to always respect your elders, so I didn't disrespect them. I just gave a look the whole time they were filming.

Gilbert: Arthur was really pissed off when we were filming. But I think it showed how strong they were.

James: That was not a high point in my career on how to deal with subjects.

Gilbert: And we turned the lights back on for them, which we got criticized for after the film was released.

James: Yeah, some of it was probably guilt, but it was the least we could do. We thought, "Fuck that whole journalistic-ethics thing, we should do this because we've been in these folks' lives, we owe them this."

Gilbert: I've worked with people who say they can't do that because it changes things. I take issue with that.

Agee: Looking back, I'm glad they filmed it, because other kids can relate to that situation, and get something out of that by seeing us face up to it.

James: Sheila gradually became my main source for what was going on with the family. For all Arthur's big personality, he was close-mouthed about a lot of things. Sheila shared with me that Bo [Arthur's father] had left. She didn't talk much about what he was doing, but we heard he was running around the streets, and he was probably using. We were in the playground filming Arthur one day, and Bo showed up.

Agee: I hadn’t seen my dad in probably three weeks. He was strung out on cocaine.

James: We were struck by how awful he looked. He looked completely strung out.

Agee: I saw him out of the corner of my eye, and I’m like, “Oh, shit.” So I went right to him before he could get to the court, and told him they were filming, but I really felt like saying to him, “Where’s your fucking shirt?”

Gilbert: For me, that was one of those sad, rare moments when you’re a shooter and you have subjects you care about, and you realize the depths of where things are at. I can’t tell you about framing that scene, because it just becomes instinctual. You’re following what’s going on, and capturing the moment. I think Steve and I drove home pretty heartbroken that day.

James: [Arthur] was very unhappy with his dad, and it was clear. And then Bo wondered off to the corner of the playground to buy drugs, and you see Arthur’s concern.

When the film was nearly done, and we showed it to the families, I was really worried about that moment. I thought Bo was going to have a fit—by that point, he was off drugs and in a much better place. I was working up all the arguments of why it should be in he film. I was expecting a fight over it. When that scene ends Bo said, “Stop the tape.” And I’m like, “Oh, shit.” And he said, “I need to see that again.” So we rewind it and watch the scene again, and then we watch it once more. We pause it, and he goes, “Wow, I don’t even remember that. I can’t believe y’all got that.”

Agee: He just sat in his seat and didn’t say anything for like three minutes.

James: I asked him if he’s cool with it, and he said “Absolutely.” He was starting a church, and he said, “This will be good for my ministry, for people to see where I was and where I am now.” It was just a huge sigh of relief.

Chapter 5: Jackpot

James: Through these years, I worked on all kinds of stuff to make a living. I was a PA on commercials, and Kartemquin started hiring me to do stuff for them. If it wasn't for Gordon and Kartemquin, who carried us and gave us a home and supported us, we never would have made it. Through them, that's how I got to know Woody Wickham [vice president] at the MacArthur Foundation. [Ed. note: Wickham passed away in 2009.]

Quinn: MacArthur approached Kartemquin to do a film that was going to be for the Council On Foundations, which was coming to Chicago. And usually the host city would take people around to various non-profits in the city. But instead of doing that, they decided to make a film. Jerry and I were already on a project, so I asked Steve to come on and do it. This was really the first time I saw the vision and editing chops Steve had.

James: When I got the job, I remember saying to Peter and Frederick, "This is step one of the master plan to get money out of the MacArthur Foundation for Hoop Dreams."

I totally started working Woody. But he was smart and knew what I was doing. He was just sincerely interested in the film. When we would get together to talk about their project, he'd always ask about the boys. So when I was done with their film, I went to Woody and said, "I would really like to talk to you about Hoop Dreams." We had a breakfast meeting, and I showed him our demo, which by that time ended with William missing the free throws in the playoff game. He liked it and asked if there was a chance this would be in theaters, and I said, "Oh, forget it." It was shot on video, and I felt no documentaries that are in theaters originated on video.

He brought some colleagues over to Kartemquin and we showed them the demo and some scenes. We felt it went great. He called me a week later, and this is how Woody was, he calls me and said, "Last week when I was looking at clips, did I leave my flannel shirt there?" And I was like, "Yeah, I think I see it." And he said, "Good, would you mind getting it back to me? I'll see you later—oh, I almost forgot, the foundation has decided to award Hoop Dreams a quarter of a million dollars." [Laughs.] Then he said, "There's only one thing, I told

them it would be the most significant program of the year on public television. Don’t let me down.”

Chapter 6: Diving Into Post

James: We had shot 40 days junior year, but after the MacArthur money, we shot 100 days between the summer of junior year and the end of the film. The film got more detailed, there were more scenes, it became fuller.

Marx: By the beginning or middle of senior year, this was around 1991, I did a paper cut of the scenes, and it went to 20 pages. It was huge. The first assemblage was over 10 hours, and I still hadn't even gotten to where we were up to date in shooting. I was like, "Oh my God." The footage was fascinating on so many levels. At one point, I talked to Steve about doing a five-part miniseries, which would make it, like, 10 hours long. Long story short, he properly nixed the idea—otherwise, we would still be in the editing room. I had spent a year editing when I realized, "This is too much."

Quinn: You have to remember, this was tape editing, linear editing. To change something, you had to dub it down. It was very awkward.

Marx: Before long, you're looking at VHS tapes that are so degraded, because we dropped so many generations, that it's almost hard to make out what the hell is happening [onscreen].

Quinn: Frederick had done an enormous amount of work, but he was just burning out.

Marx: At some point, we brought on William Haugse. We just needed to hire on more editing help.

James: Frederick spent two years working his way through, and had a six-hour version to show us. I remember watching it, and around hour three, it broke you down and you just gave yourself over to it. You're like, "I'm living in this." It was this monster.

Gilbert: You have to understand how invested I was in the film, and also what I knew we had. From coming off three or four films I had done, I knew we had something that was insanely special. I didn't know if people would see it, but to me, it was Shakespeare live. After I watched the six-hour cut, I went home and cried like a baby for about eight hours, I'm not

kidding. I was like, “This is so fucked-up.” I was truly devastated, because I expected seeing all those moments we captured somewhere in those six hours, and I saw almost none. I didn’t see the characters, I didn’t see development, it was heartbreaking for me.

Quinn: I saw the potential, but Steve was impatient to get more hands-on with the editing, and I actually asked Steve to take a step back and work things out with Frederick. It was one of those things where I think Frederick felt it would be good for the project [if he were] to step out of the editing chair, but he didn’t want to be pushed out.

Marx: It was complicated and difficult. I’ll just say that.

Gilbert: The thing is, I walked into this weird agreement that they made between themselves. “If you do this, I’ll help you on the next one.” They were extremely close when I first met them, but that agreement was always a tough thing for me, because I was always in the middle of it, and getting it to that place where I was an equal member.

James: Absolutely I wanted to get in the editing, but I really felt strongly that as much as I would have liked to be involved, Frederick and I had an understanding that I was directing and he was going to edit, and that I needed to honor that. Since he had backed away during shooting at my request, I felt I had to give him his room during the edit. I didn’t seriously consider that I was going to get to edit until Frederick came to us as a group and said, “I’m burned out.”

Quinn: There was one point in the process where they all came over to my house to tell me they had all reached some resolution. Steve would start taking over editing, Frederick would still do parts of it, but it was pretty clear that Steve would be the primary editor.

James: When I did get involved in the editing, Frederick really had done a lot of work that I could build off of. I could take scenes he and Bill [Haugse] had done and adapt them to what I was doing. I was not starting from scratch and recutting the movie. I built off of what he had done. Bill continued on working with me, and did some great work.

Marx: Steve and I are different filmmakers, and it was great to have Gordon in the room toward the end to just be a referee, if nothing else, because we needed a third pair of eyes, we

needed somebody to help us agree on the way forward. But what really made the difference—frankly, Steve's greatest contribution in some ways as a director—was sitting down and cutting himself. He did a lot of the story-shaping, and that was huge.

James: I edited for a solid year and a half myself, with Bill there for a good stretch of the time. The struggle was how we were going to tell the story of these two guys where their lives coincide directly for only a brief period of time we were shooting. Arthur left St. Joe's and had his own adventure, and William had his, so how do we put these two guys together in the same movie and have it feel coherent? That was the biggest creative challenge of the film.

At a certain point, with Bill's help, we decided not to be tied to the linear developments. We didn't take huge liberties—taking stuff that happened in junior year and making it look like it happened in freshman year—but we decided to stay with one of the boys even if he got ahead of the other in terms of when it happened. For example, when the Agees' power was turned off, the next scene is William getting an MRI for his knee. We go from the family that has nothing to William at this Northwestern hospital, and he's going through his own troubles, his knee, but he's got everybody working hard trying to figure out what's wrong, even the Bulls' doctor at one point. When we decided to focus on one of the guys' story for a stretch instead of playing ping-pong between the two, that's when it started to feel like a movie.

Another thing we really tried to do in the edit is to not sit in judgment, but to let people think about it. Gordon was key in suggesting ways to make it clearer and punchier. We wanted to create an interesting juxtaposition throughout the film, where ideally when you were leaving one kid's story, we hoped you wouldn't want to leave, but when you got into the other kid's, you're glad you're there.

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James: When we had a rough cut, we showed it to the families to get their read on it. Both families were completely different: the Gates watched the film by themselves because they were very private people, and the Agees invited us over to watch it. And whenever their scenes were on, they were very still and quiet and attentive, and when it switched to William, it was like a commercial break.

I talked to William after watching it with his family, and he was very subdued. He said it was good. I said, “Tell me honestly, you seem pretty down.” And he said, “It shows how I went from being a great player to being an average player.” I said that wasn’t fair, he got a scholarship to Marquette. He also said, “I can tell you one good thing that came out of it: My family realized for the first time the amount of pressure they were putting on me, particularly Curtis.”

With Coach Pingatore, we felt we didn’t need his feedback on the film the way we felt with the boys, but when he signed the release back when we first started filming, it said we would make sure to show him the film before it was completed. Frederick and I showed it to him at his office at St. Joe’s. It was literally a day or two before we were headed to Sundance.

Marx: Steve and I talked a lot on the drive out to St. Joe’s on how we were going to handle the meeting. It’s funny, the one key question that Ping asked us afterward—I don’t recall us talking about or having a prepared answer for—was, “Can you guys still make changes to the film?” Steve and I looked at each other and I said, “Yeah, it’s too late.”

Gene Pingatore (Head Coach, St. Joseph’s High School varsity basketball): It was fun at first. You appreciated getting publicity. But as they got into making the movie, it became a pain in the neck. Every time you turned around there was a camera. It became an intrusion in what you’re doing.

But that’s not what I was upset about. I was upset with the fact that they didn’t make the movie the way they told me they were going to make it. They did a film for PBS [“Higher Goals”] that featured Gates and others, and showed that they had their priorities straight and they were going to get into college. Well, they came to me and said they wanted to do a full-length feature about that. So when they showed it to me, I was shocked. The film was just about William Gates and Arthur Agee. I had no idea.

Marx: I remember on his face, more than anything, some confusion when we showed him the film. It seemed he wasn’t clear on what he was watching, and how he should react. My guess is he simply confused at what point we made the distinction between “Higher Goals” and Hoop Dreams. And it’s not surprising, because we ourselves weren’t clear about it until well into the process.

James: When we got to the part when Arthur is kicked out of St. Joe's he said, "Wait a second, stop the film." And he said, "This is unfair, the family didn't hold up their end of the payments. That's just the way it is." And we said Arthur was treated differently than William. William had the president of Encyclopedia Britannica in his corner paying what his family owed. He said, "I disagree with what you're doing here," and I remember being pretty firm with him and saying, "This is how it happened in our eyes, and we stand by it." We also told him there are positive things here, like him pushing William to be a better basketball player and student.

We kept watching, and my guess is he wanted to feel better about the film, and he saw evidence there to make him feel better, so by the end of the movie, he was feeling good about the film.

Marx: We walked out thinking, "Wow, we sort of dodged a bullet."

James: When we were leaving I said to Frederick, walking down the hallway, "Take a good look, because we're never going to be back."

Chapter 7: Discovering The Film's True Potential

Marx: In spring 1993, Peter reached out to Michael Apted and Barbara Kopple, who reviewed the cut, and both of them said, "You guys need to try to get this into theaters."

James: We went through this process with KTCA of us having to deliver an hour, then we got them on board with it being a two-hour special. Frankly, I was uneducated in the business. I had heard of Sundance, but I didn't know anything about it. Frederick had different ideas, which is good, because he was pushing us in different directions.

Marx: I'd been following John Pierson and his work for a while. I wanted his take on the film: "Does this have theatrical potential?" I heard he was going to be giving a talk in Chicago, so I went.

John Pierson (Producer's Rep): Chicago became a really familiar stopping spot for me. I was there for an IFP event.

Marx: I asked him at the end of his presentation, "Do you know of any film that has been blown up to film from video and been theatrically released?" He said, "No, but it's only a matter of time before it happens." And I said, "I've got it."

James: Pierson called one day when I was at Kartemquin and said, "It's John Pierson," and I'm thinking the way he's talking, I'm supposed to know who he is. I'd never heard of him. He goes, "I watched the film, and I watched it again, and I was going to wait and call you on Monday"—this was Friday—"because I didn't want to look too anxious, but I love this movie." And I'm thinking, "That's great!" So I hang up and call Frederick, and he's excited, and calls back John. He got back to me and tells me John doesn't want to represent it.

Marx: I don't think he said no right away, and in fact I think he thought about it for a while.

James: Though he didn't take it on, he still helped us tremendously. Especially getting the film into the hands of critics.

Pierson: That was an amazing year at Sundance, because I had Go Fish and Clerks, and it was a challenge to give just two films all your attention. I'm happy I could help Hoop Dreams. I'm sorry it wasn't my film.

James: Through Gordon and Frederick, we connected with Richard Peña of the New York Film Festival, so we sent the film to him. He got back to us and said he wanted the film. Back then, they only showed one or two docs at the festival, so we were blown away. Then a few weeks later, we had to call him and say we weren't going to be able to get it done in time.

Gilbert: I was completely heartbroken when we couldn't get it into the New York Film Festival.

James: We actually were the closing-night film at the [following year's] New York Film Festival following our première at Sundance. It was amazing sitting with the families in the balcony. That was one of the highlights of my filmmaking career.

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James: Around the time we withdrew from the New York Film Festival is when Woody [Wickham] convened this meeting to figure out what could happen with the film. He had PBS, CPB, KTCA, activist people from Chicago. Frederick had John Pierson come.

Quinn: It was a meeting where we began to understand we didn't have to do it all ourselves, that there were organizations and foundations and people who would be interested in really helping us make the film have an impact.

James: We had submitted the film to Sundance. It was a three-hour-20-minute version. I remember calling them up and checking in on the film, and whoever I talked to said, "I can't tell you whether it's in, I can tell you it's high up on the list of being considered." So that was big to know going into the meeting.

The film was supposed to air in March after Sundance, around March Madness, so to the credit of public television, they were willing to push the airdate, and I think John Pierson showing up with all his credentials and saying "This is an important film" was huge.

Marx: John basically said, “You’re out of your minds if you’re not thinking about first maximizing its commercial appeal, because that is what’s going to drive its social utility.”

Pierson: This was not my world. I did not know these people, which was probably great, because there was a great debate about whether PBS was going to hold these guys to the contractual obligation to deliver a two-hour film. I just remember because I had nothing to lose, I didn’t care what I said to them. I just said, “You’re nuts if you think this film should be shorter—this film could be longer. It’s great the way it is, don’t screw it up.”

James: Then you had Woody Wickham, from the MacArthur Foundation, a huge supporter of public television, saying, “This is why we’re having this meeting, to think outside the box.” All these things allowed Hoop Dreams to be thought of as a theatrical film.

Chapter 8: Park City-Bound

Geoffrey Gilmore (Director of Sundance Film Festival 1990-2009): They submitted the film and it was a rough cut. It was a long film, but we were willing to look at it because people had already responded to it positively. Also, we didn't have as many submissions at Sundance as we did years later, so you could spend more time on a title.

There was a lot of discussion about it, but it wasn't a collective decision—the decision was mine. People either argued for or against it, and the people that argued against it were basically people that just did not care for sports. Now, I was the opposite, I'm one of the people who cared most about sports. It was a film we were going to accept.

James: When John [Pierson] didn't want to rep the film, it's not like there were a lot of producer's reps around at that time.

Quinn: We agreed that [Chicago publicist] John Iltis and David Sikich would be our producer's reps. They were from Chicago, and we trusted them.

Marx: I met them probably the same time I met John Pierson. It was around the time they wanted to form a sales agency.

David Sikich (Producer's Rep): John and I knew each other for a long time. I was in traditional distribution for about 15-16 years, working as the Chicago branch manager for Orion Pictures. In 1992, they filed for bankruptcy, so I pitched John the idea of starting a subsidiary combining our two strengths, John with public relations, and me with distribution and exhibition.

John Iltis (Producer's Rep): John Pierson couldn't take it on, so he recommended us. We started talking to them in early summer of 1993, and then they hired us following the Sundance titles being announced.

James: They did a lot of good things, but the single brilliant thing they did was get Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel to see the film before Sundance.

Iltis: I told Larry Dieckhaus, the executive producer of their show, “They have got to see this, and they have to see it before anyone at Sundance.” It was unheard of: Here’s a movie that does not have a distributor, and they would review the movie. But Siskel and Ebert knew how important this was not only for the filmmakers, but for Chicago.

Chaz Ebert (wife of Roger Ebert): I remember going to see it with Roger and Gene, and we didn’t have any particular expectations, because he hadn’t heard a lot about it. It was just going to see a film. Roger and Gene and I would glance at each other from time to time during the movie, because we couldn’t believe how interesting things were unfolding on the screen.

Primarily, following screenings, conversations were between me and Roger first, because he and Gene liked to keep their feelings about the movies secret between each other until they got on the set and did the show. But there were times when you walk out of a movie like this one and we knew we all liked it a lot.

Iltis: Larry called and said he needed clips, and I didn’t say, “Great, we’re on the show?” I knew. I told the filmmakers, “Just watch the show, you have nothing to worry about.”

James: We had a party at my house the night they reviewed it. This was during Sundance [when it aired]. Back then, you went to either the first or second half of the festival. They wouldn’t pay for you to come for all of it. So we chose the second half because we were in competition, and wanted to be around for the awards ceremony. We watched the review, and it was off the charts.

Marx: They basically scooped the world. But we had a meeting the next day at a Cuban restaurant near my house, and one of the things we talked about was that I wasn’t mentioned by Siskel or Ebert [though Steve and Peter were]. That stung badly.

Sikich: I was the one set up to go the first week of Sundance, John and the filmmakers were going Tuesday night. But a day or two before I flew out, the show faxed over the transcript of the Hoop Dreams segment. It was going to air that first Saturday or Sunday at the festival. I

basically was handed the start of a marketing campaign. Right there were Roger's words: "This is one of the best films about American life that I have ever seen."

Marx: At Sundance, it felt like being The Beatles for a week. Everybody wanted us and wanted the film.

Iltis: I told the guys, "Just enjoy it. Don't say anything, just listen and enjoy all the wine and food you're going to be getting."

James: This one dinner at The Rocking Horse, we had this long table, and we're having dinner, and Russell Schwartz [then president of Gramercy Pictures] came up and goes, "Congratulations on the movie. I haven't seen it yet, but I smell it, and it smells good."

Chapter 9: Making Deals

Ira Deutchman (president, Fine Line Features, 1990-1995): The report I was getting at Sundance about the film was mixed. It was amazing, but probably not very commercial. Specifically the length of the film and the subject matter were concerns. I went to see the movie, but I had another appointment, too. About 25 minutes into the film, I stepped out and called the person I was supposed to meet and said, "I'm not coming, I'm in the middle of a movie." I went in and watched the rest of the film.

Iltis: I had known Ira since he started in the business, and I felt that he had the right feeling for the film.

Deutchman: My reaction was like everyone else's: "It's an unbelievable experience, but it's too long, and it's going to be difficult to sell." And the rumors on the street of what the sales agents were looking for was a million dollars, so I didn't hold out a lot of hope that we were going to end up with it.

Deutchman: I basically told John and Dave, "I could have interest, but if you're thinking of this being a million-dollar advance, there's no way I'm going there." Next time we saw them was the closing night, where the film won the Audience Award, and they said to me, "We don't know how that rumor started about how much money we're looking for, but we may be susceptible to something smaller if we feel the film ends up in the right hands." At that point, I asked them if we could get a print to New York.

Sikich: Orion flew us out first-class to meet with them, but they had just come out of bankruptcy, so there were just too many questions about the company. Samuel Goldwyn came to Chicago and they wanted just a straight gross deal, which wasn't ideal for us. Fine Line came to us too. Ira put on a good presentation, and being part of New Line, which was owned by Turner, they had the basketball angle.

Deutchman: They had made it clear to me that there was no cutting to be done, which made me feel maybe Harvey [Weinstein] was out of the running. I went to Chicago with Liz Manne, and we did the presentation in a conference room in Iltis' office. And I made the case

that because we were a division of Turner we were better placed for the kind of cross-promotion that would potentially help push the film to a larger audience. Turner owned TBS, the home of the NBA, and Ted Turner also owned an NBA team [the Atlanta Hawks], and there were all sorts of other networks that were potential cross-promotion opportunities. Deep down inside, did I really believe I could pull all that off? We certainly had no history of it, but I did believe it was possible.

James: John Sloss knew we could easily get screwed in whatever deal we took, so with three legitimate suitors, he wrote in a gross corridor deal [a portion of money received from box-office returns and ancillary markets will revert directly to the filmmakers] and see what happened.

Gilbert: That meant we could look at Variety every week and know what we were going to get paid. We didn't have to depend on the back end. That was huge.

Quinn: It was brilliant. It's the reason we actually made money on the film.

Sloss: I was really interested in being aggressive structurally, and trying to do things with deals. Putting in a gross corridor was unusual to do back then, and it was probably unprecedented back then to do for a documentary deal.

Deutchman: This was something Sloss and a couple of other people who were making deals at that time were beginning to push for. I was aware of the concept, and I'm not even sure it was the first time I bought with a gross corridor.

I was in Los Angeles at the American Film Market in February 1994, and we were going back and forth, since I went out to meet them in Chicago, and they came back to me with the answer I'd been waiting for, which was a "Yes, you guys are the right people, let's hammer out a deal." I told them my threshold, Sloss came back with a gross corridor, and it wasn't a complete surprise. I wasn't enthusiastic about it, but I knew we were getting it, so I made the decision right there and then to go ahead and do it for $400,000.

James: When we were closing in on a deal, we met William, Arthur, and their families at Kartemquin. One, they had read this story that the film was going to sell for a million dollars,

but we always said that if the film became profitable, we'd sit down and figure out a way to compensate them. However, I was talking to the NCAA because both William and Arthur were on scholarship in college playing Division I basketball [William at Marquette University and Arthur at Arkansas State University], and giving them money was going to compromise their amateur status.

Marx: John Sloss came in from New York. Steve, Peter, Gordon, and I were there, and all of the families.

James: We told them that the story about a million-dollar deal wasn't true, but that there is interest in the film. And we explained that because of NCAA rules, we can't talk about compensating you until the boys are done with school, or they'll lose their amateur status.

Gilbert: Think about the trust these people had to have.

Agee: I wasn't there, I was at school. But what my mom told me was we couldn't get any money until I left school, and I was just like, "If we get anything, that's cool, as long as I can buy you that house I promised you."

Sloss: That meeting was about as dramatic as anything that's ever happened in my career. It was literally about a bunch of people who had been living hand-to-mouth seeing their story being told, and seeing people getting wealthy in their eyes far beyond what they'd ever made, and trying to get their head around it. And seeing the people getting wealthy being more than willing to share with them, but everyone confronting this archaic system at the NCAA.

James: It was a very tumultuous meeting. I called Curtis afterward—he was a very contentious voice in the meeting. And he said, "I've dealt with white people before, and ultimately, I've always felt I can't trust them when it comes to money. I'm going to get screwed. And I'm just telling you that's the way I feel."

When the kids got out of school, we made William and Arthur equal partners in the film, so they got as much as Peter, Frederick, or I would get, and we also gave shares to the families.

Marx: John Sloss pointed out again and again, “This is absolutely unprecedented,” but it’s something we wanted to do.

Agee: I’ll never forget, my first check was $64,000. I’d never seen that much money in my entire life. I signed the check over to my mom and said, “Now go find that house.”

James: Before the release of the film, St. Joe’s and Pingatore filed a suit against the film, saying the film had painted him and the school in a false light. We stood by the content in the film completely, and the last thing we’d ever do was change it. We did work out a settlement that was beneficial to Gene and the school.

Marx: But we also insisted that we include Marshall High School.

James: If we were going to do anything with St. Joe’s on the profits of the film, we also wanted to help out the kids at Marshall.

Pingatore: I was upset because I didn’t think they did what they said they were going to do. Time passes and it heals a lot of wounds—it’s really a good movie. But if I had to do it again, I don’t think I would have agreed to let them film.

Chapter 10: The Film Hits Theaters

Deutchman: We did an enormous amount of testing the film in front of various audiences, trying to poke and see how possible it was to get the film to broaden outside the arthouse audience.

James: We were really pushing Fine Line: “If the African-American community can find out about this, they will embrace it.” I remember they showed the trailer before an advance screening of Above The Rim in Harlem. The trailer made it look like the film was a gritty narrative, as opposed to a documentary. So they asked the audience when they came out of the film if they liked the trailer and would like to see that movie. I remember I was at Kartemquin editing when the results of the test screening were faxed over. And I’m seeing some overwhelming results. “Excellent.” “Excellent.” I get a call from Ira, and he said, “Did you get the results?” and I said, “Yeah, they look great.” He said, “What do you mean? No, those are the people who stayed.” Half of the audience walked out. The comments on why they walked out were like, “I didn’t know this was going to be some PBS shit.” And, “I live this, I don’t go to the movies to see this.”

Deutchman: I went on kind of a goodwill tour trying to bring on promotional partners. For this film, it was the one and only time I went to the Turner offices in Atlanta. I made presentations for the Atlanta Hawks, TNT, regional sports networks. We did a screening in an Atlanta movie theater. The biggest tool we had to drive people into theaters were reviews, and they were only going to affect the arthouse audience. So we reached the conclusion that chasing other audiences in a more commercial way was simply not going to work. Then the question became, how could we put it in front of African-American kids? We put together a massive educational campaign that got it to, I think, a couple hundred thousand African-American kids.

James: I remember talking to Ira on the phone after the opening weekend in October of 1994, and he was so disappointed.

Deutchman: Some people point to us opening the same weekend as Pulp Fiction as to why we opened soft, but we got as much press as they did. We were the closing night of the New

York Film Festival [leading up to the film's release], they were the opening night of the New York Film Festival. We had just as much momentum going into that weekend as they did, but we were a two-and-a-half-hour documentary on basketball, and they were something that seemed like it was going to be more fun. I'm not sure if we opened a month later, that there would have been some other film that would have been just as problematic. [Ed. note: Hoop Dreams grossed $18,396 its opening weekend on three screens, Pulp Fiction grossed $9.3 million on 1,338 screens.]

We had to readjust the whole marketing plan to slow the release down. To keep it alive meant we had to keep the press people on to continue to get whatever additional press the film could garner. But more importantly, week after week we had to take out ads in newspapers, because back then, that was the main way to get the word out.

James: I have to give Fine Line credit, they pushed to keep it in theaters, and I think it became, "We just have to get to the announcement of the Oscar nominees."

Chapter 11: Snubbed

Deutchman: Toward the end of the year, we could see momentum building from a critical perspective, and started hearing some conversations about Oscar. I had a very, very strong opinion, which I think I convinced everybody else of, that if we ended up getting just the nomination for Best Documentary, it would be poison. It would be sealing the film's fate as being this tiny niche movie, and not having any crossover possibilities. With Siskel and Ebert and others calling it the best film of the year, maybe we could push for the Best Picture nomination.

I'm convinced that if in those days, they had 10 Best Picture nominees rather than five, we would have been one of them. But the reality is we may have killed our own hopes for the Best Documentary because I was so public about Best Picture. I mean, I was quoted in places that we were not going after Best Documentary, that our feelings were we deserved Best Picture.

James: When the Oscar nominations were announced, we were all there at the Kartemquin office and the local affiliates, and the newspapers were there with us.

Quinn: We were all standing at a doorway with the press lined up in this room so the cameras could be on our faces at the moment the nominations were announced.

James: We're watching TV and no Best Picture, which we thought was a long shot. Then news came in we didn't get a Best Documentary nomination.

Marx: I tried to put on the best face and say, "Well, it is what it is and blah blah blah."

James: We got nominated for Best Editing, which we thought was weird. But the snub meant the press now had a story.

Deutchman: Some folks blame me for the fact that it didn't get nominated for Best Documentary. But I don't feel bad about that at all. My feeling is we got more press from not

getting the nomination than we would have gotten by getting it. [Ed. note: Deutchman left Fine Line a month before the nominations were announced.]

James: I got home that day and got a call from Ebert who said, “I’m outraged, you just have to be too.” And I said, “Well, I kind of take the long view—” and he cut me off and said, “You’re not going to say anything, are you?“ and I said no, and he hung up. He wanted a quote, and realized I wasn’t going to give it to him so he had to go find one.

Ebert: I remember Roger and I were so upset that they didn’t get the nomination. How could that have happened? [According to Roger Ebert: “We learned, through very reliable sources, that the members of the committee had a system. They carried little flashlights. When one gave up on a film, he waved a light on the screen. When a majority of flashlights had voted, the film was switched off. Hoop Dreams was stopped after 15 minutes.”]

Gilbert: What was fantastic was that Steve, Frederick, and Bill were nominated for editing, which I think is one of the few times a documentary has been nominated in a category outside of docs.

There was a huge uproar to what happened, and for the first time, that documentary branch came under a huge attack.

Deutchman: At that time, it was a very small, very political committee. Some people think they voted for their friends, but I also think there’s certain types of documentaries that committee leaned toward, and this film didn’t fit that type.

Gilbert: I wanted to get involved, and I really fought to become a member. So out of the three of us, I got in the voting process for all documentaries. The biggest change we fought for was having a real branch. In the documentary branch before, you didn’t have to be a documentary filmmaker to be in it. I know some of the people who saw our film were hairdressers who hadn’t worked for 25 years.

Quinn: The process was quite flawed, and it’s still flawed, but it’s better because of the kind of reforms people like Peter fought for.

Gilbert: I did some pretty heavy research. Things changed, like you had to be a documentary filmmaker to be in it and vote. That's what I was most involved in, having just documentary filmmakers be involved in the branch.

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Gilbert: Oscar night was bittersweet for me because I was thrilled for Steve and Frederick, but I felt like I was the third wheel.

James: I was sitting next to the guy that won. He edited Forrest Gump [Arthur Schmidt]. The person who edited Speed was right in front of us, and I thought he was going to win, because Speed is all editing.

Marx: Things did not look good from the get-go.

James: When [Schmidt] came back to his seat with the Oscar, he let me hold it.

Gilbert: The ultimate Oscar moment for me was, my wife and I were sitting next to Harvey and Bob Weinstein's mom. Her commentary made my Oscar evening unbelievable.

James: The Forrest Gump people were nice enough to invite us to their party after the show.

Gilbert: They were like, "In two years, everyone is going to think you won." Which is true, half of my life is correcting people that we did not win an Oscar.

Chapter 12: A Blessing And A Curse

James: When Hoop Dreams was still in theaters, Peter and I were thinking we should make a narrative movie. I didn't have an idea for a doc, and our agent was getting us meetings left and right.

Gilbert: We were full of ourselves and we wanted to make a Hollywood feature, but we were in a place where Hoop Dreams had such critical acclaim, you want to make something good.

James: One was a project that had Robin Wright attached that was a drama about this tough, uneducated country woman, but it didn't go anywhere. [Producer] Arnold Kopelson heard we were in town and ordered us a car to come to his office. I remember he had six different posters of Platoon hanging in his office.

Gilbert: I remember he said, "You get a story, sports story, kind of like Rocky. He goes through this and that, but at the end, he wins. We get an actor, boom you have a movie." He told us we'd talk in a couple of weeks. Never heard from the dude again.

James: [Producer] David Heyman loved Hoop Dreams and said he had a script for us. He said the studio was really high on it. So Peter and I go to a meeting at Sony, and the decision-makers were in the room. They asked, "What do you think about the script?" And Peter and I said it needed work, and the characters were kind of a cliché. So we're in the parking lot afterward and Heyman comes up and is like, "Guys, guys, what are you doing?" And I'm like, "It needs work." And he said, "You don't understand, they were ready to say 'Go make the film,' we can fix this stuff as we go." He was completely beside himself. Needless to say, we didn't get it. The film ended up getting made—it opened a few years ago. Gridiron Gang, starring The Rock.

Gilbert: My favorite was meeting [television executive] Brandon Tartikoff. He called us up to do a pitch for a documentary, and the whole time on the ride over he's like, "You don't get many chances like this. You have to give a compelling pitch. I'm counting on you." We get to the meeting, and I think I said two words, Steve said maybe three. The meeting ends, we get

back in the car, Brandon pats us on the backs and says, “Guys, you just sealed your first deal.” Never heard from him again. You can’t make this stuff up.

James: Prefontaine was offered to us through Disney via Hollywood Pictures. I wasn’t a Prefontaine fan, but we’d been in that circle for a while and got a reality check. We made it. Then I followed that with a few cable movies [Passing Glory, Joe And Max], but being flown out for meetings first-class, put up in hotels, all that shit ended very quickly.

Agee: I never thought Hoop Dreams would be shown all over the world. I just thought Chicago people would see it. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that people in the U.K. or China would see this. And the way they took to it. I mean, I’ll never forget, I was walking downtown and these two people walk past me and was like, “You’re Arthur Agee. I saw your movie.” They were stopping people walking by and going, “Do you know who this is?”

Gates: My kids have only seen the first two years of the movie. Primarily because I want them to see daddy’s glory years before seeing daddy’s declining years. But they keep asking. It’s probably more me, because especially for [my son] William, I don’t want it to be that when anything goes bad in his life, it’s supposed to be because things went bad in daddy’s life. [Criterion Collection commentary.]

Agee: I remember at Arkansas State, the coach put a gag order on me. I was like, “I can’t help if these people are calling or showing up.” Tom Brokaw came down to do a piece. Even Bill Clinton came to see me. He had a private screening of the film and then was coming down to dedicate our new library. He came to my door, and I was like, “Aw, Prez, what’s up?” I was walking with the Secret Service past everyone.

After college, I kept trying to make it to the NBA. I was trying out for a CBA team when Steve asked if I wanted to be in his film, Passing Glory. I asked, “How much does it pay?” He said $17,000, and I was like, “Hell yeah.” Once I got a taste of acting, I really liked it. I got a lot of commercials, Spike Lee put me in as a cameo for He Got Game. I just starred in Peter’s son’s thesis film.

In 2001, Gates was invited to try out with the NBA’s Washington Wizards through the pushing of Michael Jordan, who had come out of retirement to play for the team. Gates’

comeback was halted when he injured his foot. Shortly after, Gates got the news that his brother Curtis was murdered.

Gates: Curtis was the only one who knew about my comeback. He met Michael. He told me, “If you make it, I'm quitting my job and travel where you travel.” [Washington Post, 2004]

James: We always swore we’d never do a Hoop Dreams sequel, but when Criterion released the film for their collection [in 2005], they asked us to do an update, and we agreed. We did a lot of interviews with all of the principals, we started getting great stuff, and we thought, “Why waste it on just a Criterion extra?” We were convincing Criterion to go along with doing something bigger when Bo died.

In 2004, Arthur “Bo” Agee was murdered behind his home.

Agee: At the time of his death, he had his church, he’d turned his life over to the Lord and was doing real good. I had just had an argument with him on the phone right before getting on a plane to go back to Chicago. I get off the plane and got word and went straight to the hospital. He had already passed. My whole focus shifted to my mom. I said, “Fuck Hoop Dreams, fuck acting, fuck basketball.” Everything was on my mom for like, three or four months.

James: We did some additional shooting, but we realized it wasn’t going to happen, and we all walked away from it.

Agee: Me and William stay in contact a lot. We are like brothers. I was there for him when Curtis died, when my dad passed he was there for me. We always say the film was a blessing and a curse. With the 20th anniversary of the film, it’s not like one of us is in jail—it turned out great for me. I’m doing a Hoop Dreams clothing line, I’m running the Arthur Agee Role Model Foundation, I do a Hoop Dreams curriculum and show the movie across the country to different schools. I use the movie as a life-skills teaching tool.

Gates: I’m glad I was a part of this. The bad side about the movie is that people have expectations that Hoop Dreams made us rich. “You’re William Gates, can you help me?” “Help you with what?” But I do appreciate that even to this day, I still walk down the street

and people say, “Are you William Gates?” [Criterion Collection commentary. Ed. note: Gates currently lives in Texas.]

Gilbert: I have been filming in the sports world continually; I’m still obsessed with it. To me, the film is still the same cautionary tale. William saying, “If I don’t [get to the NBA], don’t you forget about me.” Sheila cooking for Arthur’s birthday and saying, “It’s great he made it to 18.” Those two things encapsulate America still. And the film has endured with NBA players, and I mean current NBA players, not just Jordan and Barkley and those guys. The current players don’t even know the history of the game, but they know this movie.

Marx: I don’t see Hoop Dreams in the stratosphere like other people do, I guess. It did accomplish a lot of the things Steve and I set out to do, to mix some kind of narrative tropes with documentary ones. But the thing that the film left me with were the questions of, “Who is there in our society that is supporting young men in particular across the threshold of young adolescence into young adulthood? Who’s not basically trying to exploit them for their own ends?” That question led me on the journey I’m still on. The next film I’m in production on is about the solutions to that set of questions.

One film defined the arc of my entire career. Being a babe in the woods just fresh out of film school and becoming, if you will, a “Hollywood insider,” that’s a huge growth. It’s pretty odd that it happened within the context of one film. It’s not an easy standard to be measured by. I think I make excellent films, and I don’t think Hoop Dreams is my best film. It’s just that my work doesn’t get seen much these days.

James: Who knows what career I would have had if it weren’t for Hoop Dreams? I didn’t start off with any expectations at all. I knew I liked documentaries, and I figured I could work at a TV station. I remember while making the film, thinking, “When this is done, I just hope it will get me another film, and I’m not just doing commercial work.” When it premièred at Sundance, I was 38, I had three kids and no money saved. I think after doing Prefontaine and the two cable movies, I realized I’m a much better documentary filmmaker. I love documentaries, and I started to find some grounding. The success of Hoop Dreams was so huge, anything I made next would expose me as a one-hit wonder. That weighed on me a lot, so when Prefontaine got mixed reviews, that was a very low point.

I look at Hoop Dreams as we were particularly blessed with incredible families, incredible stories, incredible drama, and a film that seemed to come out at the exact right time about the right topic. The films that I've made since then [Stevie, The Interrupters] were harder to make, and I've made my peace with the fact that I'm probably never going to make anything that's ever seen as being as good as Hoop Dreams. I'm really happy when someone comes up and mentions another film I've done, but in a way, I've never been able to put Hoop Dreams behind me, and I probably never will. At least I have a body of work now, and I don't feel like I was a one-hit wonder.

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