Meet the team behind The Undefeated

Director Kamran Rosen and producer Ivan MacDonald kindly sat down with us to talk about The Undefeated, one of the two projects chosen for the 2024/25 Hulu Kartemquin Accelerator. The pair shared their inspiring filmmaking journeys, the serendipitous connection that brought them together, and what excites them about the industry amidst its evolving challenges.

Kamran Rosen

Ivan MacDonald

The Undefeated follows five native youth athletes who are using their platforms to reignite a cultural renaissance—spreading pride and awareness of their people across the country, and beyond.

Kartemquin: We're thrilled to introduce you to the Kartemquin community! What's something surprising about you that you'd like our readers to know?

Ivan: A lot of people are surprised to learn that I know how to sew. I actually studied fashion design for a year before transferring to something else. I was like, maybe I don't want to go into debt, hundreds of thousand dollars in debt, just having learned how to sew. But now it's a hobby I have on the side!

Kamran: I've had a lifelong desire to get better at chess, and over the last year I've really put in a concerted effort to study the mechanisms to getting better at it. I recently won my first game at Washington Square Park [New York] where the people come to play chess. It was probably 10 years of saying I want to get better before I finally sat down and said, I'm actually going to do this. And that's really gratifying!

KTQ: Kartemquin is based in Chicago, on the unceded lands of the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe nations. Can you share a bit about where you each call home and your journeys to filmmaking?

I: I'm from the Blackfeet tribe. I was born in northern Montana on the Blackfeet Reservation and moved around a lot while I was growing up, but currently live in Billings, Montana. I always say my filmmaking genesis story started in my little neighborhood. When I was living on the reservation, we were one of the first to get a satellite dish. I used to sneak into our family's living room in the middle of the night and watch the IFC and Sundance channels when they were really cool in the nineties.

I actually transitioned to film full-time about three years ago so I'm still newer in the process. I had been working in film for probably three or four years prior to that but it was after one big project where I was like, hey, I'm making enough where I can live on this, let me do this full time! And I've been doing it ever since. I was just always a huge fan of film and to be a part of it in this day and age is really cool.

K: I keep jumping coasts. I was raised outside Boston in Cambridge and then I went to Oakland for five years and then I came to New York, where I am now. My geography and career path has been very diverse. When I was in high school I was obsessed with film. I would come home from school and I'd watch two films every day.

That was my routine. So I really wanted to go to film school, but I didn't really have anyone I knew in that world. Everyone I knew had traditional jobs and they basically scared me out of it. They were like, you're going to be a starving artist!

And so I went and got an economics degree not really knowing what I wanted to do. And then when I got offers in that realm, I started to feel panic. That's when I moved out to the Bay area...I started waiting tables and every day after my shift I would go write for free.

Then there was a job I applied for as an econ writer. At that time, having a writing job was great but more and more they wanted me to just do the data and not the writing. And I was like, the whole point of this job was that I wanted to do the creative side. So I quit that job and I wrote for a newsletter that did very well and went out to about a million subscribers. I love writing and I keep up with writing. I think I'm very much story oriented in that capacity, but I realized that if I'm going to be dedicating my life to something, it better be something that I really love. And that was when I felt this full circle moment of, what am I willing to spend all my time on? What is it that I voluntarily spend all my time on? And it was film. And so that was a really gratifying journey I had to go through to kind of come back to where I started.

KTQ: Ivan you're based in Montana and Kamran you're in New York City. Can you tell us a little about the journey to finding each other and deciding to work on this project together?

K: So much of this film has really felt serendipitous. I was working with Donnie [Wetzel Jr., Native youth mentor, Founder Montana Indian Athletic Hall of Fame], following his work with both the Montana Indian Hall of Fame and then also as a tribal liaison educator and he was really good as far as establishing connections. This is my first feature, I'm very much a junior filmmaker. I was talking with him and I said, Donnie, I need help. I need someone that's a more experienced filmmaker who's Native that I can partner with on this. Donnie is good friends with Ivan's dad and Donnie said I have a buddy whose son has always been into filmmaking. I don't think Donnie actually realized how big time Ivan had become since he knew him as a little kid!

And that's when I became familiar with Ivan's work and I watched his doc [*Bring Them Home*]. I reached out and Ivan literally could not have been a better person. In the context of sports, Native mental health, and his work as a social worker, he was a perfect fit for the project. His success with Blackfeet Boxing, a Native sports documentary, and Bring Them Home made connecting with Ivan feel like one of the biggest wins for the project.

I: I grew up knowing Donnie and it was from an initial conversation with Donnie that led to meeting Kamran, and then just being really struck by the project. Ivy (MacDonald, filmmaker and Ivan's sister] and I get approached to collaborate on things all the time . We've had people come in and it's a two hour long 'educational' session where you get questions like, oh, do Natives go to school? Do they have hospitals? But it's great when you meet someone who's actually done the research and knows and stuff like that. Kamran had been doing a little bit of filming already and I was just super struck by the project and thought it was kind of an interesting look at something that's been documented before, but in a different light. So much of the projects on Native sports have been centered on high school and successes there, but what does that success look at the next level?

K: Donnie keeps telling me he's 'putting stuff in the pipe' and I didn't grow up knowing anything about Native ways and religion. I told him about the Hulu/ Kartemquin Accelerator and when we had the interview, we were on res when I was in the library zooming with you. I told him about the interview and I was like, Donnie, I really think this program would be great for us. He's like, all right, I'm going to put it on the pipe for you! And they smoked and sweated and we got in. I don't know, I think there might be something to it. I also don't know how Ivan's family ended up as Celtics fans in the middle of Montana, but we're all big Celtics fans. Maybe there was some of the synergy there, but it really is tremendous that everything lined up the way it did.

I: For some weird reason, the MacDonalds, every single last one of us, are either Boston Celtics fans or University of Montana Griz fans. It kind of runs in our blood. And it was funny, I didn't even know Kamran was from the Massachusetts area until the Boston connection came up. So yeah, as Kamran said, that's another part of the synergy of the project.

KTQ: Documentary filmmaking is difficult and you're both working on multiple projects - what are some industry challenges you're both facing right now and what gives you hope?

I: I think the challenges in the industry have only grown or been exacerbated over the last few years. And of course, I think with Indigenous filmmakers, there's always challenges to access to funds and support and all of that. I tell people that for every amazing doc about some topic, there's another five or six other docs around the same topic that don't get that kind level of posterity or what have you. It's always an uphill battle, but that leads to some inspiring instances. I'm thinking of the current distribution landscape of self-distribution and the cool successes people have been having with that. I know some of the people who worked on the Union film, and they're going their own self-distribution route because unsurprisingly the film has been a kind of hard sell. It's great seeing that they're like, you know what, if no one's going to take it, we're going to do it on our own!

Those kinds of things have been inspiring and I've been reading some cool stuff people have been writing about self-distribution in that landscape. I think it's always, always a challenge and tastes ebb and flow. But I always have people who have been here a lot longer than me who have been in the industry a lot longer than me who are like, yeah, it's just the ebbs and flows. The pendulum swings one way and it's going to hopefully swing back some and correct a little in the next iteration. It's about finding those little small ways to keep yourself going.

K: I want to caveat everything being this is my first feature. I can't speak to anything from a position of expertise, but I've talked with a lot of people, applied to a lot of different things. I think the exciting thing right now is that more docs are being watched than ever before. I think Netflix's unscripted division is actually bigger than their narrative division. So streaming has actually created a appetite for unscripted that people wouldn't have maybe paid a ticket for to go see in theaters, but they'll be happy to stream it. I know people are obsessed with docs. The downside of that, in my opinion with streamings is that excellence is not incentivized. I think volume is really the name of the game when it comes to the business end of things. And so people are very risk averse and very formulaic.

I think that when you're trying to do something different, like we are, people want to say, well, what has succeeded? On the flip side, this can bring exciting opportunities. I started making this film before Rez Ball came out. When you have risk averse studios, we have the benefit of the people who are really the trailblazers, who started to get Native docs out there and show that there's an appetite for them. So I think that we have a couple headwinds that feel very exciting. The main thing that I'm trying to make sure of is that we deliver a product that has staying power.

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> Kamran Rosen

I think a lot of docs that you see, they get green lit, produced and distributed in under a year. And I think that's because if you don't have something new, then people lose interest.

Hoop Dreams is the first doc I became obsessed with. That still holds up, there's something about that film that transcends time. And so I think that the challenge of having people take the risk on you today is that we have a short-term mindset in the media landscape. So the hope is that we can

Famous Lefthand, a film participant. He is a basketball player from the Crow tribe playing in his hometown college at MSU Billings

find the business viability for distribution and reaching an audience in ways that studios see the value in, but are also able to keep the core quality I think that docs should have to engage audiences for a long time.

KTQ: Despite its many and varied challenges, what are the elements of filmmaking you both find the most fulfilling?

I: I think for me it's the impact that the film can have. It's often a slog. Often there's more downs than ups, I hate to say, even in this day and age with stuff like getting distribution or getting your production green lit even in some instances, it's tough. So when you're actually able to see an impact of a film, it's really rewarding and you're like, oh, that was such hard work, but look at the impact that's having on people.

I just did a talk with the Environmental Protection Agency about my bison documentary [Bring Them Home]. And just the reach that it can have for people is really cool. And I think that kind of keeps you going, just knowing that whatever you create it can have some impact on someone.

K: I think that with film the hardest part and the most rewarding part is that it's a collaborative process. My uncle is a visual artist and he can just go in a room and paint and I told him sometimes I feel jealous about the fact that he doesn't need the same kind of resourcing and work that goes into building a team. It is a really tough logistical aspect, but the most enduring and rewarding process is having lifelong collaborators. And I think there's something about people that work in film and really take it seriously that there's a passion for people and storytelling that at my core, that's what I love most.

The conversations I have with filmmakers are always the most rewarding. And those lifelong partnerships, that's really what I think keeps me going. Every project will come and go and you'll have the impact and then it'll kind of run its cycle. But the people you meet I feel like are forever and that's been such a reward.

KTQ: You're both incredibly busy but when you do get some downtime, what art - films/art/music/books - has been inspiring you lately?

I: I'm a huge horror movie fan, and I think this year has been amazing for horror films. I just saw Smile 2, and it was amazing. And I don't know if anyone's watched the first one, but it's the first one times 10 with this incredibly and crazy pop star angle. And so that was even more at my alley. I've been really inspired by horror. I'm putting some ideas together for my first ever narrative venture or fiction venture, and I think it's going to be a horror short.

K: I would actually say I think the world of short form documentary is incredible right now. And my last piece before this was a short animation. I think that the ways in which we're able to give a voice to individuals in ways that might be difficult in feature length is something I think was impossible 10 years ago. And I think the internet has completely changed that landscape. And I think that you can't really be a purest, I'm not one of those people that thinks a film has to be this one way. Film is however people consume it. I've seen platforms that are super exciting. I think that Humans of New York, when he came out with his Instagram page, that's not film, that's photography and incredibly basic portraiture as far as a technical standpoint, but some of the most moving things I've ever seen have been on that page.

KTQ: What are you both most looking forward to being part of the Hulu/Kartemquin Accelerator program?

I: I'm just excited to see how the project develops and hearing Kamran and some of his ideas to get the film to completion and having the watchful eye of Kartemquin. Getting feedback at that really high level I think is always so important. I was telling Kamran that you have to do at least one fellowship or one kind of program or one lab to start out, because it just gives you such foundational knowledge. I didn't go to film school, but I've had so many fellowships and labs and programs that I feel that's helped a lot, and that's been my education. So I think that's what I'm excited for, furthering education.

K: I'm also a non film school, filmmaker. Ivan is a little ahead and he's had the chance to be in some great accelerators and fellowships. This is my first ever one and I couldn't be more excited as far as the people that are involved. I was a PA and then I worked at a rental house and then I became assistant camera. I was just desperate for any way to get on set to learn. I've never had a formalized mentorship and I've never had a mentor, I've never had a teacher. I've only ever had work experience. And so to have a formalized mentorship program just feels super exciting.

Learn more about Kamran, Ivan, and The Undefeated HERE