



Bill Resler and Darnellia Russell in *The Heart of the Game*.

Swish

A basketball documentary with more than a narrative arc

THE HEART OF THE GAME: Written, directed and filmed by Ward Serrill. Produced by Serrill and Liz Manne. Music, The Angel. Narrated by Ludacris. With Bill Resler, Darnellia Russell, Joyce Walker and the Roosevelt High School Roughriders girls' basketball team. Miramax Films, 2006. 97 minutes. PG-13.

Ward Serrill began filming the Roosevelt Roughriders, a Seattle girls' basketball team, seven years ago, when they'd just gotten a new coach. Sleepy-eyed and round-bellied, UW tax professor Bill Resler came to Roosevelt with a love for basketball and a different attitude. In his first season, the coach changed everything: He dismantled the offense. He opted for a full court press for the whole game. He told his players to be a pack of wolves (later, they're a tropical storm and a pride of lions): "Look them in the eyes!" He put his girls through grueling drills and workouts, making them stronger, faster and tougher than their opponents. And he created the "inner circle," removing parents and even himself from the scene when it came time to work out personality conflicts and solve problems.

The inner circle also TPs Resler's house late one night, but these are high schoolers, after all. The film that resulted from Serrill's years at Roosevelt, *The Heart of the Game*, shows Resler with all his quirks — and his players with all their skills, passion and unselfconscious teenage humor. Serrill's documentary puts all those inspirational Hollywood sports movies, with their foregone conclusions and canned scenes, to shame. *The Heart of the Game* is an exhilarating, heart-breaking trip through several seasons of a basketball team that is the classic underdog.

The first season, as Resler gets his feet under him as a coach, and as the team comes together, is exciting enough; there's a palpable sense of immediacy and change in Serrill's interviews with players, fans and Resler himself. But when Darnellia Russell turns up to play for the Roughriders, the film finds its star.

Darnellia, whose mother sends her to Roosevelt (rather than its rival school, Garfield, where her best friend plays ball) because the academic prospects are better, is a determined, charismatic young woman who wants to go to college and then play in the WNBA. A slight, striking freshman, she rolls her eyes at her mother's worries, tells her old middle school coach that she's never been around so many white people before and sits out the first few basketball games with bad grades. Later, eligibility issues threaten to keep her from playing for the rest of her high school career.

But when Darnellia gets on the court, she's unstoppable. Between her compelling offcourt story and plain talent, it's understandable that Serrill opts to focus on Darnellia; it's also frustrating, at first, as the film becomes less about a team and more about a single player. But the film comes through in the second half, as *The Heart of the Game* shifts again to become about more than basketball, more than confidence, more than teamwork. Darnellia's struggles to keep playing the game she loves reflect issues of gender, race and class, though Serrill wisely presents her story as her own, without using it to make statements or generalizations. He lets viewers see for ourselves that within Darnellia's tale is something bigger than one girl or one team, something about becoming more than you thought you were, in ways you may never have expected.

It's also to Serrill's credit that his documentary turns out to have all the nail-biting intensity of an actual basketball game. As the clock runs down on the final game — in which Resler plans to play every one of his amazing young women, even those with almost no experience — the outcome is never clear. And, as Ty Burr noted in *The Boston Globe*, it almost doesn't matter. The win is already there, in the journey, and in *The Heart of the Game*'s clear-eyed, triumphant storytelling. **EW**

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