



HOOSIERS

35
YEARS
LATER

1986 FILM LEFT AN INDELIBLE MARK ON SPORTS, CULTURE

Before “Hoosiers” earned two Academy Award nominations, before it landed on the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress, screenwriter and producer Angelo Pizzo had concerns, even doubts.

There were squabbles on the set between actors Gene Hackman and Barbara Hershey and director David Anspaugh. Would a story about Indiana high school basketball, Pizzo wondered, resonate with a national audience?

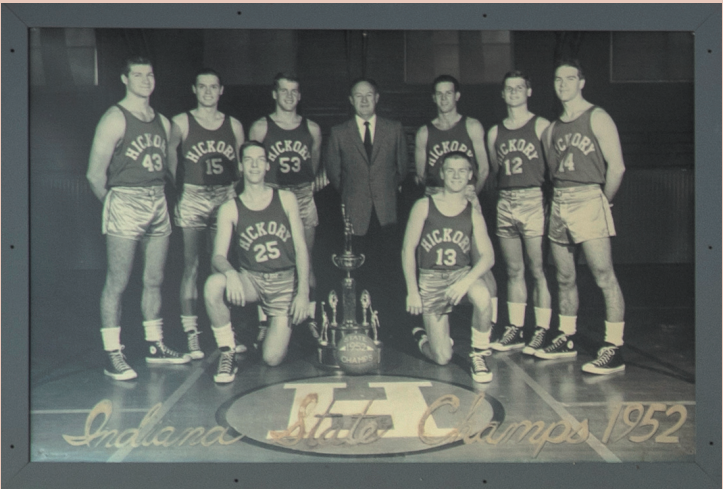
“There’s always a feeling that you’re teetering on a cliff, about ready to crash and burn,” Pizzo said. “Because this was our first movie, there was so much we didn’t know.”

What emerged from the cutting floor was an iconic sports movie that remains relevant decades later. “Hoosiers” will turn 35 in November, and the underdog story of Milan’s 1954 Indiana state basketball run is still quoted by high school basketball coaches. Clips from the movie are routinely shown on Jumbotron at sporting events. Even the NBA’s Indiana Pacers have donned Hickory Huskers jerseys, celebrating the tradition of high school basketball within the Hoosier state.

Pizzo said he routinely gets asked why the movie has stood the test of time. He mentioned the movie being set in the 1950s and the classical music score.

“We took a familiar story and made people feel like they had never seen it before,” Pizzo said. “We were able to create kind of a fresh angle in a classic underdog story.”

Pizzo also gave credit to Hackman, Hershey, Dennis



Hopper and the rest of the “Hoosiers” cast.

“The performances and the depiction of events feels immediate enough that people still respond to it emotionally,” Pizzo said. “So hats off to the actors in creating a world that felt organic and real and present. I mean, let’s face it, many of those small towns that we saw in ‘Hoosiers’ are still the same. I mean, the world of the people who live in them are totally different, but there is a lot of familiar imagery.”

As the all-Indiana NCAA Tournament begins this month, parallels already have been drawn to “Hoosiers.” Games will be played at Hinkle Fieldhouse, which was the site of the Indiana state finals in the 1950s and appeared in the movie’s final

game scene. Pizzo, who returned to Bloomington to raise his family after living in California, said it won’t feel the same due to limited fans in all the buildings because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He will watch the games from home.

“This year is so different because of the lack of fans,” Pizzo said. “I associate those games with electric energy in the fieldhouses or in the gymnasiums and that’s just simply missing. The games are always going to be games, we watch them on television, we’re going to be rooting just as hard ... But it just doesn’t have the same feel, the same energy.”

— Kevin Brockway, CNHI Sports Indiana

LEGENDARY CAST



Gene Hackman
Coach Norman Dale



Barbara Hershey
Myra Fleener



Dennis Hopper
Wilbur “Shooter” Flatch
Hopper was nominated for an Oscar for his role.

THE REAL STORY

The film “Hoosiers” and its Hickory Huskers are inspired by the Milan High School Indians, who won the Indiana high school tournament in 1954. At the time, Indiana was one of the few states to hold a single-class tourney. It was known as the “Milan Miracle” because the school’s enrollment was just 161 when the Indians defeated Muncie Central (1,662). With the game tied at 30 and four minutes left in the fourth quarter, Bobby Plump held the ball unchallenged and hit a 14-foot jump shot as time expired to seal the 32-30 win for Milan. Plump’s buzzer-beater, mirrored by Jimmy Chitwood’s shot in the film, and the importance of basketball to small towns in Indiana are the only true parts of the Milan story represented in the film.



WIT & WISDOM

There’s not a basketball season that goes by without some coach (or fan) somewhere rattling off a few words from “Hoosiers.” Here are a few of the film’s most memorable lines:

“My practices aren’t designed for your enjoyment.”

“Welcome to Indiana basketball.”

“If you put your effort and concentration into playing to your potential, to be the best you can be, I don’t care what the scoreboard says at the end of the game, in my book we’re gonna be winners.”

“I’ll make it.”

“My team is on the floor.”

“Don’t get caught watchin’ the paint dry!”

“Strap, God wants you on the floor.”

“Measure this from the rim. Buddy, how far? Ten feet. Ten feet. I think you’ll find this is the exact same measurements as our gym in Hickory.”



TAKE A GYM TOUR

Scenes on Hickory’s home court were filmed at the former Knightstown High School gymnasium, now known as the Hoosier Gym. The gym, marking its 100th anniversary this year, welcomes 60,000-plus visitors a year to this shrine to basketball. You can visit the locker room and shoot hoops on the floor. Find more info at thehoosiergym.com.



ABOVE: The Hoosier Gym in Knightstown, Indiana. LEFT: The Husker Bus was used in the film.

LIFE LESSONS

“Hoosiers” has stood the test of time because of its appeal beyond sports. It inspired Knightstown grad Robert Garner, now the events coordinator at Hoosier Gym, to write “Hoosiers: 11 Life Lessons,” which expounds on these values found in the script: Accepting Change, Second Chances, Forgiveness, Belief & Prayer, Respect, Values, Trust, Responsibility, Judging, Doubt & Confidence, and Redemption.

