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Rippin' Shots

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Two hours before *In The Crease* makes its debut on the big screen at the Boston Film Festival, Matt Gannon '91 and co-director Michael Sarner have staked out the projection booth. They are terrified. This is hardly the Academy Awards, but for these two film-makers the question in the air is just as important as, "who will win the Oscar?" Soon they will finally find out what a live audience thinks of their film, the result of one hundred and sixty hours of filming, all-night editing sessions, and years of paying dues working on other peoples' films. Theirs is the real life story about Southern Californian surfer dudes who, as the California Wave team, compete for an unlikely national youth ice hockey championship. But much more than just a hockey movie, it's a story about the impact of competitive youth sports on kids and their families as they pursue dreams of making it big. As the theater fills with local families, the anxiety in the booth builds.

"In film you try to capture moments that evoke emotional connection between your characters and the audience," he says. "But in a documentary you are not working with actors but real people." This leads to a unique mixture of intimacy and spontaneity in the process. "You never know where your subjects are going to lead you." At the moment the question is whether the audience will follow.

One of the featured players is a first generation Indian named after Wayne Gretzky. The Wave's Wayne is the clown of the team, but he works harder than anyone. Hockey is his burning ambition. He's home schooled to allow time for the three hour

one-way trip to the rink each day. Wayne panics when traffic makes him late for practice because he thinks he let his team down. Wayne's father Amir pushes his son. But at critical moments he tenderly comforts him too. The Wave families courageously pursue a modern-day American dream just like the families in the audience.

Matt Gannon knows something about pursuing a dream. A political science major at Yale, Gannon's life was changed by the course he took on American Documentary with Michael Roemer. The classroom overflowed with students on the first day. Roemer made all the students write on a four inch card why they wanted to stay. Gannon wrote about his newfound love for film, how he wanted to absorb the craft like a sponge. Roemer responded and Gannon has never looked back.

After Yale, Gannon wrote for ABC's *One Life to Live* before landing at American Playhouse, PBS's independent film venture, with the help of alum Nick Gottlieb. Gannon eventually worked directly for Executive Producer Lindsay Law (now a professor at Yale School of Drama). Law took Gannon with him to Los Angeles when he took over 20th Century Fox's independent film label, Fox Searchlight. Later, Gannon joined European film studio Pathe Pictures and co-produced the Oscar nominated "Girl with a Pearl Earring" starring Scarlett Johansson.

By 2005 Gannon was ready to strike out on his own. He sensed a change in the movie-making landscape. The studios were increasingly focused on block-buster films that could make hundreds of millions, abandoning smaller niche audiences. At the same time, Gannon fell in love with the movie *Spellbound*. He realized that no one had taken an inside look at youth sports the way that movie had done with national spelling bees.

Having grown up in a hockey family, Gannon was also searching for a rink to teach his three year old son how to skate. To his great surprise, Gannon discovered that the local club had competed with teams from traditional powerhouse regions like Michigan and Massachusetts. “We had the idea for *In The Crease* on a Monday and were shooting on a Friday,” Gannon recalls. This was only possible with the advent of low cost cameras and editing software available on a standard Apple computer. Overnight, the hard costs of making a movie had gone from millions of dollars to literally a few thousand.

Even beyond the democratization of production, Gannon realized that the internet leveled the playing field for independent film-makers when it came to distribution. Technology allowed them to by-pass the studios to reach their audience directly. Gannon released *In The Crease* exclusively via DVD on his website (www.inthecreasemovie.com) and on Amazon. He and Sarner focused all of their marketing efforts on families involved in youth sports. USA Hockey agreed to promote the movie in email blasts. In the film, Gannon included interviews with NHL stars talking about their youth hockey experiences. Their teams promoted the movie on jumbotrons across the country and in emails to their fans. Gannon and Sarner made their movie, and promoted it, from a living room.

The film-makers scraped together money from family and friends to complete production and add music. Within months of the movie’s internet release, the money was returned and supporters began to make an exceptional 60% return—a rare experience for independent film investors. ITC became the number one sports DVD on Amazon and number thirty four overall. Versus (OLN) network agreed to show the movie to its

seventy million household subscribers on cable television. Gross receipts reached \$500,000. Something had hit home.

Back in the theater, the lights go out and suddenly *In The Crease* is on the big screen. The audience settles back into their seats as Gannon leans forward to watch them. Early in the movie, one of the bushy-haired surfer dudes talks about the trade-offs he's made pursuing a national championship. "I'm missing out on a lot of good make-out sessions," he explains, "but, hey, I'm playing the sport I love.." There is a loud noise in the theater. It is laughter. The audience is with the film-maker for sure. Gannon leans back with a sigh of relief. The audience continues to laugh and then cries and cheers when the film reaches its climax.

Gannon says he made his film for this audience, and families like them. He has received rave reviews for his virtually marketed DVD across the country. But in Boston he receives a standing ovation in the flesh. And in New Haven, the hockey team awaits the arrival of the Wave's goalie, Nick Maricic, who will be playing for Yale next year.