

Colin Low's Standing Alone

The rolling foothills of southern Alberta conjure up cinematic memories of Hollywood cowboys and Indians. But those are American memories. Here now is a unique Canadian twist (maybe even a myth in the making): how about cowboys who are Indians? Meet Pete Standing Alone (his real name), a blood Indian cowboy, astride his steed.

Horses dominate *Standing Alone* and Pete's thoughts about himself, his family and his people. He watches his young children play horsey-back with each other and wonders if they will grow up ignorant of real life on horses when, like so many of his people, they are drawn to the city. "Keeping anything of the old ways is more difficult all the time," he remarks philosophically. For time is the real protagonist in this eloquent blend of ethnographic and lyrical documentary from the National Film Board.

Pete Standing Alone last appeared on film 22 years ago as a young buck on motorcycle in the NFB's classic Indian film, *Circle of the Sun*. Producer Tom Daly and director Colin Low showed him then with feet in two worlds, uncertain in each. A generation later, Pete ruminates about how time has brought accidents and death, "the things you cannot control. It changes you." His convictions have changed too.

Now he confirms his identity and strength through tribal custom. And it means more than paying lip service to a near-forgotten ethos. No longer afraid to chant or dance, he has become a bridge-reaching back to an oral tradition some 5000 years old and forward to the next generation.

Pete speaks of change, the most constant factor in life, while we behold the horse herd as counterpoint against a panorama of the rolling verdure of southern Alberta. This is part of an unchanging cycle. Pete gallops alongside them in classic cowboy pose, reminiscent of the lyricism of the cowboy on horseback in *Corral*, another Low and Daly masterpiece (1954). The lyricism is still there, but now a cowboy Indian speaks.

His voice-over narration adds a special complexion to the film because it seems so natural. This is not the tired documentary method of reading someone else's words about the images. In a painstaking process (an original documentary method pioneered in the '30s) Daly and Low showed Pete the hours of rushes which had been shot off and on over the previous two years. They took copious notes or recorded what Pete said. Then they wrote the documentary with Pete and made his phrases fit the picture with apparent effortlessness.

Pete Standing Alone wants his children to get a taste of the earth where animal and man interplay. It is hard to find that genuine combination; even at rodeos today where most of the cowboys are Indians, the bucking broncs and steers are rented. The rodeo, a proven route to bravery and manliness, is dangerous (and pointless?) as we watch a mean steer trample a thrown cowboy.

If Indians become braves this way now, at least before the white man they proved themselves by killing buffalo

with bows and arrows from galloping horses. Pete challenges his oldest son to learn this lost art and prove his mettle. The young man and two friends respond with more enthusiasm than skill as an elder fashions the weapons and explains first principles.

They must learn to shoot the animal. Pete attaches bales of hay to his battered Chevy pickup and leads them through golden fields as they race bareback, trying to hit the moving target. It is a visual pun on all our cinematic memories of the western film - wild Indians in hot pursuit, shooting arrows - only these young braves are trying to capture a lost tribal art. Once again, Pete serves as a figurative and literal vehicle of their education. He is as happy careening through the fields as are the adolescents striving for their straw target. It is irrelevant that we never see whether they actually get their buffalo. They have earned dignity.

And that is the beauty of this film. It does not idealize Indian life, nor does it reflect the white man's fixation with contemporary Indian social disintegration. The film insists quietly that social cohesion exists (with its share of controversy and strife, to be sure) as does an honourable Indian way of doing things. A touching moment occurs when Pete talks to a white archaeologist who has found an Indian fingerbone in a 5000-year-old stone cairn he has opened. Pete balances the bone atop his own finger, matching it perfectly. He has touched an Indian past older than the Pyramids.

As the film ends, a solitary Pete stands in a snowy field with his horses. A wild stallion has come down from the hills, probably to feed with the mares on Pete's hay. He reaches out with gloved fingers to touch the normally reluctant stallion. Against all odds, the wild horse lets Pete touch him. Pete concludes that Indians, like horses, are survivors against the odds. Nor can we forget an earlier truism Pete stated about the art of breaking horses - if a man spoils a horse, he calls the horse no good.

Daly and Low, two senior and eminent masters of documentary at the Film Board, have not lost any artistic skill or deftness with time. In all probability *Standing Alone* would not have been attempted by commercial interests because it takes so much time and money to use the camera as a cultural mirror. The CBC has purchased it and soon Canadians may see how worthwhile the effort has been.

More significantly, *Standing Alone* may stimulate Native people to seize hold of their own destinies, to do something with their own lives and do so on their own terms. And that may be worth more than a dozen funded programmes.

Gary Evans •

STANDING ALONE d. Colin Low p./ed. Tom Daly project organizer John Spotton d.o.p. Douglas Kiefer, Ernest McNabb asst. cam. Ian Elkin. Rodney Gibbons, Simon Leblanc loc. rec. Bev Davidson, Claude Hazanavicius sd. ed. John Knight orig. mus. Eldon Rathburn re-rec. Roger Lamoureux exec. p. Barrie Howells, Michael Scott prod. & dist. National Film Board of Canada color 16mm running time 57 min. 50 sec.



• Victor Davis after setting the world record for 200m breast stroke

William Johnston's & Ira Levy's

The Fast and the Furious

The Fast And The Furious is a wonderful documentary about two Canadian world-class swimmers: Alex Baumann and Victor Davis, members of the Canadian National Swim Team. Not only does the film personalize these two names from the sports pages, it reveals the drama of their lives and training efforts leading up to the Ecuador World Championships and the Commonwealth Games in Australia. The film is so intense and involving that its real-life drama, for me, outclasses the slick and scripted efforts of a *Rocky* I, II, or III.

While watching the film, it's hard to remember that these two athletes are just teenagers: Canadian kids from ordinary Canadian towns - Baumann from Sudbury, Davis from Guelph. Through the story of their individual efforts to win, they take on heroic proportions. It's also difficult to remember that you're watching a documentary. *The Fast And The Furious* unfolds like classic drama, with a building of tension and conflict, the pitting of the hero against an adversary, and in the dénouement, the final test of the hero's mettle. The filmmakers have achieved a remarkable fusion of documentary and drama, quite different from docudrama in that there are no actors and life itself cannot be scripted. But by involving us in these two people and their sport, we care deeply about the outcome. The filmmakers pull out all the stops in heightening the dramatic tension.

Interestingly, directors Johnston and Levy seem to have allowed much of the film's "information" to emerge subtly, without overt comment. We learn quite a lot about the sport of swimming, the necessary training, the arena of world-class competition, the procedures for races, etc., but much of this information comes through at a non-verbal level. That is, we grasp the essentials of this sport through our own visceral responses. For example, we come away from the film with a strong sense of the intense involvement between athlete and coach: Baumann with Jenó Tihanyi, Davis with Clifford Barry. But, as I recall, at no time in the film is this relationship

commented upon. Rather, we see and feel it through the editing, the compositions within the frame, the nature of the conversations and body language between the individuals. I may be wrong using this particular example, but my point is that *The Fast And The Furious* works so well at the level of unfolding action and imagery that its verbal content recedes. In fact, although I am quite aware that this film includes a scripted narration delivered by R.H. Thomson, I have little recollection of its use. The voice-over narration, so standard in traditional Canadian documentary, is here so well integrated with imagery and music that it becomes an unobtrusive, ethereal guide. This seems to be one of several ways in which the film transcends its category as documentary.

In the sequences devoted to the races at the Ecuador World Championships and the Commonwealth Games in Australia, the filmmakers intercut film and video images. The economics of shooting dictated a one-camera setup, which proved insufficient for covering the races fully. When projected on the larger screen, the differences in quality of the two media were apparent, but not distracting. In fact, the effect was interesting and seemed to add a dimension of meaning on its own. I suspect that on television the discrepancy would not be as readily noticeable.

The film makes liberal use of slow-motion footage during all swimming sequences. This technique enhances the grace of movement and highlights the beauty of the body, but becomes repetitious and predictable. Moreover, its emphasis results in the fact that there are only a few moments when we see the swimmers actually racing at full speed. On the other hand, this rarity makes those few moments astounding.

The Fast And The Furious must reach a wide audience - it is that good. The film has already been shown on Radio-Canada and CBC, and will be scheduled for a repeat. Watch for it. This film may become a landmark in Canadian documentary.

Joyce Nelson •

THE FAST AND THE FURIOUS

exec. p. Ronald Lillie p. William Johnston assoc. p. Ira Levy, Henry Storgaard d. William Johnston, Ira Levy d.o.p. Peter Williamson ed. Judy Krupansky narrator R.H. Thomson story consultant & narr. Peter Blow assoc. ed. Cathy Gulkin sd. rec. Peter Sawade, Steve Joles, Dan Latour, J.B. Franks cam. assts. Robin Miller, Brad Shield, Malcolm Cross sd. ed. Peter Thillaye, 16mm., colour, 50 minutes, 1983, p.c. Lauron Productions, 56 Shaftesbury Ave., Toronto, Ont.