

FILM REVIEWS

Donald Brittain's

THE CHAMPIONS

d: Donald Brittain, sc: Donald Brittain, ph: Andreas Poulsson, ed: Steven Kellar, Ted Remerowski, sd: mix: Michel Descombes, Jean-Pierre Joutel, sd. ed. Bernard Bordeleau, sd. rec. Claude Hazanavicius, exec. p. Peter Katadotis, p: Donald Brittain (NFB), Janet Leisner (CBC), p.c. National Film Board/Canadian Broadcasting Corp., col:16mm, dist: NFB, Television Distribution only, CBC, narr: Donald Brittain, running time: 2x60 minutes, year: 1978.

"Politicians should be like Trappists in monasteries. The only words they are permitted to say to each other are 'brother, one day we must die.'"

Pierre Trudeau in *The Champions*

If anyone has any questions about the differences between television and film, *The Champions* provides many of the answers. Television gives us history in dribs and drabs — what happened yesterday and what might happen tomorrow. The current affairs shows give us the sensationalized gleanings behind the nightly news, delving with short, quick thrusts into a scandal here and a human interest story there. Very little in the enormous deluge of what we see, hear and read helps us make sense of this flood of information. *The Champions* uses television as its raw material. The events and the footage are familiar, but the structure of the film helps us put the jigsaw pieces of history into a pattern which makes some sort of sense. It's like Grierson's often-quoted aphorism, "everything in this world is art, it's just a question of getting it into the right order."

Using a sensational selection of stock footage and interviews with the people who knew them, *The Champions* traces the parallel careers of Pierre Elliot Trudeau and René Lévesque. It has long been a fine debating point among historians whether it is men who shape history, or history that



Lévesque interviewing other champions

forms its own leaders. What would have happened to our world if Napoleon had been shipwrecked on his way to France, or Hitler had drowned in a vat of wallpaper glue? One is tempted by this film to ask what this country would be like without Trudeau and Lévesque. As the title suggests, they are the champions of their respective causes, "defenders on the final battleground — the fiercest and most noble warriors." The film shows the political evolution of these two men, an evolution which has led us step by inevitable step to the cheek-to-jowl standoff which Canadians now find themselves in. If we are getting a history lesson in this film, it is a history lesson personified. It is the stuff of great drama.

Donald Brittain is at the peak of his forces when he is making films about people. Film-biography is his medium and he can spin out masterpieces with both live and dead heroes. *Volcano*, about novelist Malcolm Lowry, *Never a Backward Step*, about newspaper magnate Lord Thomson, and *Bethune* number not only among his best films, but also among the best films ever pro-

duced at the National Film Board. Even in films like *Memorandum* about Nazi death camps, Brittain personifies abstract ideas into the breathing reality of the lives of individuals. Trudeau and Lévesque should have been a piece of cake for him. In a sense, they were. As with other Brittain films, we get all the gossip, and our heroes are deftly reduced to human proportions. We find that Lévesque regularly skipped classes at university to play poker with his pals Robert Cliche and Jean Marchand. We discover that Trudeau was careful to dress inappropriately; when a suit and tie were called for, he would show up in shorts and sandals. Basically, however, we really get to know these two only in terms of their political evolution. This is not a film about the private men and, in a way, it is too bad. Brittain seemed to have the material to give us some insight into the make-up of the champions but the glimpses are brief and, in terms of Brittain's other flesh and blood portraits, depressingly one-dimensional.

As pictures of two political animals, however, *The Champions* remains remarkably objective. We are

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shown both leaders, complete with warts, and no one is likely to be swayed one way or the other. But Brittain is not neutral in the debate raging around him. He is afraid of the passions of nationalism and, like Trudeau is concerned with the idea that once it starts, nobody can say in what extremes it will end. His hard-hitting description of Duplessis sums up his attitudes: "Maurice Duplessis ran Québec as a piece of private property. At his peak, he controlled not only the police, but the newspapers, the universities, and the Church itself. He was a narrow, conservative, French Canadian nationalist, and to promote this, he stuffed ballot boxes and broke heads." Lévesque, albeit by democratic means, has been given the "awesome weapons of power." The statue of Duplessis is unveiled and sits in a place of honor in front of the legislature buildings. Quebecers now live under "majority rule with a vengeance."

Much of the fun of watching *The Champions* comes from its use of the old footage. A lot of it is loaded with irony. We see Lévesque in his early career as television commentator hosting the first trans-Canada television hook-up. He introduces "our" Queen Elizabeth who says that "the rising generation clearly shows that, French or English, we all belong to one great Canadian family." In a sequence which was on television in 1964, we see Trudeau, the lowly law professor, interviewing cabinet minister Lévesque on the disorder which his fledgling separatist ideas could create. "We live in a social and political context," said Trudeau, "where the forces of authority have traditionally behaved in a very authoritarian way." A different form of prophecy comes from a 1967 interview with newspaperman Claude Ryan. Lévesque had just committed what then seemed to be political suicide by trying to get the Liberal party to adopt a separatist platform. "He is dead now," said Ryan with a smile "but watch him in five to ten years from now."

With his deft scissors and wry narration, Brittain has made recent Canadian history into some sort of Tolstoyian soap opera. The characters who hold the fate of the country in their hands all seem to have grown

up together, and their lives are intertwined. The politicians and their stars grow and wane but history irrevocably marches on, symbolized and actualized in the figures of these two leaders. "It is not really a battle between the emotional and the rational man. Both minds are brilliant, both souls are passionate and there is a fine rage in each. Both are glad that, at last, it has come to this time of confronta-

tion. They are, in a sense, prisoners of each other. And this will be their final battle."

Ronald Blumer

Note. Part one of this film was shown on CBC television Sunday, Feb. 5th and part two on the following day. The film version of this film will be available from NFB offices in June of this year.

SHORT FILM REVIEWS

TAKE YOUR MARK

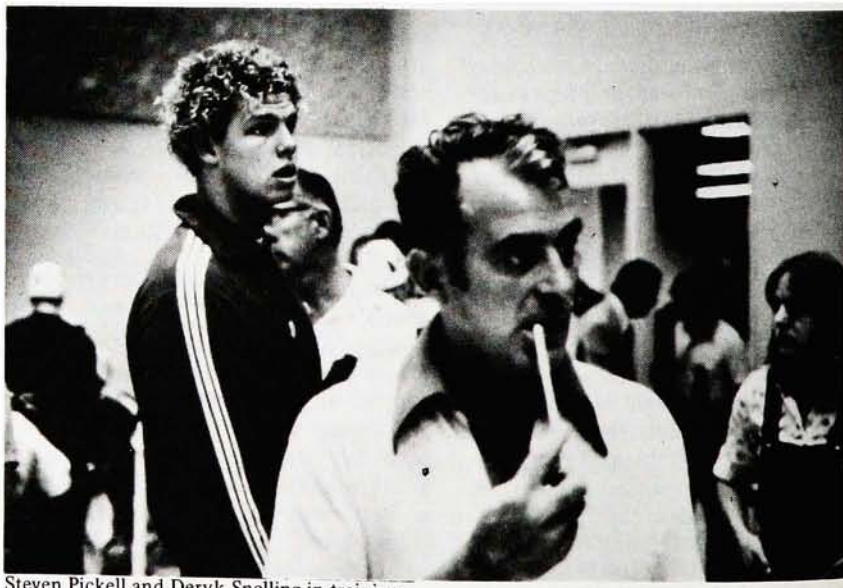
d: Michael Savoie, Peter Shatalow, ph: Michael Savoie, additional ph: Mark Irwin, Ray Burley, ed: Peter Shatalow, ass't camera: Greg Farrow, m: John Mills Cockell, p: Michael Savoie, Peter Shatalow, p.c.: Cedar Films Inc., 1977, dist: Cedar Films Inc., Running time: 25 minutes.

Take Your Mark is a documentary on Steven Pickell, a world-ranked Canadian swimmer who is a key part of Canada's swimming plans for the 1980 Olympics.

The film, produced and directed by Michael Savoie and Peter Shatalow, also highlights Deryk Snelling, a former British army physical-training instructor who coached Canada's national swim team at the Munich and Montreal Olympics.

The film's editing, by Shatalow, alternates a judicious selection of fast cuts in the action sequences with interviews which are strong enough in their content to enable the viewer to identify at once with Snelling as the mentor-coach and Pickell as the young athlete. In fact, one spends the rest of the film figuring out what makes each of them tick.

Snelling, whom sports writers have dubbed the Vince Lombardi of swim-



Steven Pickell and Deryk Snelling in training.

ming, produced Britain's top swim team in 1966 and came to Canada in 1967 to coach the Vancouver Dolphins, a swim club which has won the Canadian team title every year since he arrived. In 1976, after conflicts over recreational versus competitive swimming at the Dolphin's home pool, Snelling accepted a coaching position at the Etobicoke Olympium sports complex near Toronto, taking with him several top Dolphins including Steven Pickell.

In the film one observes the recurring features of body language — in particular the messianic fervor of Snelling's intense brown eyes — which exemplify the coach's emotional involvement in his current goal, which is to make the Etobicoke Olympians club the tops in Canada by 1978.

Snelling's approach to coaching is to push carefully selected athletes such as Pickell consistently to the point of physical and mental collapse, in a training program where practice is also broken down into its most essential elements. The outcome of the program will, in one way or another, be evident at the 1980 Olympics.

In Pickell, one observes a similar intense quality of non-verbal expression as he discusses his goals, but in him, one also senses a little more sense of humor and fun.

Among Pickell's sources of enjoyment are the enormous release and pleasure and well-being that occur at the other side of the intense pain of the workouts and time trials which make up Snelling's "break-down, build-up" training regimen. This is a form of training practiced in a variety of sports. "There's a reason I swim," says Pickell, "it's because of the feeling you get after you've swum eight miles, and been in the water two hours. Your whole body aches, every muscle's sore, your arms feel like lead, you can't lift them up again, your legs are like rubber, they can't do a thing. Your lungs can't hold any more air, they can't do a thing, and yet you take another stroke. That's the ultimate feeling in swimming."

There are also passages in the film which make *Take Your Mark* a companion piece to works of literature such as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* and Michael Murphy's *Golf in the Kingdom* and Jacob Atabet.

In these, sport becomes a metaphor for "things coming together" within a zen-like "right practice" which leads over time to remarkable powers of mind and body and levels of awareness which have connotations for personal growth that are ultimately unrelated to questions of winning or losing.

In one interview, for example, Pickell refers to the uncanny sharpening of perception which results from years of disciplined devotion to the same pursuit. "You can slow it down in your mind," he comments. "The more experienced you are, the more ability you have to slow down the action... and see it in minute detail, and

see the complexities that you've got to have, the thousands of things that have got to come together to make that thing just flow. I think when you do, it just sort of opens you up to what we are potentially capable of doing."

Altogether, *Take Your Mark* is a thoroughly enjoyable film which is as appealing for followers of the Vince Lombardi "win or die" school of sports competition, as it is for proponents of "swimming for swimming's sake", where the ultimate aim is to be involved in play instead of in beating the world.

Jaen Pill



The kids from the Point: sometimes winners.

THE POINT

d: Robert Duncan, sc: Robert Duncan, ph: Andreas Poulsson, David DeVolpi, Savas Kalogeras, Douglas Kiefer, ed: Les Halman, asst. ed: Sidonie Kerr, sd: Claude Hazanavicius, Richard Nichol, Raymond Marcoux, Jean-Guy Normandin, sd. ed. Bernard Bordeleau, m.d.: Art Phillips, ed. Donald Douglas, Musicians: Gordon Lee, Harold Joyce, exec. p. Roman Kroitor, p: William Weintraub, p.c. National Film Board, col: 16mm, narr: Budd Knapp, running time: 50 minutes, year: 1978.

"We don't care for all the rest of Canada, All the rest of Canada, All the rest of Canada, We don't care for all the rest of Canada, We're from Point St. Charles."

The Point is a film about the Irish. It is a film which might be called racist but, paradoxically, a film which will be loved and applauded by those who star in it: the poor Irish of the dying industrial underbelly of Montreal — Point St. Charles.

The Point is also a film which has caused an enormous amount of con-

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trovery, even before its release. In the minds of both those who love it and hate it, it has become far more than just a film about a particular area of a particular city. It is a travelogue presenting us with an overview of a state of mind, the chronic, hereditary disease known as poverty. In an odd way, this is a courageous film because it does not present a fashionably left of center "running-Capitalist-dogs" view of poverty. Also, it is not an up-reaching fiction, skilfully fashioned to forge the masses into organized revolt. If anything, *The Point* is a film of "constatation" and the poverty in it is ugly, brutal, corrosive and ultimately enfeebling.

It would be wrong, however, to represent this lively film as a modern day, Dickens-like portrait of bleakness. The hour is exciting, full of energy and, in its own way, more emotionally and sociologically true than many a more "worthy" film on the same subject. *The Point* and its people are themselves exciting, and the characters presented on the screen are as alive and fighting as the Point St. Charles working class heroes of David Fennario's plays. For example, it is the first film which I have seen that overtly faces the fact of racial tension between the French and English of Montreal. To anyone growing up in the rougher parts of Montreal, the two solitudes are often bridged with rocks and fists. As the film wryly puts it... "In Canada it is widely believed that all the French in Quebec are poor and all the English are rich. They have heard that story in Point St. Charles, but they have trouble believing it." Nowadays, *The Point* is no longer 100 percent Irish working poor. Not only are the poor of the area no longer exclusively Irish, they are no longer working. Jobs have moved away from this formerly industrial area, replaced by street crime, charred buildings and monthly welfare checks. The cycle of poverty continues and the children learn the ropes quickly.

The Point is not the first voyage that the National Film Board has taken across the tracks. *Things I Cannot Change*, a stinging *cinéma vérité* portrait of a poor family from the same area is the film that inspired the NFB's Challenge for Change program. That film presented a family of nine children

headed by a weakling father in such a devastating light that the family was forced to move out of the area. *Calabogie Fiddler* by Peter Pearson is among the best dramatic films produced by the National Film Board. Set in the rural Ottawa Valley, this film also reinforces our stereotyped image of the drinking, brawling Irish. As with *Things I Cannot Change*, this powerful, energetic — and in many ways too honest — film was very poorly received in the region which it portrayed. Challenge for Change's response to these films was to make films not just about, but for, disadvantaged groups. A film such as *VTR St. Jacques* illustrates a group organizing its way out of economic repression. These films are not portraits, nor do they pretend to be typical of what is going on. Their aim and purpose are not filmic but inspirational.

The Point brings us down from these lofty heights. It gives this area, not to the local social activists fighting for lower rents, but to the nightly arsonists and to the mailmen with their six-million dollars in welfare checks. The film is particularly telling in its view of the kids, the kids "without any dreams" who do not worry about the diminishing job market because, "we're all strong workers down here, ya know." As a former resident who has succeeded in moving out of the area puts it, "they have struck out down here. I see people suffering with alcohol and sickness. I'm not proud of that, but they have a lot of guts to put up with it." And it is this spirit which comes through in the film, the spirit of a neighbourhood which is now almost no more, the spirit of the ancestors who arrived half-starved on the ships a hundred years ago, and finally, the spunk of the young people still ready for a fight, whatever the odds. The film does not leave us with feelings of despair or helplessness, but with a very unromantic view of poverty. The slums are not pretty, the people want out, and the lucky ones make it.

Ronald Blumer

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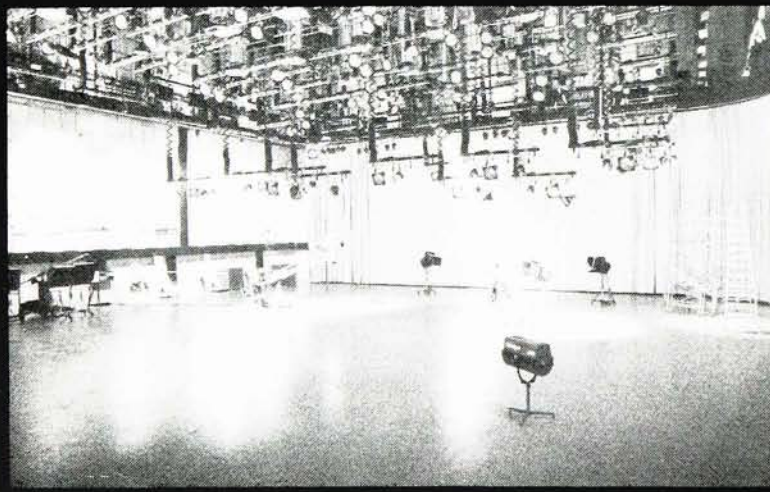
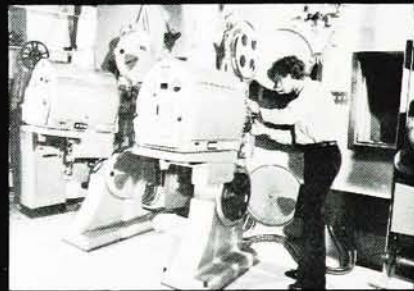
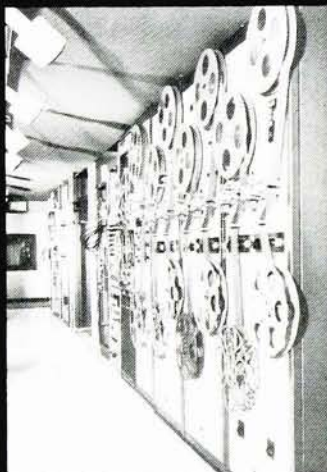
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