



FACEBOOK.COM/PAGES/THE-ONLY-REAL-GAME

Mirra Bank in Imphal during the shoot of *The Only Real Game*

'They pull together and play ball'

◀ M3

memorable. Baseball is a bridge between different people as well as between the small, strife-torn state and the rest of the world.

First Pitch worked with the Major League Baseball International Envoy program to send coaches to Manipur to train players and further develop the sport in hopes of building a local league. The work between MLB coaches Jeff Brueggemann and Dave Palese and the Manipuris takes up significant screen time, and the warmth of the relationships is revealed in these scenes.

"We never dreamed that we'd become so attached to these coaches in such a short period of time," Brueggemann said. "Mirra captured some of this emotion, their tears and our tears, and it was real. It was very unusual for us and very unexpected."

Out of the various MLB envoy initiatives throughout the world, the Manipur one was unique because instead of coaching kids, Brueggemann and Palese were coaching coaches. And from this experience, Brueggemann said, what stood out was how the women were really the leaders both on and off field.

Bank echoed this: "I had been to India before, but I think one of the great surprises for me, and this is in the film, was the degree to which women are just great engines of positive energy and tal-

ent. They're largely, disproportionately victims of all the problems, but they're such an enormous force for good there. So, that was really a magnet for me in the story and very important to me."

Along with the training, the story also follows the path of the First Pitch-MLB project in attempting to get government funding for a baseball stadium, which, not all that shockingly, does not happen by the end of the film.

This is where the project stands today, with Peters and the First Pitch team still determined to help the players and see opportunities created for them through baseball.

Brueggemann shared an anecdote that is telling about the situation of trying to donate from the US: "We raised 680 lbs of equipment in the community (*he said of an event in Kansas*). None of it got to Manipur. We sent it through Heart to Heart; I think it got to Calcutta. And I think that's as far as it got. And who knows what happened to it. But what I was told by a representative in Manipur is that it never made it to them."

While Peters admits that hopes for a stadium may have been too ambitious — starting with a basic field without bumps in the ground or cows strolling through it might perhaps be a better start — she and the others have faith that the film can be a catalyst to awareness of the reality in Manipur, the need for life and economic prospects, and the existence of potential for this through athletics, which is already in the spirit of the people.

"My hope is, as a filmmaker," Bank said, "to get this film out to India, get it to Manipur, let it shed some light, and hopefully it will generate what we'd love to have happen, which is a celebration of the good things that are going on there and the opportunity for people. They've certainly earned it."

She is off to a positive start: Like *Hoop Dreams* receiving numerous accolades in the year it showed at Sundance and after, *The Only Real Game* won the Best Documentary Award at NYIFF. ■

A game, a film, a controversy

ARTHUR J PAIS

Can there be a film festival without some controversy? This year, the documentary *The Only Real Game* about baseball lending a healing touch to troubled Manipur brought protest by Somi Roy, a film archivist and New York resident, whose mother is featured in the film.

This quintessential American game has not only stayed back in a remote corner of India long after the departure of American soldiers from World War II, but as seen in Mirra Bank's 77-minute documentary, to a people facing curfews, fights between secessionists and the Indian Army, and continual uncertainties over life, baseball offers more than recreation.

"There is something uplifting and empowering when people share a passion for something," said Bank. "The passion (*for baseball in this case*) can be healing and transcending."

The tradition started by American soldiers during their sojourn has lasted all these years, handed down from family to family, making it perhaps the only place in India where baseball is played, she said.

The film came from a suggestion from Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi — a princess, writer and playwright and a fierce critic of the Indian Army's role in her state — who died two years ago.

The film has been dedicated to her, and her presence in it is a key element.

However, her son Roy, who has not yet seen the film, says his mother withdrew her support to the project and thought the filmmakers had not understood the tortured history of her state.

"I was distressed to learn that the film has interviews of my late mother and is dedicated to her," he said. "My mother's request was that she not be featured in the film. This was communicated and discussed before, so I have asked for the removal of the dedication and those sections that feature her."

Bank said Binodini Devi never communicated her displeasure, nor did she make the request that she not be part of the film: "Anyone who sees my film will see how happily she is involved in telling this story. Roy is making the protest, but his mother is not around to clarify."

"I was — and still am according to our contract — one of the producers of the film," Roy said. "Our agreement was for the film to be shown to me before it went out, so I could make sure that all the friends, family and supporters I gathered there to make the shoots, as well as the baseball camps there possible are protected in Manipur."

"As I have not been shown the film, I cannot say for sure what is in the film and what is not. But there is concern from state officials coming to me now that I have not seen the film as I had assured them would be the case, and that there might be frames in it that are not acceptable and may put people who took part in it in jeopardy."

Bank said she would gladly take the film not only to Indian film festivals, but also to the people in Manipur. "Binodini gave a great embrace to the film right from the start and she had a very positive and affectionate attitude towards it."

The filmmaker said her film told a larger story and could appeal to anyone across the world.

"There are neighborhoods in America that are facing their own wars, dangerous situations caused by drugs and crime," Bank said. "Baseball, in our film, provides an experience that is opposite to frustration and fear. It brings together the people, gives them a vision, in addition to providing entertainment and fun."

But Roy is not satisfied.

"I find it very offensive that one would attempt to sell the film to audiences in India this underhanded way," he said. "It undermines the intelligence of the people there as well as here, in addition to damaging my mother's integrity and memory. I mean, how easy do they think people are over there to think they can get away with this so easily?" ■