

Chasing a dream along Waveland

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Review

'BALLHAWKS' Rating 3 out of 4 Steelworks presents a documentary directed by Mike Diedrich. Written by Kyle McCarthy, Terry Cosgrove and Joe Sciarrotta. Narrated by Bill Murray. Running time: 74 minutes. Opening today at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

The eloquent documentary "Ballhawks" is framed by a question from narrator Bill Murray: "What are you going to do with your life?" He does not speak in demanding tones, but with the lilt of crippled wonder that defines longtime Chicago Cubs fans.

"Ballhawks" is the story of men who shag batting practice and home-run balls with Major League Baseball gloves along Waveland Avenue in a Wrigley Field tradition that began in 1914. These guys garnered national attention during the Sammy Sosa-Mark McGwire home run chase of '98, but "Ballhawks" is set in the 2004-05 seasons with the Wrigley Field bleacher expansion as a backdrop.

Produced and directed by Cubs fan Mike Diedrich, "Ballhawks" was written by Terry Cosgrove (a former DDB Chicago advertising copywriter), Kyle McCarthy (a former ad copywriter) and Joe Sciarrotta. Joel Murray (Bill's brother) is executive producer.

The ballhawks are outside artists in the truest sense.

Longtime hawk Rich Buhrke keeps meticulous records on yellow legal paper of the balls he has caught: 1,489 at Wrigley Field, 513 at the old Comiskey, 23 at Minnesota (in the new stadium) and even 20 at Kane County in suburban Geneva. "Super Dave" Davison does not play by the rules and sometimes sells the balls he catches for \$20, with 10 percent off for blonds.

Gary "Moe" Mullins is the most famous ballhawk, who at the time the documentary was made, was marking his 46th season with 4,444 "career catches." The documentary credits Mullins as the guy who started the throw-it-back tradition, and the filmmakers play it down the middle by allowing Mullins to portray himself with the shifty moxie that's needed to succeed in this street sport.

The ballhawks travel to Florida for spring training, even though the Cubs train in Arizona. Why? Because there are more ballparks in Florida, where they can catch home runs to get in shape for the regular season. In Florida, Mullins discloses his scheme of donating his baseballs to a proposed Cubs museum -- in return for a lifetime pass to the bleachers. During the '98 Sosa home-run derby, Mullins filed a theft report against a fellow ballhawk for possession of Sosa's 62nd home run. Mullins claimed that he was tripped and bitten. This scrum is not addressed in "Ballhawks."

Some of the best scenarios are away from the ballpark. Ballhawk Jack Mielke lives with his father (a ringer for Major League Baseball commissioner Bud Selig), who has cancer. Mielke becomes the most developed of all ballhawk characters, taking his father to Arlington Park and also taking time away from ballhawking to pursue his dream of being a Chicago firefighter.

Most of the other ballhawks featured in this documentary lack such noble aspirations.

By my count, the first female doesn't appear until 33 minutes into the documentary. Buhrke's wife Marilyn describes herself as a baseball widow who endorses her husband's unusual hobby.

An appearance by NBC's "Today" correspondent Mike Leonard comes out of left field. He suddenly shows up playing wiffle ball in the homemade field of his north suburban home, which has nothing to do with ballhawks or Wrigley Field. But when Leonard stops to analyze what motivates ballhawks, his thoughts wax poetic. "It's like bird watching or fly fishing," he says. "The ballhawks are all trying to catch something."

ESPN Radio's Harry Teinowitz is around to size up everything although he pokes fun at the concept of ballhawks and "schmucks from Naperville." He does prove his Cubs fan cred, though, by name-checking obscure fielder Ozzie Timmons.

In his rookie film, Diedrich's photography of the bleachers and Wrigley Field skies are stunning. He creates a dreamy vista that matches the splendid script. The flourish at the end of the film brought a tear to my eye. And Murray speaks of love.

The love of a team. The love of a ballpark. "The love of a game that has brought you as close to your father as anything ever has," he says. Then he pauses and declares, "When you love something you will do anything to be a part of it."

"Ballhawks" is a labor of love, made by people who catch the devoted drift of Cubs Nation.

Sun-Times writer **Dave Hoekstra** once caught a batting practice home run and a game home run from Bill Buckner on the same day while sitting in the Wrigley Field bleachers.