

On Film: on the gridiron with the ladies of the Force



PHOTO I. A. JACKSON

LAURIE LITTLE, RONIT BEZALEL

Last May the Chicago Force's match against the Oklahoma Avengers was called off after a tornado hit Oklahoma City and destroyed the homes of three of their players—including the quarterback's. "They found her unconscious in the bathtub, no house," says Ronit Bezael, who codirected *A Day on the Force*, a documentary about Chicago's franchise in the four-year-old Independent Women's Football League. "She was OK, though. The Force had a food drive to help them."

The 50-minute digital video, which screens this weekend, is full of examples of this all-for-one attitude. Initially shot by Bezael, Sree Nallamothe, and Laurie Little as part of last year's 72 Hour Feature Project, the film focuses on three players and the team's 55-0 rout of the San Diego SeaCatz a week after the Avengers forfeit. The players, who aren't paid, sell raffle tickets to raise money, drive themselves to games, and help each other suit up. In one scene, defensive tackle Maria Kreevich talks about how badly she wanted to play football in high school—until the coach threw a jockstrap in her face and told her that she could play as soon as she could fill it.

"I was amazed by how dedicated they were despite the hardships," says Bezael. "They couldn't find a practice facility and finally found an abandoned popcorn factory with paint peeling off the walls. They found a way to juggle commuting and day jobs, and they get nothing in return—they actually had to buy their own uniforms. They're really doing it for the love of the game."

The same could be said of the filmmakers, who met in the late 90s in Columbia College's graduate program. Bezael took four years to finish her thesis project, the well-received *Voices of Cabrini*, a documentary on the redevelopment of Cabrini Green. A football fan, she saw the Force play last January and thought it would make a great subject for a movie. "It was just a really neat family atmosphere," she says. "And it was really cool to see all these women in pads and playing football." Figuring she couldn't do it on her own, she called up Nallamothe and Little

and got them to come check out the team.

"I was never interested in spectator sports," says Little. "I grew up with a family that shouted at the TV, and I'd go up to my room disgusted and play guitar." But, she says, "I thought it'd make a great story because it's so unusual."

"There's something really passionate about the way they carry themselves and play the game," says Nallamothe. "It was the first time they'd played professionally, so we got to see them play in a way we wouldn't have seen this year or three years from now."

The 72 Hour Feature Project required them to shoot and edit their film in no more than three days, but in the months leading up to the competition they got a lot of practice shooting other Force games. They interviewed the players and wrote a loose script, and just before the SeaCatz game called in a bunch of friends to make up nine camera crews. They filmed the first day, then spent 48 hours editing, drinking coffee, and taking turns napping. "It was the perfect setup," says Bezael, because with all three of them working full-time day jobs they didn't have the time or money to stretch it out anyway.

A rough cut was screened at the festival last May. It took home an honorable mention, but the filmmakers knew they wanted a more polished piece. In the last year they scraped together the dough to reedit and add additional footage, including an epilogue covering the playoffs, where the Force lost the conference championship to the Sacramento Sirens, 47-7.

These days Little is working with Nallamothe (who now lives in Toronto) on the script for a feature called "Rats Have Rights," about a group of people living in a building on Devon Avenue; Bezael is slated to produce. They've submitted their film to a bunch of festivals and are hoping to work with the IWFL to get it shown in other cities. They still try to catch the Force, who are undefeated this season, whenever they can.

The filmmakers and several players will attend screenings of *A Day on the Force* on Friday, April 30, at 8:15 and Sunday, May 2, at 5 at the Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State. Tickets are \$9; call 312-846-2800 or see the movie listings in Section Two. The Force play the New Hampshire Freedom at 3 PM on Saturday, May 1, at Saint Rita High School's Doyle Stadium, 7740 S. Western. Tickets are \$10, \$5 for kids; see www.chicagoforcefootball.com.

—CARA JEPSEN



"A DAY ON THE FORCE"