

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, Nov. 24, 2009

University of Miami resists ESPN film, but will show it

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BILL FRAKES / STAFF FILE PHOTO

University of Miami coach Jimmy Johnson is carried off the field by players celebrating their national championship victory over Oklahoma, Thursday, Jan. 1, 1988 at the Orange Bowl in Miami.

Inside a Miami Beach office that feels like a not-too-reverential Hurricanes shrine, the finishing touches are being applied to the documentary of record on the University of Miami football program.

Stacks of old newspaper clippings and UM media guides sit atop a table. A Ray Lewis action figure poses menacingly on a desk, and a stuffed "Ibis" lurks across the room. A UM pin cushion and Canes pillow are propped on the couch.

Director Billy Corben and producer Alfred Spellman aren't only accomplished filmmakers -- they're also former UM students. Corben believes Canes fans will be pleased when their two-hour documentary, *The U*, airs at 9 p.m. Dec. 12 on ESPN, in a high-profile slot following the Heisman

Trophy show.

"For Canes fans, this will be a reminder of what they loved about this team. For Canes haters, this will be a reminder of what they hated about this team," said Corben, who has crafted six films with Spellman, most notably *Cocaine Cowboys*. "I'm also hoping the haters might walk away with some passing appreciation of what the team brought to the table in terms of their pop culture contributions, the merger of sports and entertainment, the style of game played.

"The criticism of the team has been well-documented. We certainly review it. But this is really a Canes talk-back, a Canes rebuttal kind of piece. There's no dearth of incredible highlights of both sensational plays and over-the-top celebrations."

UM WON'T PARTICIPATE

But Corben said UM refused to participate and would not allow the filmmakers to interview coach Randy Shannon, former athletic director Paul Dee or former president Tad Foote, though old sound bites from Foote appear in the film. According to Corben, former coach Dennis Erickson and several former Hurricanes players said they disregarded UM's request that they not grant interviews.

"It upset me to no end," Corben said of UM's resistance. "I felt disrespected and unappreciated by my alma mater. Early on, [UM athletic department spokesman] Mark Pray told me, 'You should rethink even doing this project.' It was a display of rudeness, disrespect and ignorance. UM has a persecution complex about that era." As a result, Corben said he resigned from UM's Citizens Board, which supports the university's philanthropic efforts and promotes UM's programs.

Jackie Menendez, UM's vice president/communications, said the school declined to allow the interviews or participate in the project because Corben wasn't willing to allow UM officials to read the script in advance. Corben said he never was asked for a script -- "a documentary doesn't have a script" -- but that he sent UM a treatment, which is a two-page synopsis of the project.

Pray said only, "I have no recollection of saying he should rethink the project."

Still, UM will hold an on-campus screening of the film on Dec. 10.

The UM story made the cut for ESPN's 30-film project not only because of the program's popularity but also "because it was a personal specific story," said John Dahl, executive producer of ESPN Films. "Billy [and Spellman] went to the University of Miami. We're trying to play up the filmmakers' individuality."

Interviews with 38 former Canes and oodles of game footage filled hundreds of hours of tape, and whittling it to 102 minutes has been challenging. A longer version eventually will be sold on DVD.

The documentary primarily focuses on 1983 to 1991 -- a span when UM won four of its five national titles -- but opens by briefly touching on the program's struggles before Howard Schnellenberger's arrival in 1979.

Some tidbits about the film:

- Earlier this month, rapper Luther Campbell taped a new song, *It's All About the U*, which airs at the outset over video of great plays and Canes players prancing and preening. Campbell is identified as "Uncle Luke."
- UM's controversial on-field behavior receives ample attention. In his interview for the film, then-athletic director Sam Jankovich said Randal Hill's memorable touchdown celebration in the 46-3 Cotton Bowl rout of Texas on Jan. 1, 1991 -- Hill ran down the tunnel and pretended to shoot pistols -- was "totally disgusting."

Jankovich recalled telling Erickson afterward "if you don't solve this problem, somebody else will solve it for you. You should be ashamed how this team performed."

- Though most of the focus is on the field, the film also touches on the race riots in Miami in the 1980s "because it's relevant to the story" of the inner-city players recruited by Schnellenberger and his successors. There also is chronicling of off-field issues -- the pell-grant scandal, player arrests, former linebacker Bernard Clark's claim that Campbell paid players who made big plays, and the tension between Jimmy Johnson and Foote. But Corben said he decided not to explore the "so-called Canes curse" of the more than 15 former players who have died over the past 20 years, including Sean Taylor, Jerome Brown and Bryan Pata.
- The film has no narrator and is told through the voices of those interviewed. Viewers also hear announcers from network game broadcasts and sound bites from old interviews and news conferences.
- In his interview for the film, Johnson recalled meeting with Foote after Miami's January 1987 Fiesta Bowl loss to Penn State, when the players were criticized for flying to the game wearing fatigues.

"I said [to Foote], 'What about a contract extension?'" Johnson said. "He said, 'No, we can't do a

new contract, not with how the team conducted itself.'

``I can't say on camera the words I said to President Foote, and I stormed out of the room and slammed the door. I told Sam Jankovich, `Settle this contract. I'm out of here. I can't work for a man like this.' . . . As it turned out, we did a new contract."''

- Corben said Michael Irvin (the final person interviewed), Johnson and Schnellenberger provided some of the best material: ``Howard leaving the program -- when you hear him tell it, I get chilled or misty eyed every time."''
- Schnellenberger explains how he would intentionally leave his pipe in the home of some recruits so he would have an excuse to come back. Excited, Melvin Bratton took the pipe with him to Miami Northwestern High.

PROMINENT NAMES

• Bratton, Alonzo Highsmith, Don Bailey Jr., Art Kehoe, Brett Perriman, Bennie Blades, Robert Bailey, Steve Walsh, Carlos Huerta, Lamar Thomas, Bernie Kosar, Jeremy Shockey and Jankovich are among others with multiple appearances in the film. Vinny Testaverde and Warren Sapp declined to be interviewed, Corben said.

Bratton detailed how he and Highsmith called Oklahoma's Brian Bosworth at the Fontainebleau to wake him up before a UM-Oklahoma game and inform him ``we're going to kick your [butt]."

- Larry Coker was the most prominent person interviewed who didn't make the cut. ``Originally, we had delusions of grandeur that we would somehow do the 2001-02 championship," Corben said. ``We wound up not going that far."''
- Corben and Spellman obtained rare footage from the controversial steak fry before the 1987 Fiesta Bowl, when UM players said they were insulted by Penn State players' jokes. Viewers see Brown asking, ``Did the Japanese sit down and have dinner [at] Pearl Harbor before they bombed them?"''
- The end of the film covers the program's brief decline in the mid-1990s, with video of last year's Orange Bowl demolition.

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