



Laramie Movie Scope: Flint Star: The Motion Picture

Flint Michigan's high-flying basketball legacy

by **Robert Roten**, Film Critic

March 28, 2004 -- "Flint Star: The Motion Picture" is a heartfelt documentary about the awesome basketball heritage of the small city of Flint, Michigan. The story is universal enough, though, that it could be about any town in America and how the people who live there are so very proud of their basketball, baseball and football heroes, past and present. More than that, however, it is also a story about the tragic loss of lives and careers due to violence and drugs that go hand in hand with the collapse of the Flint economy. Basketball is seen by many youths as the only way out of this economic wasteland. I saw the "uncut street version" of this film on DVD. It is an entertaining film, especially if you happen to love basketball.

This film picks up years after Michael Moore's great documentary "Roger and Me" detailed the economic collapse of Flint when General Motors closed the automobile plant in Flint which had been the main source of high-paying jobs. Flint had always been a basketball powerhouse. The economic collapse did not change this, but it did make success in basketball more urgent for those seeking a better life. For the best, the goal is the NBA and instant millionaire status. For others, it is a full-ride basketball college scholarship and a chance at a career elsewhere. Some find basketball careers in Europe. Young girls dream of playing in the WNBA. One thing that hurt basketball in the area, according to some coaches, was the end of the local community schools program that kept the gymnasiums open for players late into the night.

The stream of talent from this small city (population about 125,000) is amazing. Among the NBA players from Flint mentioned in the film are Glen Rice, Eddie Johnson, Trent Tucker (some people in the film said Trent's cousin, Fred was an even better player), Justus Thigpen, Charlie Bell, Mateen Cleaves, Wayman Britt, Demetrius Calip, Terry Furlow, Jeff Grayer, Daryl Johnson, Ben Kelso and Roy Marble. Flint natives also claim NBA star Latrell Sprewell as one of their own. In addition, the city turned out some NFL players, too, like Rick Leach and Daryl Turner. The city turned out even more players who went on to become major basketball stars in college. Some, like Cleaves, Bell and Calip, went on to win NCAA basketball championships.

In some cases, there are interviews with these players in the film, such as Eddie Johnson, Mateen Cleaves and Charlie Bell, but more often we see coaches, former coaches and ordinary basketball fans reminiscing about these former high school stars who went on to greater things, or passed into legend. One crusty fan said, "Damn fool-ass kids. Players in the day (the present) aren't crap compared to what they was back in the day (the past)." Everybody who has ever talked sports with anyone has heard this comment from old-timers about how kids today aren't as good as the kids years ago. Even former NBA star Justus Thigpen talks this way in the film, saying basketball players today are too specialized. He said players from his day would have "run them off the court," speaking of today's players. It isn't a black thing or a Flint thing, it is something that just about every sports fan says at some point in his life about the sorry state of today's youth, and they've been saying that for a thousand years.

One of the more colorful characters to appear in the film is John Hogan, a Flint basketball coach. A very enthusiastic talker, Hogan uses a lot of large, vigorous gestures and body language to make his points, while roaming around the gymnasium with great energy. While talking about great women athletes of Flint, he waves his arms in huge arcs (like the "safe" sign that umpires use in baseball) while exclaiming "Ain't no question! It ain't no question!" -- that Linnel Jones McKinney was the best woman basketball player ever from Flint. Other top women's players from Flint include Tonya Edwards, Judy Tucker, Pam McGee, Paula McGee and Deanna Nolan. Other colorful characters appear in the film as well.

Besides the interviews there is a lot of basketball in the film and a lot of music of the rap, hip-hop and soul variety from Aivee Squad with underground tracks and unreleased tracks from Duce-O, T-Hen, Patience and Sanphanee. The DVD has 42 minutes of extra material with some interviews and a lot of music and basketball game footage. One of the bonus cuts is a soulful version of the national anthem performed by Lia Mack (DMG records). This "uncut street version" of the film has a lot of profanity in it, and that includes the music. There is no violence and no sex in the film, however. The game footage consists mainly of a lot of dunk shots, with a few blocks, steals, passes and long jumpers for good measure. In a couple of basketball game scenes some young kids take off from a distance of about 10 feet from the basket and soar to the hoop for stuff shots. The skill level is very high in these games, even among the small kids. In fact, some scenes of the youngest kids playing basketball are the most entertaining scenes in the film.

One of the interviews in the film with Mateen Cleaves illuminates both the highs and lows of a Flint star returning to his home town. Cleaves was an NBA star at the time of the interview and a recent NCAA champion. He talked about his personal work ethic and how he planned to stay in the pros as long as possible to amass a fortune. He would soon be out of the NBA, however (he's back in right now on a 10-day contract with the Cleveland Cavaliers). He also mourned the death of his brother, Herbert "Sluggo" Cleaves, Jr., killed at the age of 27 in Flint, the victim of a drive-by shooting. In fact, Michael Moore's Academy Award-winning film "Bowling for Columbine" is dedicated to Herbert Cleaves. In his filmed interview in Flint Star, Cleaves said "it is hard" to bear the death of his brother, a gifted scholar and athlete. In more than one way, his brother's death had pulled the NBA star back to Flint. Cleaves said he had tried to put his brother's death out of his mind with hard work, but it haunts him still. Escaping the ghetto is hard, even for the most dedicated and gifted of athletes.

NBA star Eddie Johnson talked about how people are always asking him for money, knowing that he has a huge NBA contract. He said that people don't understand that a \$30 million contract shrinks a lot after taxes and NBA-lifestyle-sized living expenses are subtracted. Other former NBA stars and their Flint fans talk frankly in the film about the need to give something back to the community. Indeed, Flint is hurting. Its population is shrinking, schools are closing. The unemployment rate and crime rate are both high. Some people in the film talk about how basketball is the only way out of the poverty trap. Others are optimistic that things will turn around in Flint. "Look what we're doing now with nothing," one optimist says in the film. He adds that the basketball will be even better when the economy picks up again.

Despite the shrinking population, high unemployment and high crime rates, Flint residents are very proud of their sports stars, and their gritty determination to succeed against all odds. Local residents, who call themselves "Flintstones," call this work ethic "grinding." The sports stars talk about the grind of getting down to the gym early in the morning to shoot several hundred jump shots every day. To them, basketball is a job. They proudly display their Flint tattoos. The director of the film, Marcus G. Davenport, did a lot of grinding of his own to get this film done. He self-financed the film on a teacher's salary and credit cards. He and his partner, Anthony R. Barnes did all of the editing, directing, shooting, production, and distribution of the film themselves. Davenport is president and CEO of Big Thangs Inc., which began with a comedy film project at Michigan State University in 1998. Davenport is an eighth-

grade language arts teacher in Detroit.

While the photography is decent in the film, the sound quality is sometimes lacking. Background noise sometimes almost drowns out the person you are trying to hear. A large number of captions are used in the film to let you know who is speaking, and to convey other information. Sometimes the captions can be read and sometimes they're unreadable because they run almost completely off the bottom, or off the left side of the screen, leaving only parts of the lettering visible. The DVD has no subtitles. That would have been a useful feature. The DVD does have a chapter menu and an extra features menu which has its own chapter menu. The credits are not on the regular menu, however, they are on the extra features chapter menu. The credits are unusual in that they run in two columns connected by a dotted line. Sometimes the two columns relate to each other and sometimes they don't. The letters also pulsate, which makes them harder to read. The first thing in the credits is a special thanks to God, gotta love that.

The main feature on the DVD is 90 minutes long, the bonus features total another 42 minutes. In addition to the interviews, music and game footage in the bonus package, there are also some video diary entries from the film's director during the grind of making this movie. Davenport was operating on about four hours sleep at times, according to the diaries, which show a lot of emotional highs and lows. Some of the scenes were filmed in Davenport's car, which sported a bullet hole. Davenport says in the diaries that this film is his way of giving something back to Flint. All the images are full-screen. Evidently this feature was shot on video. Sound is Dolby (tm) two-channel sound. This film rates a B. Ordering information is below.

This film can be ordered direct from the [Big Thangs Inc. web site](#), or by calling toll-free 1-888-478-7153 (24hrs) or by mail: Big Thangs Inc., P.O. BOX 14824, Detroit, MI. 48214. The film costs \$19.99.



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Back to the [Laramie Movie Scope](#) index.



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