

REVIEW ESSAY

THE “MIGHTY MACS”: WOMEN’S BASKETBALL IN CHESTER COUNTY

O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs. By Julie Byrne. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. 291 pp.

The Mighty Macs. Directed by Tim Chambers. Produced by John Chambers, Pat Croce, and Vince Curran. Quaker Media, October 21, 2011. 99 mins.

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In October 2011 the feature film *The Mighty Macs* opened nationwide to rave reviews. The movie had already won several awards, including Best Feature and Audience Award at the John Paul II International Film Festival and Best Drama at the International Family Film Festival. *The Mighty Macs* is based on a true story, one recounted in Julie Byrne’s *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*. The Chester County college, founded in 1920, was the smallest college to win a national championship, with only about 400 students enrolled in 1972 (and approximately 3,800 in 2012).

Byrne’s monograph focuses on the relationship between basketball and Catholic women at Immaculata from the 1930s

until the late 1970s. She used oral history interviews, questionnaires, correspondence, unpublished memoirs completed by and with former basketball players, the college newspaper (*The Immaculatan*), Philadelphia area newspapers (particularly the *Evening Bulletin* and *Inquirer*), and monographs on sports history, women's history, and religious history to tell the story of the importance of basketball to the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and Immaculata students from the 1930s to the 1970s.

According to Byrne, Immaculata's mission as an affordable college for working-class Catholic families led the college to be an attractive higher education option for girls from immigrant and post-immigrant families from the Philadelphia area. Philadelphia was a hotbed for girls' varsity sports, and Philadelphia-area Catholic high school leagues and Catholic Youth Organizations had sports for both genders. Intercollegiate competition was the first time the Mighty Macs competed against players of different faiths and races, and they considered their opponents from public universities to be "hired guns whose grades and scholarships depended on court success, while they themselves were purists who played the game merely for pleasure" (63). In addition, the sport provided players with the opportunity to travel beyond the local community, especially when the team participated in national tournaments in the 1970s.

Throughout the book, Byrne places women's basketball at Immaculata in the context of Catholic teachings and practices. Immaculata's basketball players, according to Byrne, saw themselves as Catholics first and athletes second; "making the team . . . meant making their identities as Catholic young women" (54). Although the Mighty Macs challenged established views of femininity with their athletic prowess, they did not consider themselves to be feminists, despite their success coinciding with the passage and implementation of Title IX. After all, despite their athleticism, the players in Byrne's book embodied the modesty of womanhood, particularly in their uniforms (layers with stockings, corduroy tunics, blouses, and skirts), and they never changed or showered together, traveling to and from games wearing their uniforms.

The film *The Mighty Macs* focuses on one season in Byrne's book—the 1972 championship season. Filmed on location in southeastern Pennsylvania, the movie incorporates buildings from present-day Immaculata University, The Hill School in Pottstown, the basement gym at St. Colman Roman Catholic Church in Ardmore (which served as the dilapidated practice gym), and Hollinger Field House at West Chester University. The 1971–72

season (which culminated in the first national championship) was the first time the Division of Girls' and Women's Sports (DGWS), forerunner of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW), permitted teams to play full-court, five-player men's rules. The coaches at West Chester had full-court practices while Cathy Rush played there, so she was familiar with the necessity of players building stamina in the practices. *The Mighty Macs* focuses on the challenges Cathy Rush faced, from recruiting a team to finding a suitable practice facility to arranging a gym for playing home games.

The film is based on a true story, yet at the same time it takes liberties with the facts and recollections in *O God of Players*. The only "real" characters in the movie are Cathy Rush (Carla Gugino) and her husband, Ed (David Boreanaz), an NBA referee. College President Sister Mary of Lourdes McDevitt, a Mighty Macs player in the late 1930s, becomes Mother St. John (Ellen Burstyn), who quietly supports the team yet struggles with the financial challenges faced by the college. The character of Sister Sunday (Marley Shelton), Rush's assistant coach in the film, was fictional but represented the religious community's support for the basketball team. Star player Trish Sharkey (Katie Hayek) is modeled after Theresa Shank Grentz, who also occasionally hitchhiked to campus. Other players in the film represent members of the 1971–72 squad, but their personal stories were embellished to provide more drama.

Inaccuracies also occur in the film's portrayal of the trip to the national tournament. According to Byrne, Sister Mary of Lourdes persuaded each trustee to cover the cost of sending one player, and local businesses were encouraged to contribute. Players sold toothbrushes to finance the trip to Illinois (not hand lotion, as portrayed in the film). Only eight players and one coach traveled, not the entire team (and Cathy Rush did not travel wearing a nun's habit). The film did incorporate the bucket brigade that was started by Rene Muth's family, but instead of players' families it was nuns who banged wooden dowels on the metal buckets.

At the end of the film, photos of some of the "real" Mighty Macs, including future championship women's college basketball coaches Theresa Shank Grentz and Marianne Crawford Stanley, are shown, with descriptions of their post-Immaculata achievements. Many of the former players have cameos in the film (nuns in a pew when Cathy Rush passes out a flyer announcing basketball tryouts), as do Cathy and Ed Rush.

Overall, *The Mighty Macs* was a great movie, and you do not have to be a sports fan to enjoy it. Those of us who remember Volkswagen buses, rotary telephones, plaid sports coats with striped shirts, and Converse sneakers will appreciate the attention to detail. Tim Chambers has succeeded in telling a story that rivals *Hoosiers*, *Miracle*, and *Rudy* as inspirational movies that the entire family can enjoy—and one that, despite the inaccuracies, effectively portrays the importance of basketball to the Immaculata community that Byrne describes in *O God of Players*.