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‘A Most Beautiful Thing’ documentary on West Side high school rowers is truly beautiful

Amazing film follows the pioneering Manley High crew team as they reunite — and row again.

By Richard Roeper | Jul 30, 2020, 5:08pm CDT



The men of the Manley Career Academy High School rowing team reunite in Oakland, 20 years after their introduction to the sport. | 50 Eggs Films

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The question is, *When was the first time you saw somebody die?* And for the members of the 1990s Manley High School rowing team (that's right), the answer is: 10. Ten years old, or maybe 11.

Not all American childhoods are the same. We know that. We see evidence of that every day, perhaps now more than ever. But as we learn in Mary Mazzio's uplifting and inspirational and just plain cool documentary "A Most Beautiful Thing," not all American rowing teams are born in prep schools on the East Coast, and not all rowers look like the Winklevoss twins (who are among the famous executive producers of this film, along with Dwyane Wade, Grant Hill and Chaz Ebert).

Narrated by Chicago's (and the world's) Common, "A Most Beautiful Thing" tells the stories of Arshay Cooper, Alvin Ross, Malcolm Hawkins, Preston Grandberry and Ray Hawkins Jr., who all grew up on the West Side of Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s and attended Manley Career Academy High School in the East Garfield Park neighborhood. (Director Mazzio, a former Olympic rower, based the film on Cooper's memoir.) Arriving at school one day, they were surprised to see a beautiful and quite incongruous boat — along with an invitation to get some free pizza and learn about the sport of rowing.

'A Most Beautiful Thing'



50 Eggs Films presents a documentary directed by Mary Mazzio. No MPAA rating (recommended for viewers 16 and up). Running time: 95 minutes. Premieres Friday on Xfinity on Demand and Sept. 1 on Peacock.

Forming a crew team was the brainchild of Ken Alpart, a former rower for Penn and a Chicago trading exec, and despite initial skepticism from Cooper et al., they formed the country's first African American high school rowing team. Spoiler alert: As the men recount in funny, frank and self-deprecating interviews, they didn't win any championships, but they forged a lifelong bond as teammates — and 20 years later, at a

funeral service for one of their coaches from back in the day, they decide to get the band back together and compete in the Chicago Sprints in the Lincoln Park Lagoon.

The men are older and heavier. (Who isn't?) There are success stories — one started a moving business, another became a licensed barber — but the film doesn't sugarcoat the fact that two of them have been incarcerated. The training sequences (and for that matter, most of the film itself) are like something straight out of a Disney sports movie, and the story becomes even more amazing and incredible when Cooper suggests they invite members of the Chicago Police Department, nearly all of them white, to row with them.

Given what's happening in the city and in the country these days, the scenes of the cops and the original Manley rowing crew working together, sharing laughs, bonding and rooting for one another are particularly poignant. We can feel our hearts hurting and soaring at the same time.