



GAME PLAN

# THE GREAT ESCAPE

A HEARTENING, TIMELY DOCUMENTARY REVISITS AN ALL-BLACK HIGH SCHOOL ROWING CLUB FROM CHICAGO'S BRUTAL WEST SIDE

BY MARK BECHTEL

## WATCH



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**H**IGH SCHOOL kids from inner-city Chicago in the 1990s, trying to navigate a landscape filled with drugs and violence, using sports as a way to (hopefully) illuminate their path out. It's hard to watch *A Most Beautiful Thing* and not think of another similarly affecting documentary: *Hoop Dreams*. But while the latter focused on a sport long associated with the Black experience, the former has at its heart one of the whitest activities imaginable: rowing.

*A Beautiful Thing* is based on the 2015 memoir of Arshay Cooper (above), which is being rereleased to coincide with the film. One day in 1998, as a student at Manley High, he walked into the lunchroom and saw a rowing shell. Behind it was a TV playing a clip of a crew race. Cooper and his friends didn't know what to make of the footage. "All I see in the boat are white guys on the water," said one student. "I didn't even know what rowing was."

"We don't even swim," exclaimed Cooper.

The next day the boat was there again, only this time there was pizza. That got the kids' attention.

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Before long, they were members of the Manley High rowing club, the first all-Black high school crew team in the U.S. (and likely the first with a coxswain named Pookie G).

The boat was there because of Ken Alpart, an "intense, Bernie Sanders-looking dude," in the words of Cooper. A former rower, Alpart was intent on bringing the sport to a wider audience. For the first 45 minutes of the movie, director Mary Mazzio, a former Olympic rower, movingly re-creates the team's experience. "It was dangerous being in a gang in the West Side," says Preston Granbury. "But I honestly think it was more dangerous *not* being in a gang in the West Side." Instead of falling into the gang life, the rowers found the bond they were missing on the water.

Originally meant to be a retrospective, the movie shifts halfway through. After the funeral of one of their coaches, who died after filming started, the guys get together at a barber shop ("the Black man's country club," as Cooper puts it) and decide to get back on the water. Their journey takes yet another turn when Cooper invites four members of the Chicago Police Department to train, and ultimately race, with them. "I thought, You know what? The Black man's story is not just growing up on the West Side and having a disconnect between different communities," Cooper said

recently. "It's also the disconnect with the police. I want to talk about that."

The action with the cops was filmed in 2019, and Mazzio delivered her final cut in March, before the pandemic began and George Floyd was killed. "There's really been an awakening of those that live in the world of privilege," says Mazzio. "And there is no more privileged sport than the sport of rowing. So for our own [rowing] community to have our Arshay right in the middle of what's happening has been shockingly profound."

Since the release of his book, Cooper, a chef, has done outreach for U.S. Rowing, proselytizing to kids from backgrounds similar to his. The film—narrated by Common with Grant Hill and Dwyane Wade among its producers—can only help raise his visibility.

But that's not the sole reason Cooper got involved in the film. He also wanted to give many of the rowers' parents a chance to understand what occupied so much of their sons' time two decades ago. Some were working two jobs, some were battling addiction, and they never got to see their kids row.

Twenty years later, those kids are now men—men who have endured the most trying of circumstances. As they hit the water in one last quest for the medals that eluded them as high schoolers, it's hard not to cheer along with their parents. □



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