

'Running Brave' about pride, prejudice

By Dan Bloom

Special to Tundra Times

"Running Brave" is a film about pride, prejudice, ambition and love. And like Chariots of Fire, it is about running. In this case, the come-from-behind 1964 Tokyo Olympic triumph of Sioux Indian runner Billy Mills in the 10,000 meter race.

A bronzed Robby Benson plays Billy Mills, from his early days in high school to his young adulthood at Kansas University, in the Marine Corps, and at the Olympics. It is a winning, sympathetic performance by Benson, and Pat Hingle as his college track coach puts in a dynamic performance as well. Claudia Cron stars as Billy Mills' girlfriend and wife.

The supporting cast is made up largely of Indian actors from Canada and America and it is a pleasure to see real Indians playing real Indians, instead of the usual stereotyped roles that Indian people have customarily been given in Hollywood.

"Running Brave" operates on two levels.

On one level, it is pure cinema: photography, musical score and all. In fact, the music by Mike Post works very nicely against the images we see on the screen. Produced by Ira Englander and financed by a Canadian Indian tribe in Alberta, Canada, "Running Brave" moves fluidly from scene to scene, telling a moving and inspirational story culminating in an amazing Olympic victory by an unknown, unheralded Indian runner from South Dakota.

The other level of the film takes us into Indian country, into a world where Hollywood has rarely given convincing or authentic portrayals. In my opinion, "Running Brave" is a landmark film in the history of American cinema because its descriptions of Indian life in these United States are unburdened by the usual stereotypes of "Indians."

And for many white Americans, Running Brave will come as a gentle awakening to the realities of modern Indian life. We see the harshness of life on the reservation where Billy Mills was born, but we see the warmth and love there as well. We see the triumphs in Billy Mills' life, and we see the tragedies too. We see his dreams as well as his nightmares.

Robby Benson was Billy

Mills' personal choice to play his character in this movie that was many years in the making. Mills resisted selling his life story to Hollywood for fear that big studios would change the storyline to fit their own needs, but he finally found in producer Ira Englander a man he could trust and work with.

Part of the reason for making this film, aside from its cinematic appeal, especially with the 1984 Olympics in the wings, was to develop a role model hero for Indian youth in particular, and all minority youth in general. Because Running Brave is about bigotry as much as it is about running.

We have seen films about growing up Jewish, growing up Puerto Rican, growing up Irish, growing up Catholic, growing WASP, but here is the first American film to sensitively show the public what it is like to be an Indian in a white, white world.

Item: Billy Mills was not allowed to join a fraternity at college in Kansas because he was an Indian.

Item: One of his college track team-mates continuously teases and taunts Billy Mills for his "Indianness." (Billy responds finally, with his fists.)

But Billy Mills, in the long tradition of the American hero with a dream will not see his dream to someday run in the Olympics squashed by a racist society. His dream is to run as hard and fast as he can, and run he does. For his people. For himself. And for his brother Frank who committed suicide on the reservation after a long battle with depression and alcoholism.

Robby Benson adds just the right kind of humor to the Mills role. You can't help but laugh at some of the jokes (which have a unique Indian sense of humor to them) in the film. It is this combination of humor and tragedy and eventual Olympic victory that make of "Running Brave" a film for the entire family, and for all families, regardless of the color of their skin or the names of their tribes. "Running Brave" is one of the most emotionally involving films I have seen in a very long time.

It is a story that we have all seen before, but never with this particular flavor. Call it Indian flavor. Call it the flavor of our dreams. Call it excellent.