

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 14, 2009 at 12:26pm

'More Than a Game'

by Sr. Rose Pacatte



LeBron James (center) with St. Vincent-St. Mary's basketball team, as seen in "More Than a Game."
(Photos by Lionsgate)

Of active basketball stars, Kobe Bryant may have most name recognition, but 6-foot-8-inch LeBron James, the highest-paid player in the NBA, drafted out of high school by the Cleveland Cavaliers, has caught the popular imagination. Now, with *'More Than a Game,'* a new documentary by first-time director Kristopher Belman, we get to see inside the heart and soul of a basketball champion and the family and friends who made him who he is.

When Belman, a native of Akron, Ohio, was an undergraduate film school student at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles in 2002, he was required to make a 10-minute film for his production course. "I was committed to telling a story about my hometown," Belman told me in an interview. "During my research I read an article about these four African-American kids in Akron: LeBron James, Sian Cotton, James Dru Joyce III and Willie McGee -- 'The Fabulous Four.' What was so remarkable was this brief blurb saying that these boys, three of them from the inner city, had played together as kids and then chose to stay together for high school. Who does that??"

This prompted Belman to get in touch with St. Vincent-St. Mary High School. As a non-member of the press, Belman was given unusual access and began traveling and filming the team. They called him "Camera Man."

"I was impressed by their unique friendship after 10 minutes with them," he said. "It was such a refreshing surprise."

Belman's project became the nucleus of "More Than a Game," which was cowritten with Brad Hogan.



Coach Dru Joyce II recruited LeBron, Sian and Willie when they were in middle

school to be part of son Dru's traveling team, "the Shooting Stars." They practiced at the Salvation Army gym. In high school, former college coach Keith Dambrot trained "the Fighting Irish" hard for the first two years. The team won state and national championships in 2000 and 2001.

But then trouble started. Dambrot left suddenly for a college coaching position and Coach Dru replaced him. The guys developed an attitude. They came in second in the state championship in 2002. As seniors, the 2003 state and national championships drove the team.

The film shifts focus to Coach Dru Joyce, already a father figure to all these boys. He and his family were an anchor of stability for them during these years. His main goal was to make these boys into men of character by living an example of a consistent Christian life as a father, husband, coach. Willie Smith's older brother, Illya, who raised him from the age of 7, as well as Gloria James, LeBron's mother, are also featured in the film.

In an interview with my colleague Sr. Hosea Rupprecht, Coach Dru talked about the team's relationship with the media. "I told them, 'Stay focused. We have to control what we can control. We can control the basketball.' Everything outside of that we had no control over. If we took our eyes off of the basketball we could lose our focus. We appreciated the recognition from the media but we were built up fast and then brought down just as fast. We couldn't let ourselves get caught up in that but only to stay focused on what we could control."

Although this story could never be dull, one of the outstanding aspects of this documentary is the artistic 2½-D (distinct from 3-D) visual technique it uses to frame the characters and the narrative. "Keeping track of six characters, the four friends plus Romeo Travis and Coach Dru Joyce, was a challenge to me as a filmmaker. This effect streamlined the story," Belman said.

When I asked why the rest of the high school team was not even named, Belman said that he had interviewed all the players, but it got too crowded and didn't help the story. "As a documentarian," he said, "I had to remain true to my story: LeBron, this team of friends and Coach Dru."

Belman subtly weaves faith into the telling of the story, creating a gossamer-like context. "Faith is a huge theme in the film, really," said Belman, who is Catholic and attended Catholic schools. "This is true for Coach Dru in particular. He relied on his faith to fulfill his dream to be a coach. He was such an influence on this team, and for me, too. When things got tough in the making of this film, especially in the last five-

and-a-half years, I would call Coach Dru and he would tell me, 'God has taken this film so far for a reason. Keep going.' ?

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Basketball is more than a game, it's a dream factory. 'The one

thing I would say to the faith community,' Belman said, 'is that at the end this film is about dreams. Whether it was these boys chasing a dream or Coach Dru chasing his dream to coach rather than work in the corporate world, you surround yourself with good people who stay positive.'

Coach Dru expanded on this idea. 'During the whole thing, we were just living our lives. We never imagined that any of this could happen. What we hope that people take from this is that their dreams can come true. I truly believe that God gives each of us a dream. Whatever it is for you, pursue it. Through the good times and bad times, keep chasing after it. You can realize that dream. For us it happened through basketball.'

'More Than a Game' deals with the controversies, beginning with the fact that 'the Fabulous Four' seemed to desert the public high school for the mostly white private Catholic school. Dru, who was not very tall, made the decision to go to St. Vincent-St. Mary's because he knew he would have a chance to start; the other friends followed.

Later, Gloria James, known to be in financial difficulty, took out a loan to buy LeBron a Hummer in his senior year. The backlash from the media and fans was quick and fierce. Then LeBron was suspended from the last five games of his senior year for accepting two jerseys. He appealed and was reinstated on the basis of disproportionate punishment.

And, as they say, the rest is history.

Whether a documentary can succeed as a major theatrical release remains to be seen, but 'More Than a Game' is excellent filmmaking that entertains, compels and inspires.

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