

Gudjon Ragnarsson about RAISE THE BAR “I felt like walking into an NBA game”

If controversy is the mother of a good documentary, **RAISE THE BAR** is of good breeding, burdening you with sky high dilemmas. Whichever side you choose, you never know whether you have chosen well. **RAISE THE BAR** may disguise itself as a sports movie, but constantly tests your guilty conscience as we follow the development of an Icelandic girls' basketball team. Their training programme is intense, and they are led by an over-qualified coach who constantly raises the bar. This team is ready to change the world, but is the world ready for them?

How to start an interview when a film addresses a dozen topics, and you find them all equally intriguing? Probably by asking the most obvious question of them all...

What is this film about?

Gudjon Ragnarsson: It is about a young girls' basketball team that has the goal to change the paradigm in which girls are coached. As adults we

have the pre-assumption that they're young, they want to have fun, but with these girls, when they were about 10 years old, a lightbulb just went off in their head and they understood things weren't right: we're treated differently than the boys! Their coach Brynjar Karl Sigurðsson is a charismatic character. There are scenes in which he addresses them as if they were a group of CEO's, and the girls are listening and taking it in. Many children around the world are heavily involved with sports at a very young age. Some parents think of it as babysitting, but some don't. The movie is not about basketball, it's about a group of people trying to do something about a problem, not talking or whining about it, but actually doing something.

How much do you admire Brynjar?

Ragnarsson: I admire him for his experience, his dedication and I admire him as a father. For five years I have spent almost every day together with him (I knew that I had to be in the innermost circle to hold the camera

in someone's crying face) and I have never in my life seen a more intimate and beautiful relationship between a father and his children. They trust him implicitly. People who see him yelling during tournaments might think he is a terrible father, but the moment the game is whistled off he goes back to his normal self. It is all theatre to him.

When you gave him a platform, you knew what was coming?

Ragnarsson: Controversy! I knew it and he knew it too. That is what got me hooked on it.

You recognised it in him from the very beginning?

Ragnarsson: After I finished my studies in Los Angeles I was looking for a reason to go back to Iceland. That is when a friend back home sent me a text: 'I met a guy and I have to introduce you to him'. I took all my clothes and sold them at Goodwill; with those 300 \$ I bought a ticket to New York and asked my parents to get me a ticket back home. Three days later



my friend introduced me to Brynjar in his tiny office, and we sat down and talked for hours. How was it possible I never knew who this guy was? He had an amazing background as a basketball player and coach. When I called him a few days later, he didn't have time to talk - "I'm about to go to practice. I'm coaching my daughter and her friends." That didn't make sense. Wasn't he overqualified to coach seven-year-old girls? I went to see it, and my first reaction was that I was





witnessing something really wrong – he was yelling at them so loud. But they were running around, smiling. After practice everybody was just happy and cheerful. I thought this was the most interesting thing I had ever seen, and it needed to be documented. So I filmed 10 practises over the course of half a year, not knowing what I was going to do with it – documentaries hadn't even entered my mind as of me making them. Then I went to film school in Iceland. There was a documentary course and I told my teacher I had hours of footage of this crazy coach and his team. When he watched it, he said: *"You're lucky, you don't have to pick a project, you*

already have one."

The result was a student short film?

Ragnarsson: It went to a festival and got so much controversy that I had to take it off the internet because there were people "losing their shit" over it. I sent it to producer Margrét Jónasdóttir, and she liked it; this could become a small, local production with an initial €20,000 budget. But then I filmed them when they put on their pink hoodies to protest against gender inequality in sports, and the day after the reaction was so harsh! They were lynched for it. That moment I knew this was an international story and the budget went from €20,000 to

€350,000.

Did you realise there was a danger in giving Brynjar a forum? He might turn into a kind of guru for the kids working with him.

Ragnarsson: For me, there is nothing in the film that endangers anyone, but when it's taken out of context... Oh boy! There were harsh moments when he was really hard on them, that I had to take out of the film, because they demanded too much explanation. This was a difficult film to edit, but the final version puts out a lot of good questions and hopefully starts a healthy discussion. The scene in which he tells them not to just follow their friends, is an incredible lesson that I would have loved to hear at that age. He says: there are times I will force you to criticise everything that I'm saying, as I don't want you to become robots.

Parents react in different ways to his methods.

Ragnarsson: Dealing with the parents was one of the biggest obstacles for me. I also had very hostile interactions with parents on other teams. That was the most traumatic aspect, when they came up to me and said nasty things, like how I seemed to enjoy filming young girls. Sports tour-

naments can bring out the worst in people, especially when their kid is losing a game. At one time I was even banned from every tournament in Iceland. I can understand one aspect of it, me filming those kids and nobody knows my true intentions, but those were difficult moments.

Some parents are shocked by the language Brynjar is using. What shocked me more is how he motivates girls by making them trash talk to each other during practice.

Ragnarsson: You don't have to teach this to boys, they obviously have it in their nerve system. But he wanted to find out if these little girls had it in them too, and they did, although he told them not to do it in a game. When Brynjar was invited to a panorama show on Icelandic TV, the interviewer asked him: *"Do you think every coach in Iceland should use your methods?"* Of course not! He has been developing them for 31 years. You can't screw around with them if you don't know what you're doing.

Already when watching the opening scenes, I was totally captivated by the intensity that you read on these girls' faces.

Ragnarsson: The first practice I watched in, I felt like walking into an



NBA game; there was electricity in the air. They are playing for different reasons than any other kids I've seen in sports. They aren't doing it to chase fame and fortune. They do it for themselves. Making this film made me lose all interest in professional sports. Watching billionaires play football, I don't get anything out of it. The stakes are too low; they're being paid millions to tighten their shoes. But these girls have a new team now, and recruited a bunch of new players. Some of them are living far away, driving 1,5 hours every day to come to practice in a run-down facility in the countryside, because the federation doesn't grant them a venue for training. Isn't that the perfect Hollywood underdog story?

A similar intensity Brynjar invests in this fight about girls competing with boys. It is the moment in the film when his profile changes. He is not just a maniac basketball coach, he is someone who fights with a huge intensity for the things that he believes in.

Ragnarsson: I wanted people to be shocked at first, and then they get to know him during the film and make their own assumption, after they've heard his speech: *"We'll have nail polish, red lipstick, and we'll be dressed in*



pink, and we're gonna kick these boys' butts." He hates the system!

Basketball doesn't seem the easiest sport to capture on camera.

Ragnarsson: To me that was a thing I hit myself in the head with. I had to bring in a professional photographer to do the beauty shots. But I decided very early on that with the cheap equipment that I had, I would just focus on the girls, the bench, the locker rooms... To me the games and how they went, that isn't the part of the story I wanted to tell. That's why almost every frame is a close-up, from chest to forehead. I told every cinematographer working with me: when-

ever you have the chance, stay close. The result doesn't look perfect but it feels personal, rough and in your face, and I wanted it to be like that.

Imagine a bunch of kids in sports clubs coming to the cinema, what should they take home after the screening?

Ragnarsson: The idea to be critical thinkers about what you want to take with you from sports. There is a scene that puts it all in one box, when Tanya says: *"When I'll stop playing, the basketball isn't going to matter anymore, it is what I take with me from it."* I've talked with lots of women who have devoted their entire lives to the world

of sports, and came out of it as broken people. They've been stepped on, they've been treated badly as women in very subtle ways. It has always been different for men, and it still is. I'm coloured with years of listening to Brynjar, but a lot of the things he says are true. My instinct as a person is not to go to see women compete – I'm not afraid to admit it – but if I'd find a girls' team that makes a statement like *"we're going to scratch their eyes out and we're going to win this game"* I might want to go see that game and pay for it. Because I know they are not there for the pay cheque. They're paying with their own sweat, tears and blood. Or maybe not the blood.

You wish!

Ragnarsson: I do!

–
Gert Hermans