

Camiel Schouwenaar about BIGMAN “The harder he tries, the harder he falls”

Dylan and Youssef are best friends, and football is all they dream about. When Dylan ends up in a wheelchair due to an accident, he must come to terms with his new life. His dad – and former coach – wants him to accept his situation and tries to keep football from his life, but Dylan is determined to play again. Will Youssef choose to ditch or support him?

A festival edition without a new football film would be unthinkable. More than any other sport, football seems to be the ultimate backdrop for telling stories about brave young people. But...

Camiel Schouwenaar: ... BIGMAN is not a typical sports film with fixed formula scenes about winning or losing. The story is inspired by Job Tichelman's youth, our scriptwriter who has a disability. He comes from a football crazy family, his two brothers were fanatic players. As a child he loved the game so much and wanted to join them. Determined as he was, he taught himself to play football with

his hands, upside down in his wheelchair. He is the only person I know who can do this; it is so exhausting to practise.

The energy of the football scenes on the square and in the streets is overwhelming. These boys can't live without football!

Schouwenaar: We wanted to open the film with a dynamic vibe, as a proof of Dylan's carefree life. He enjoys playing football with friends, and discussing football with dad. The joy that football brings is the motor behind our story. When ending up in a wheelchair, the only thing Dylan wants is to play football with Youssef again. Our story is set in the streets of Rotterdam, a harbour city. People have a typical saying there: *“Act, don't talk”*. That's also Dylan's spirit.

What was the biggest challenge for actor Maik Cillekes? Doing the football scenes or riding the wheelchair?

Maik Cillekes: Playing football in a wheelchair was hard. I had to use muscles that I didn't know I had. My whole



body was aching.

Schouwenaar: The football scenes for sure. Maik is not exactly a superb football talent. I knew that with the right shots, choreography and editing, we could make the audience believe in his talent. But Maik's real talent is in his passion for wheels. He is a cyclist; he knows a million tricks on his bike. In our very first wheelchair rehearsal he immediately did a wheelie! He had such fun learning how to master all the skills and tricks. It is a tough physical role to play, with stunts, football, fighting... so we needed a sportive actor. Job taught him how to control the vehicle, going fast, climbing in and

out...

Job Tichelman: We practised all summer long, every week I took him to a gym. Maik appeared to be a natural talent: he is very skillful at handling the wheels and playing football upside down in his wheelchair. As a kid it took me years to get there.

Dylan's reactions of frustration and anger are not exactly charming, but deeply human.

Schouwenaar: Job and I created a universal story; both children and adults can relate to loss and failure, and how it leads to anger and frustration. And everybody wishes for Dylan to walk



again. When things turn out differently, he doesn't give up. His tenacious nature is what everybody envies him for. In the first drafts of the script Dylan was more frustrated, in a way that you could easily dislike him. We changed some scenes and made him the stubborn, tempered character that you still can identify with. The moment I casted Maik, I knew this was no longer an issue; Maik is a strong individual, but a sweet guy as well.

What's the role of the "dream character" appearing in Dylan's daydreams?

Schouwenaar: One of my inspirations was the film *LOOKING FOR ERIC*, in

which footballer Eric Cantona simply appears in the life of a troubled postman. We did the same with the famous YouTube street footballer Touzani. His solidarity is unconditional. When Dylan is down, the famous Touzani is encouraging him to fight back. He feels true and real, as if he was a close friend. We didn't want to make him a mythical figure, just someone helping a boy in need. Until this imaginary friend at some point shows up as a real person.

After every ray of hope comes another disappointment for Dylan, time after time again. Is that the story of this film, or simply the sto-

ry of life?

Schouwenaar: The story of our film. Some people have to face a lot of misfortune, others don't. We made a film about a boy who has a hard time accepting his disability. The harder he tries, the harder he falls. Thus we are telling a story of strong will, independence and empowerment. If you want something, go for it. Every attempt brings Dylan closer to embracing his new life.

Parents getting over involved with the sports careers of their kids is a well known phenomenon. I guess you didn't have to look far for inspiration.

Schouwenaar: Youth football culture is immensely popular in the Netherlands. Every village has its team and on Saturdays all parents encourage their children on the pitch, like a family tradition. For many years I did the same for my sons. This was a huge inspiration for the film indeed.

The helplessness of Dylan's parents is painful to watch. There simply isn't a ready-made codebook on how to deal with such situations.

Schouwenaar: Everybody might respond to it differently. When your child gets disabled, the natural response is to protect and nurse it. But

some parents don't know how. We show both sides of the coin through Dylan's caring mother and his clumsy father. Despite being in a wheelchair, Job's parents let him play outside like all other boys. If parents want to see their children growing up as happy self-confident individuals, stop overprotecting them.

Tichelman: I sometimes came home with bleeding knees after falling from my wheelchair. My mother stuck a band aid on the wound and I went out on the street again. My parents knew I wanted to be treated like a normal kid, and that is how they raised me. They gave me the space to experiment and get hurt; I even broke my legs three times. I was all the time doing crazy stuff.

—
Gert Hermans