

HOOSIERS

Directed by David Anspaugh
Produced by Carter De Haven and Angelo Pizzo
Distributed by Orion Pictures
Released in 1986

Subplots generate a strange dichotomy. They beckon us to look inward, where characterization contributes to verisimilitude, contextually. A fictional world is enlivened by strong characterization, and by details of motivation and background, specific to each character, a story can generate its own internal logic. That's when it really takes off.

If the audience is willing to invest more in the characters (that probability increases if character is shown rather than explained), the characters' struggles become the struggles of the audience, now living vicariously in the story. The audience aspires to meet the same challenges facing the characters (if only as involved onlookers). The strange dichotomy arises when subplots become so detailed that the struggle at the center of the story is relegated to secondary status and we're left with an ensemble film of divergent plot strands. If the characters of the subplots, each wrestling with his personal problems, share an overriding goal, then character is enriched to the benefit of the Paramount Struggle. Excessive subplotting is less a failure to refine the cut than it is a failure to refine the script; define a goal shared by all characters and subplots won't get in the way.

Apart from the team, with its own flashes of conflict and character amplification, the subplots of *Hoosiers* are:

- Jimmy's decision to play ball or not, represented on one side by Miss Fleener, who hopes he'll abstain, and on the other by the vociferous townsfolk
- The burgeoning romance between Miss Fleener and Coach Dale
- Cletus's ill health
- George's desire to return as coach
- Shooter's struggle with alcohol, driven to temperance by his son and the coach

Do all these characters share the same overriding goal? Is the story about Coach Dale, the team, the town? Or is it all about Jimmy?

The climax of *Hoosiers* is undoubtedly the final basket of the State Finals, which Jimmy Chitwood drains as the clock runs out. The Huskers win, but the movie isn't about winning, just being the best (that you can be). This is the axiom Coach Dale gives voice to, just before the regionals; *Regardless of the score, if you play to your fullest potential, in my book we're going to be winners.* As caretaker for Jimmy, Miss Fleener discourages him from playing any more basketball, thinking he should instead focus his considerable powers of repetitious practice on studying for college. Coach Dale respects her opinion, yet he does value basketball as a self-evident avenue to greatness. It may be that Jimmy's first, best destiny is to be an astonishing basketballer of singular excellence. He has that kind of potential, and we can see by how often

he shoots hoops that his reputation as an indispensable player was secured by years of effort, alone. Jimmy has maximized his talents by relentlessly applying himself. Dedication and commitment are prerequisites for excellence; Coach Dale swears by them. Unlike his teammates, Jimmy doesn't need to have his brain battered with this precept. He learned it the hard way.

When this small school, from a hamlet disregarded by most state maps, is acclaimed, all of the townsfolk cheer right along. Their dedication to the team seems at first to be controlling and possessive, a spirit best delineated by the eloquent Miss Fleener, who has for years seen old men ruminate on the glory days when they were seventeen. That's not what Coach Dale wants. His behavior demonstrates a single-minded dedication to better himself in every way, all through life. But Miss Fleener only sees him as a failure, coaching in Hickory at the age of fifty. In a way she is right. Norman Dale's mission to excel was derailed by his very fervor. By punching his own player years ago he lost his chance to fulfill his potential, and retreated to the Navy.

The initially unlikable townsfolk cultivate sympathy as the film progresses. With the team winning, and the fans applauding rather than booing, if we're generous we could observe that they, too, only wanted the team to do its best, after all. The team is the finest expression of burgeoning manhood in Hickory. When they win, the town wins because Hickory thinks, *yeah, we made them what they are and they play for us, not just the school*. The town claims the team whether they're winning or losing. But they do want Jimmy Chitwood on that team. Again, generously, without Jimmy they're not as good as they can be, and, for that matter, without Coach Dale they're not as good as they can be. So the town rallies 'round both (a matter simplified by the fact that Jimmy won't play without Coach Dale).

They would not be state champs without Jimmy. His ultimatum allows Coach Dale to stay. His hot hand sparks a win streak that never stops. And his example of quiet excellence, for which he is revered by his teammates and the community, was all that could undermine Coach Dale's fixation on team play. Coach feels a team must function as one unit, no individual player more important than the other. But as the season progresses, Jimmy becomes their standard-bearer. In the final game, getting pummeled by South Bend, one of the players recommends Jimmy guard their most talented opponent. Jimmy obliges and saves his team from disaster. In the last time out Coach Dale opts for a picket fence with Jimmy as decoy. Critically, the other players don't like the idea. Jimmy says, "I'll make it," and Coach Dale cedes control. He kept them down for a long time, to prevent their regression back to selfish play. He reasoned that a team must function collectively to stand a chance of succeeding. The irony is rich: Getting Jimmy was not a must for Coach Dale. He was basically the only person in town who ignored him, focusing instead on the team he was given. But he inadvertently convinces Jimmy, perhaps through his very indifference, that Jimmy should play ball, and play for him alone. And it is Jimmy who spurs the team to greatness and ends up winning them the state championship.

All subplots tie into the team. The displaced coach, George, wants back in, but his style of play, all surface and no substance, will undermine the team and doom them before they start. But, like the rest of the town, he just wants what is best for the Huskers. Once they start winning, he quits complaining and cheers. Cletus's heart condition contributes to Norman Dale's isolation, for by losing Cletus he loses his stalwart intermediary. And the fact that the heart attack was triggered by the volatility he introduced to a game must lead Norman to recall the sad consequences of his irascible temperament.

Shooter is probably the most compelling character of the film. An aging drunk, he is haunted by a missed shot during his playing days. He has a keen mind for the game but, like the coach, is ostracized by the community. Mirroring his own rehabilitation and, perhaps, wanting to make amends for the many mistakes of his past, Coach Dale invites Shooter to join him as an assistant coach. And it is this decision which generates a petition for the coach's removal. Shooter proves indispensable, despite the hesitation of his embarrassed son. Slowly adopting the coach's vision, son embraces father, Shooter sobers up, and the future seems bright. Besides being a kind gesture, bringing Shooter on board sends the message loud and clear: *We're doing things my way, the way that I think is best for the team, and the rest of you can just eat it.*

Myra Fleener wants Jimmy off the team, articulating the skepticism that should accompany any discussion of sports as a serious enterprise. For it is only in a grand mission, by striving for something beyond his reach, that a man can begin to fathom his worth. If sport doesn't reach that lofty ambition, then it's nothing more than a systematized diversion with the suspicious whiff of exercise about it. Myra soon realizes, perhaps, that athletics are an avenue to plumb the depths of the divine imprint on Man.

Additionally, her personal interest in Coach Dale reflects his professional recovery, and their burgeoning romance is indicative of his thorough rehabilitation, including, the film implies, a growing interest in religious matters.

All along, Coach Dale wasn't badgering the boys for the sake of his own ego, but to foster an esprit-de-corps, forged by discipline. And it is here, in the last game, that the team spirit finds its critical expression, as they entrust their fate to Jimmy. Coach Dale, for the first time, lets his players decide what they want to do, and he, bowing to their judgment, gives Jimmy the ball, and Jimmy wins the game. Does this mean that Coach Dale's idea that no player is more important than another is proven wrong? Or does it reinforce his idea (since it is the other players who insist on Jimmy)? This is the rich enigma of *Hoosiers*. Coach Dale is right all along, and Coach Dale is wrong. The climax doesn't clarify, so we look to the denouement.

In the film's coda, we're shown a little boy shooting hoops in the old gym. We hear echoes from the past. First is Cletus, introducing Jimmy to the new coach. After that we hear Coach Dale exhorting and reflecting in a dialogue assemblage, highlights culminating with "I love you guys." Thus, the spirit of team play endures. A team's bond, fashioned in toilsome practice and pressure-packed buzzer-beaters, persists, transcending the strictures of time and distance, all through life, into the credits. And Jimmy Chitwood is the spirit of this team.

Being the hero of Indiana may be Jimmy's first, best destiny, and we've seen Norman Dale redeem himself by coaching Hickory to victory. Only a fatuous narrative would divulge

more. We leave the film suspended in the throes of triumph, a high achievement for any story. The Hickory Cornhuskers were the Indiana State Champs of 1952, and that's all we need to know, besides the fact that we wish we could be there, like Shooter would prefer sitting on the bench to hunching over a transistor radio in the hospital. The film is so compelling that a viewer can feel nostalgia for a time he never knew. It sets him on flights of wonder to chase the mysteries of a retreating past. If only we could see the Indiana of yore....

Well, compared to our subject, it would probably be a disappointment. Whatever small town team we'd follow, odds are they'd be stuck in a losing streak. Yes, the movie is based on a true story. But, though truth is stranger than fiction, it is also less exciting. Movies strip life of the mundane, but retain enough truth to inspire. So going back isn't necessary. *Hoosiers* is sufficient.