

## Interview with Jeremy Spear

*Fastpitch* is a story about how you play the game—and not just softball, either. Jeremy Spear, a first-time filmmaker, has created not just a winsome documentary about a down-at-heels sport, but a tale about being American now.

Fastpitch softball, a game played in small towns where the local factory sponsors it, is either dying or about due for a major commercial makeover. In *Fastpitch*, you can watch the old world (a Rustbowl team running on empty) confront the new (a Sunbelt team fueled by its sponsor's info-economy largesse).

And you can meet characters who really fill a screen. There's Shane, the star of a small town Ohio fastpitch team. By the way, he's a Maori from New Zealand, where fastpitch softball is a lot more popular than it is here and so has become recruiting territory. There's foulmouthed Bruce, who's still really mad that a shattered wrist kept him from pro baseball. There's Grandma, who babysits the players and marvels at the Lord's unpredictable ways.

And there's Jeremy, the multicultural (Chinese, German-Jewish, Austrian, and Polish) narrator and filmmaker. At Yale, he majored in art and baseball. When he wasn't drafted, he settled into the downtown art scene, making art for more than a decade. Then the ballplayer in him returned, taking the artist side of him in tow to record the adventure. Among the people who helped him make it happen were co-producer Michel Negroponte (*Jupiter's Wife*), editor Juliet Weber (*The West, Swimsuit 92*, and Oscar nominee *Daughter of the Bride*), and director of photography Elia Lyssy (*Silk Dreams*).

On the eve of the film's world premiere, Jeremy Spear talked with IFP about how and why he made his first movie.

*Why did you decide to make a film about softball, after establishing yourself in the downtown art world?*

I made art for 14 years after college, and I had a very split life, very committed to playing sports and then also making art in relative isolation. When I woke up one day and had this huge leap of faith that I was going to make a film. It made so much sense to me to be able to bridge this gap in my life that I don't know why it took me so long to figure it out.

*You sure made it easy for a non-sports person to get into the movie.*

My initial intent was to get people who didn't give a damn about sports to care. I have a neighbor in New York, a feminist conceptual artist, and I felt if I could get her to like this movie, or at least care about it, I would have succeeded.

*Don't you exaggerate your own naivete about the sport at the beginning, to help the exposition along?*

Actually, I didn't know much about fastpitch when I started. I found myself pursuing a level of sports competition that was very challenging, and that was what led me to play the sport.

*Was it complicated being the filmmaker and the ballplayer at the same time?*

I had no background in film or video, so at the start a two person crew, a sound and a camera guy, was pretty necessary. But as soon as I found myself a little more comfortable in the idea of having a second life in the midst of playing the sport, I bought a Sony VX1000 digital handcam. That was the smartest thing I did in some ways, because it allowed me easy access to people because it's a small camera. I ended up shooting about 30 percent of the film myself.

The simplicity of the camera was obviously a great help to me, but it also helped in one of the more unusual scenes, when I hand the camcorder to my coach in the graveyard. He spoke into the camera as if he were narrating the scene in front of him. That I think is a telling scene about my coach's comfort level with me coming into his town and playing ball for him. He overcame my initial distrust of what I thought the greater Midwest would be like and whether people would accept me, as a non-mainstream person.

*All the characters are marginalized in different ways.*

Yes, I'm more interested in the hopes and dreams of more fringe characters. Even in the context of sports, which has in our society a glamorous mainstream appeal, I've landed on this sport that is marginalized for many reasons. It's a throwback to the way sports even at the higher professional levels was played in the '30s, '40s and '50s. That's very far from most sports stories we're seeing today, with all the hoopla. This was more akin to where sports should be, in my mind.

*Fastpitch* draws a lot of different people for different reasons. That's what I found very exciting. It was a real smorgasbord of characters and dreams.

*How did you get such a highly qualified team to work with you in making the film?*

When I woke up with the idea, I started thinking about my background and the people I'd met in my life and I realized that through social or familial ties I'd met a lot of people in the film world. I called those resources very quickly. I called Christine Choy first, who was head of the NYU film school, and she had fiscal sponsorship. I raised money through private donations. It's a lot of little hits, and that was all new to me. But as soon as I was off and running I realized it was the right medium for me. I really felt connected in my activities in an incredibly fulfilling way.

Michel [Negroponte] was a real beacon to me. I was so fresh to this world, I didn't know where to turn, and I had very little clue about where the film might go. But every time I had a period of doubt, I would run something by Michel or he would coincidentally call me and tell me it was gonna hit a home run. Having him attached to the project certainly helped the profile.

*The film has a very clear structure, organized around the softball season. How much scripting went on?*

The weave of the story came out of an intuitive way of dealing with the subject matter. I'm a very detailed person, but at the same time when it comes to narrative I'm much more intuitive. I shot 180 hours of footage over two or three years. I logged every hour of footage and every interview and made notes on everything that stood out, whether it was B-roll shots that seemed poetic or scenes that revealed the strength of characters. When we finally got in the editing room, Juliet Weber, the editor, was really instrumental in helping me make some decisions. I think I was just too close to the material.

*Did you always think this would be a feature documentary?*

Yes, from the start. Early on some people pushed me towards ITVS, which was interested in a 56 minute version, and I had to say that to me it was a different film. When I finished it, I took a real gamble and committed to a 35 millimeter film print. I submitted it to Sundance, but it didn't get in. I have an inherent trust that the film will find its rightful place in the world, but not the way I might have imagined it.

I'm really looking to the film festival circuit as an opportunity to create some buzz for the film. It's going to world premiere at DoubleTake Doc Film Festival (April 6-8), and the IFP Independents Night showing, and Nashville Independent Film Festival. I'm hoping it's best positioned to have a limited theatrical run, and to a North American broadcast, either on commercial or public TV.

*Are you going to be making movies from now on?*

Making the film was a natural transition. My art work in the last two or three years prior to the film was becoming less formal and more personal. I even started to do a few works that dealt with my Asian identity and baseball, in some sculptural work. So the film became the succession of that thinking.

But it's been a long five years, and I draw the comparison to running a marathon race. A real marathoner will run another marathon but it's not gonna be the next morning. When this gets across the finish line I'll take a breather and do it again. Friends have really pushed the idea that I should do a fiction feature film, but I feel I have two or three docs in me.

I'll push this as long as I can push it. As Yogi Berra said, it's not over till it's over. When I feel I've done as much as I can with this film, I'll start the next film.

