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'Unrivaled' more than a football story

Oxford-based filmmaker documents 1899 team in new release

By JIMMY DURHAM

In an exceptional college football season, the University of the South's 1899 team made history by defeating 12 teams in just six weeks. "Unrivaled: Sewanee 1899," a documentary by Oxford-based filmmaker David Crews tells the team's story. It aired on Mississippi PBS on Sunday, Aug. 6, and will nationally debut on the WORLD channel on Sept. 16.

The film is also available for

streaming on PBS.org.

This captivating story follows the team of 21 players who traveled 2,500 miles to play five games in six days. In that remarkable season, only Auburn managed to score against them.

Founded in 1857, the University of the South turned to football in 1891 amidst financial struggles post-Civil War. Their 1899 season not only reinvigorated the college but also ensured its future.

The film blends interviews, re-en-

actments, and historical sources to narrate the saga of a team that played under different rules, with limited protective gear and no practice time between games. It also highlights African-American trainer Cal Burrows, an unsung hero from that victorious season.

David Crews, a Sewanee alum, initially had skepticism about the project, but deep research revealed a genuine tale of ambition and per-

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Battle Crews

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severance. The documentary features insights from notable sports figures, descendants of the 1899 team, and a score by Bobby Horton, a regular Ken Burns collaborator.

Before its TV debut, the documentary received accolades at various film festivals, including a first-place win at the Knoxville International Film Festival. It was also nominated for a Southeast Regional Emmy in the Best Historical Documentary category.

David Crews' fascination with the 1899 Sewanee football team began with college classmate Norman Jetmundsen's awe of their accomplishments.

Together, they embarked on a five-year journey to bring this almost forgotten tale to the screen.

"Unrivaled" captures the tenacity of a team that played five games in six days, traveling 2,500 miles by steam locomotive, culminating in an unbeaten 12-game season.

"What this team pulled off had never been done before and will likely never be done again," Crews said. "These players were remarkable men—they possessed amazing stamina and drive to endure what was, at that time, an incredibly violent and brutal game."

The players' grit and Luke Lea's ambition, a student manager with future political aspirations, were central motivations for Crews and Jetmundsen. However, they also want-

ed to spotlight a remarkable story deserving wider recognition. "This isn't just a football story; it's about determination, skill, and character," Crews said. Given the physical demands of the sport then, with minimal protective gear, injuries, sometimes fatal, were common.

Crews said, "I am drawn to remarkable people and stories and I strive to tell stories in powerful ways to make them accessible to everyone."

A stellar crew supported Crews and Jetmundsen, including editor Matthew Graves, musician Bobby Horton, narrator Gates Shaw, artist Ernie Eldridge, and reenactors Battle Crews (David's son) and Aubrey Black. Together, they recreated the unique 1800s football style and tackled the dark

aspects of the game, like severe injuries.

Beyond filmmaking, Crews expressed his love for literature and language in "The Mississippi Book of Quotations." A collection of over 2,500 quotes spanning various themes, it includes insights from renowned Mississippi personalities, from William Faulkner to Elvis Presley. First released in 2016, a paperback version with additional lines was published recently.

Having received an Emmy for "The Toughest Job," a documentary on Gov. William Winter, Crews remains hopeful about "Unrivaled" receiving similar acclaim after its PBS broadcast.

"It's a story deserving of recognition," he stated with conviction.