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Thai Cheerleaders Documentary Draws Applause

A new documentary about the surprising international success of a Thai cheerleading squad is attracting attention in the Southeast Asian nation and abroad.

“The Cheer Ambassadors,” set for official release in March, centers on the underdog Thai national team that placed a remarkable second at the annual International Cheer Union World Cheerleading Championships in Orlando, Florida in 2009.

Despite the fact that there is little tradition of the sport in Thailand, the team took home the silver medal, finishing only behind the traditional cheering juggernaut of the United States.



A Single Production Company

Good for second place

The Thai squad was largely self-taught, gleaning routines from YouTube clips and from competitions broadcast at odd hours on ESPN. The group also raised funds for their travel, and even trained in the middle of the night at home before the trip in order to offset the effects of jet lag once they arrived in the U.S.

The film has been shortlisted for selection at the upcoming TriBeCa Film Festival, according to the film’s director, Luke Cassady-Dorion. “The Cheer Ambassadors” was shown in late January at Bangkok’s World Film Festival, and Mr. Cassady-Dorion has also submitted it to several more

festivals. For now, [there is a two minute trailer available](#) on YouTube.

Mr. Cassady-Dorion, a 35-year-old American artist and yoga teacher based in Bangkok, told Southeast Asia Real Time that he was attracted to the project due to the “against all odds” nature of the story. Not only does it relate the team’s sporting achievement, but the tale provides a “great lesson in Thai culture” for those outside the country, he says.

For example, one of the cheerleaders’ mothers, a rice farmer in the northern Thai city of Chiang Rai, took exception to her daughter standing on fellow cheerleaders’ shoulders while positioned in pyramids. That’s because in Thai culture, the feet are considered lowly. It’s impolite to point one’s feet at other people, much less place them near others’ heads. Moreover, the mother, steeped in traditional Thai culture, had objections to the short skirts her daughter wore while performing.

In another cultural twist, while many Western cheerleading squads are lead by official coaches, the Thai team had the added assistance of an altogether different figure: a Thai fortune teller. The woman advised them in various aspects of their performance and taught the cheerleaders to meditate and focus in order to pull off their potentially dangerous routines.

Mr. Cassady-Dorion says that the Thai team also embodied the Thai concept of “sanook,” or an emphasis on fun.

“You see how these kids are genuinely having fun out there,” he says, while “with the other teams it looks

forced or they look stressed.”

Mr. Cassidy-Dorion, a Niskayuna, New York native, had never before directed a film, and he does not have a cheerleading background. He emphasizes that the project was a team effort. His partner, Thapanont “Tae” Phithakrattanayothin, who had been a part of the cheerleading team himself, worked as the film’s production manager.

The two enlisted Mr. Cassidy-Dorion’s friend, Jason Best, a California-based technology entrepreneur and consultant, to be their executive producer. Documentary film editor Duangporn “B” Pakavirojkul provided her services, as well.

Mr. Cassidy-Dorion says the cheerleaders depicted in the film are delighted to receive belated kudos for their achievement. Their efforts were somewhat overlooked in 2009 due to the sport’s relatively obscurity in Thailand. Now that the film has been made, though, the cheerleaders have begun receiving emails from cheerleading fans around the world. (The film is in Thai with English subtitles.)

Mr. Cassidy-Dorion says he has also showed the film to dozens of people in the U.S., and the feedback has been positive.

“There’s a whole current of friendship” that runs throughout the film, Mr. Cassidy-Dorion says. “Kids from different backgrounds and from different parts” of Thailand “became like a family,” he says. “People can relate to that.”

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