

MIRACLE

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

Based on the exciting true story of one of the greatest moments in modern history, "Miracle" is the inspiring story of the team that transcended its sport and united a nation with a new feeling of hope. In 1980, the United States Ice Hockey team's coach, Herb Brooks (KURT RUSSELL), challenged a ragtag squad of college kids to take on the awesome juggernaut from the Soviet Union – the greatest hockey team in the world – at the Olympic Games. Despite the long odds, Team USA carried the pride of a nation yearning for a distraction from world events. With the world watching, the team rose to the occasion, prompting broadcaster Al Michaels's now-famous question to the millions viewing at home: "Do you believe in miracles? Yes!"

Walt Disney Pictures' "Miracle," directed by Gavin O'Connor from a screenplay written by Eric Guggenheim, is produced by Mark Ciardi and Gordon Gray. Executive producers are Justis Greene and Ross Greenburg. Buena Vista Pictures distributes.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

"It's important to understand the social and political climate of the country back in 1980," says Gavin O'Connor, director of Walt Disney Pictures' exciting and uplifting motion picture, "Miracle." "Our psyche was fractured. We were a nation feeling really sorry for ourselves. Long gas lines. High interest rates. The hostage crisis. No summer games. We were desperate for something to wrap our arms around, anything to offer us hope. And then, out of nowhere, come these 20 kids."

The story of the 1980 US Ice Hockey team's underdog victory against a Soviet

juggernaut in the Olympic Games, "Miracle" is the story behind the game that has been immortalized by sportscaster Al Michaels's famous line, "Do you believe in miracles?"

"These players really inspired the country," says producer Gordon Gray, who, with partner Mark Ciardi, also produced Disney's 2002 hit, "The Rookie." "People really forget what things were like that winter. It was a time when America was simply feeling low about its abilities, and then here come these kids against a squad of Goliaths... You play that game a hundred times, and maybe the Soviets win ninety-nine. But they didn't win that one, and that made all the difference in the world."

"Gordon and I are drawn to inspirational stories," says Ciardi. "To me, there is no more inspirational story than this one. It was voted by Sports Illustrated as the single greatest sports moment of the 20th century. These players are iconic. It's an honor to be able to tell their story, and it's a perfect time to tell it."

"We'd wanted to do a movie about the Miracle on Ice, but we didn't really know how we'd tell it," says Gray. With a moment so strong in memory, the producers and director wanted to make sure they got it right. Indeed, the Team USA's victory over the Soviets remains a pivotal moment in the country's cultural history – one of those moments where every sports fan remembers where he or she was when it occurred.

"I was a freshman at the University of Maryland," says Ciardi, "I was on the top bunk and my roommate and I were watching the game on a little black-and-white TV. The whole place was going bananas – everybody was glued to the game. It was on tape delay, but nobody knew the score – not like today, where you can find out in two seconds on the internet."

"My son was born in February, 1980 – I remember watching the games at the hospital, at the house," says Kurt Russell, who stars in

the film as the team's coach, Herb Brooks. "But the game where they beat the Russians – I was at my brother-in-law's house, and we watched the game together. We were both longtime hockey fans, and both played some in the net, but after that game, we became obsessed."

"Herb Brooks was a hockey egghead, a mad scientist, and the team was his lab experiment," notes O'Connor. "He basically re-wired the boys' brains to learn a new style of play – a fusion of the Soviet school with the best of the Canadian and European school – in such a short amount of time. No one thought it was possible but Herb. The team's success was the result of a group of kids who were willing to trust in Herb's plan and push themselves far outside the norm. The sadness of it all was Herb's determination to sacrifice any personal relationships with the team to gain the results he was after."

"Brooks had his eye on the game against the Russians from the very beginning," says Russell, who plays Coach Brooks. "He realized right away that to win the gold medal, Team USA would have to go through the Soviets, and he also realized that the formula they'd been using hadn't been working. He coached his team to play for that game. It was a huge risk – if it didn't work, it was going to be embarrassing."

"This film is about understanding that even though it's called a miracle on ice, in fact, a lot of hard work went into the miracle," says Russell.

CASTING THE FILM

Once the producers and director decided that the story of the team would focus on the dynamic and determined coach, Herb Brooks, they looked for a star that would bring those qualities to his portrayal of the man.

"I wanted Kurt to play Herb from early on in the process," says director Gavin O'Connor.

"I was very much aware of Kurt's athletic background, his passion and knowledge of sports and, of course, I was a fan of his work as an actor. What he's done in this film is astonishing. He spent three months skating everyday, studying the tapes of Herb Brooks I supplied him with, to get the behavior, dialect and physicality exactly right. During rehearsals I knew we were headed down the right road. Kurt completely transformed himself. He brought so much talent and commitment to the project that it trickled down and inspired everyone around him."

"For me, it's just been fun learning about Herb and who he was," Russell says. "This was a man who was ahead of the curve in his field. He was trying to do things that would take the game in a new direction – really change the way hockey is played in this country. North American hockey had been a crunching, physical game; after the 1980 team, it would include much more – he incorporated aspects of preparation, conditioning, and speed skills which had described the European and Russian style of play; he made the Americans play a much faster game, a quicker mind-game."

"It was an interesting experience for me to play Herb," Russell continues. "This is a guy who said, 'I'll be your coach, but I won't be your friend.' He called that year the loneliest of his life, because he was so separate from the team. He felt, for reasons you will see in the movie, that this relationship would garner the best result. I'm usually a pretty outgoing sort with whoever I'm working with, but for this role, like Herb, I felt it would be better if I maintained some sort of distance from the rest of the cast. I didn't particularly want to do it, but I felt for this particular film it would be best for the relationship off-camera to mirror the relationship on-camera."

O'Connor says he thinks of "Miracle" as a love story – a love story among men, as well as between Herb and his wife, Patti. "I've had

many conversations with Jack O'Callahan, and the theme he emphasized to me was how close these twenty kids became and how much they loved each other," O'Connor continues. "It was instrumental in their cohesion as a team and how well they played together and in their wanting to succeed for this crazy-like-a-fox coach who united them.

"The most important part of the film is what happens off the ice," stresses O'Connor. With an eye toward that, O'Connor knew that the pivotal non-hockey role would be that of Herb's wife, Patti Brooks, and he was especially conscious of this role.

"The best sports movies aren't just about sports," says Ciardi. "The themes are so much bigger. In 'Miracle,' we had an opportunity to make a film not just about hockey, but about country, about holding onto your dreams, about second chances, and about support from family in times of tension."

O'Connor, Ciardi and Gray cast award-winning actress Patricia Clarkson, who most recently received a Special Jury Prize for her outstanding work in three films at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival.

"Coming out of the independent world, I was very familiar with Patty Clarkson's work and I was a huge fan. I felt her arthouse sensibilities would make for an interesting contrast to Kurt's. From the moment we started rehearsals, I knew we were on to something special. They danced beautifully together.

"Herb was a man obsessed and driven towards a goal. He had a singular purpose and mindset. In order to pull off the impossible, he put his family in the shadows to chase a dream. I needed an actress who didn't shrink away into the shadows. Someone who balanced him – a yin to Herb's yang. Patty Clarkson delivered in spades."

"It thrilled me when Gavin said that the story of Herb and Patti's relationship was as important to him as anything hockey-related,"

says Clarkson. "He was really committed to showing this integral and crucial part of his life.

"I've never been to a hockey game," Clarkson laughs, "but that's apropos for the role. Patti Brooks isn't a hockey fan, either. I was feeling guilty until I found out her true feelings."

The casting of Team USA was more unusual. When O'Connor first met the producers, he made it clear he wanted to use real hockey players. "He had faith in his ability to get the performances," says Ciardi.

"To me it seemed obvious," says O'Connor. "I wanted the film to smell raw and real. So we could either teach actors to play the sport at the level I wanted to achieve without body doubles – impossible – or we can do an exhaustive search for highly skilled hockey players who were born with the performing gene and didn't know it. Randi Hiller and Sarah Halley Finn knew how important it was for me to find the right kids for each part – and many elements played into the decisions: physicality, dialect, age, region, does he shoot lefty or righty – and they were tireless in their efforts to turn over every rock to pull it off. They made me very happy."

"It was Gavin's idea to get kids who were hockey players first – he would turn the hockey players into actors, and not the other way around," says Gray. "He went to Boston to find Boston guys; he went to Minnesota to find Minnesota guys."

Rigorous on-ice tryouts followed in New York, Boston, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Vancouver. "We saw approximately four thousand kids to find these players," says Ciardi. "Not only did Gavin try to remain true to the physical characteristics of the real players," says Gray, "but also to their original geographic area. If the real players were from Boston, he tried to get hockey players from Boston; he tried to cast Minnesotans for the players from Minnesota."

“Eventually,” says Ciardi, “we had a combine and narrowed it down to sixty guys and from those, we chose our twenty – the same way Herb Brooks did in Colorado Springs. We provided them with acting coaches and a lot of support to get performances that were really natural. They’ve done a great job, and the only way you’ll see better hockey is at an NHL game.”

Most of the young men who were cast – eleven Americans and nine Canadians – had played hockey in a college or junior league, or pro hockey in Europe. They could not believe their good fortune to be playing the game they loved in a Hollywood film. A few months earlier they were either graduating from college or high school or searching for a career. All were now intent on honoring the men they were playing.

For the pivotal role of team captain Mike Eruzione, the producers and director turned to longtime hockey player, first-time actor Patrick O’Brien Demsey (friends call him “Paddy” – “That’s what happens when your name is Patrick O’Brien Demsey,” he says). “I found out about the audition less than a day before it happened,” he says. “I graduated from college and a week later found out I got the part. It couldn’t have gotten any better.

“The real Mike Eruzione lives about 20 minutes away from me,” says Demsey. “I got to skate with him and his son’s team for about three weeks. But I was also hanging around at home for about six weeks between school ending and the movie beginning – my mom had me painting different rooms of the house to earn my keep. I was definitely excited to get to Canada.”

Michael Mantenuto, also from the Boston area, was cast as Jack O’Callahan. “I got a call from Randi Hiller, who did the casting. He said that O’Callahan is a tough Boston kid, kind of charismatic, the first guy to drop his gloves. So I went out to L.A. for the auditions and ended up getting into a fight. It wasn’t anything that I

planned to do, but I think people saw it and said, ‘All right, that’s Jack.’”

To play the original team’s left wing, Buzz Schneider, O’Connor chose the perfect player: Billy Schneider, the Olympian’s son. “We knew that they were making the movie, but we had no idea that they were doing a nationwide casting search until my wife read it in the paper,” he says. “She said, ‘Do you think this is something that Billy would be interested in?’ Four or five auditions later, he got the part. It’s mind boggling, watching him play something that was a big part of my life.”

For a few roles, the director and producers sought actors who could pick up the game quickly. “We are all united by our love of the game,” says Nathan West, who plays Robbie McClanahan.

Eddie Cahill (best known for his recurring role as Rachel’s assistant on “Friends”), who plays Jim Craig, had never played in goal until the combine, but found an incredibly supportive environment. “What I learned there and what has been so impressive about this process,” says Cahill, “is what happens to you inside yourself, when someone says to you in any form, I believe you can do this. I bet you can do this. That’s been remarkable.”

The production also needed to find sixty-five great hockey players for the Soviet and European teams. A casting call took place in Vancouver, where “Miracle” was to be filmed and fifteen hundred players showed up. Reelsports Solutions’ Mark Ellis and Rob Miller were able to cast five former NHL players in the Soviet team: Sasha Lakovic (New Jersey Devils), Bill Ranford (Edmonton Oilers), Todd Harkins (New York Islanders and a former Team USA member), Mike MacWilliam (New York Rangers) and Randy Heath (New York Rangers). Roger Watts, a Tretiak buff, put his law practice on hold for four months to portray the Soviet goalie who had inspired him to take his game to another level.

HOCKEY PRACTICE

“In ‘The Rookie’, we had three games and a montage,” notes producer Gordon Gray. “‘Miracle’ is a hundred times more complicated. There are so many plays in the film; each one has to be perfect, so they take a long time to rehearse and shoot. Then it goes by on-screen in the blink of an eye and you’re on to the next incredibly complicated shot. But all of it has been worth it, because all this effort goes into making the hockey as accurate as possible. We know our energies will be up there on the screen.”

“Any fight scene, any stunt, is choreographed to make sure that the actors don’t hurt themselves,” says Kurt Russell. “With a sports movie, it’s no different. Any kind of action – you do it a hundred times to make sure you know exactly what you’re going to do when the camera rolls. It was pretty tough for the players. But me, I was glad to be behind the bench.”

To create the 133 plays in the film, the filmmakers turned to ReelSports Solutions’ Mark Ellis, who had previously worked with producers Ciardi and Gray on “The Rookie.” But even with so many plays to get right, two stuck out as especially important: Bill Baker’s goal during the Sweden game, and Mike Eruzione’s goal during the Soviet game. “Those kept me up at night,” Ellis laughs. “If we didn’t get those goals right, we might as well have packed it up and went home. We had to make it real; we had to make it feel for the audience like it felt when it happened 24 years ago.”

“Hockey is such a free-flowing game,” Ellis notes. “The closest thing I’ve worked with is basketball – it’s also a free-flowing game – but it’s not played on frozen water.

“You’ve got a guy going 35 miles per hour – as fast as he can – in between two or three cameras on the ice, trying to make sure he gets a pass coming from more than 30 yards

away that lands right on his stick, control the puck, and then put the puck in just the right place in the goal – and make sure the goalie misses it with his glove by a hair. And get it all done in three takes. It’s one of the toughest things I’ve ever done,” Ellis continues.

Ellis also took the opportunity to talk to Herb Brooks about how he ran the offense and practices, as well as fundamental questions about the nature of the equipment and look of the uniforms. “We got him in a room and picked his brain a bit,” Ellis says. “We sat him down with an eraser board to go over plays, go over the Xs and Os. It was up to Kurt to understand the mental side of his philosophy, but it was up to me to understand how over six months he taught his team a new style of playing hockey, how he brought something new to the way the Americans played the game. Those conversations helped us so much with our research.”

When it came time to train the players, Reelsports Solutions organized a six week training camp to train the players. Even though most had hockey experience, all the players had to relearn the game using 80s-era hockey sticks, gloves, and pads. “The equipment alone was a huge challenge for us,” Ellis notes. “Everybody had to get used to that. Then we began to learn the plays.”

The hockey sequences were filmed chronologically, beginning with the selection of the team and moving to the training, followed by the early games and ultimately the Olympic Games. Their camaraderie grew, with director Gavin O’Connor as the Herb Brooks figure. “These kids formed an incredible bond that was beautiful to see,” says O’Connor, “and it’s palpable on-screen.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE 1980 TEAM ON THE MIRACLE

"I think it's taken 20 years for some of those kids to realize what Herb was doing – and, to be honest, there are still some who are still learning things about what Herb said to them to get them to perform at a level they didn't necessarily know they could play at," says Russell. "But for the most part, I'd say that their appreciation for their coach has only grown over the years; as they get older, they realize what he did for them. But I don't think Herb ever asked himself, 'Gee, was I too tough on them?' I think he felt that he was as tough as he had to be."

"Herb was the key," says Jack O'Callahan, a defenseman for the original team. "If you wanted to be on that Olympic team, you did whatever Herb told you. It didn't matter what any of us thought of him – being on the team, playing in the Olympic Games, outweighed anything I might have thought about Herb."

"It's one thing to play for Boston University, or to play in the NHL, but to play for your country is something different," says Jim Craig, who played goalie for the legendary squad. "Everybody in the country is rooting for you. And back then, the game took on so much more meaning because it was the Russians that we beat."

"They were like a team from another planet," says O'Callahan. "They didn't play hockey like we played it in the colleges. They didn't play it like we saw in the NHL. Today, if a team's that good, you can see them all the time on ESPN or ABC or HBO, but back then, we didn't have that – we never really got to see the Soviets, we didn't know who they were, until we got to the international tournaments and saw their skill level, their teamwork, their physical strength, their on-ice discipline."

"Coach sat us down before the Olympic Games and laid out our odds," remembers Rob McClanahan, right wing. "If we play at the top of our game and catch some breaks, we could win bronze. If we catch all the breaks,

we'll win silver. But forget the gold; the Soviets have the gold."

"The Russian Red Army team was the best in the world, the team that had beaten the NHL All-Stars," says Craig. "They did it because they were trained professionals. But by the time we faced them, we had gained an awful lot of confidence. Each game that we played built an incredible following, while the Russians had shown at that point that they were capable of being beat. We were mentally ready to play them."

"Quite honestly, the key was when they pulled Tretiak out of the game," says McClanahan. "It gave us a huge emotional life. The best goaltender in the world has just been pulled from the game. We looked at each other: 'what the hell is going on?' That's when we had a real hockey game, and with the crowd behind us, anything could happen. We'd just been out-shot in the second period – twelve-to-one or something – but anything could happen."

Amazingly, none of the players had any idea at the time what their victory meant to the public at large. "We knew that people in Lake Placid were happy, but no idea that the entire country was tuned in like it was," says team captain Mike Eruzione.

The moment crossed all cultural boundaries: race, sex, age, sports fans or not. In fact, even people who weren't around in 1980 have responded to the event. "We all get a lot of fan mail, and it comes from kids who weren't even born yet in 1980," O'Callahan notes. "As kids get acquainted with our achievement, it seems to be something that continues to resonate with new generations. We're making new fans all the time. That's wild – it's the best thing about the whole experience."