

Champs: Tribeca Review

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NEW YORK — In his debut doc about superstar fighters, Bert Marcus offers more sociology than boxing fans may expect, using mean-streets origin stories not just for biographical intrigue but to comment on hardships his subjects faced later in life. Still more a sports-doc than an advocacy film, Champs will be embraced on cable, where it could serve to change attitudes about boxing's relation to other, more regulated sports.

Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, and Bernard Hopkins share the film, and while Marcus draws on some celebrity fight fans for general insight — from Mark Wahlberg, Denzel Washington and Ron Howard to Mary J. Blige and 50 Cent — he is most interested in the fighters' own specific experience of it. Each came from poverty — rich people don't take up boxing, we're reminded once or twice, and the film suggests that a chronology of fight stars' ethnicities can tell you which groups were most socially oppressed at that time. Each stopped going to school well before graduation, and two were locked up for crimes they committed with their friends. Tyson, whose emotionally naked interview provides the film's strongest moments, recalls his first time robbing houses with some more experienced kids. "They didn't give me much money," he recalls, "but it bought me clothes."

The Bottom Line: Very polished doc has more on its mind than action in the ring.

Hopkins, who spent five years in prison before his career, was helped by an inter-prison boxing tournament. After emphasizing Hopkins's epiphany that prisons are an industry, not just a social tool, the film laments the disappearance of many positive programs and the fact that some — like jailhouse barber schools that train inmates to do something they won't be able to get a license for after parole — seem almost perverse.

Sportswriters, biographers and other insiders help recall how each boxer emerged on the scene and, particularly in Tyson's case, how the glory ended. In recounting foreclosures and bankruptcies, the interviewees note how unprepared they were to become rich overnight. We hear also about the fighters who never win those multi-million dollar purses: Unlike baseball, football, and other team sports, there's no minimum salary for a professional boxer; after expenses, we're told, even a fighter who shows up a few times a year on ESPN might be living near the poverty line.

Oversight becomes the main focus near the end, with talk of brain injuries and a lamentable lack of required medical testing. Many suggest that a first step toward a safer sport would be the creation of a single national commission to replace the patchwork of local, sometimes ethically dubious, authorities.

What no one suggests is that perhaps boxing, like cockfighting and dog fighting, shouldn't be legal at all. A fan would point out that human beings have a choice in the matter, unlike animals that are forced to destroy each other, and that's certainly true. But as this film about men who felt their only way out of dire poverty or crime was to box makes clear, an impoverished young man who learns he has talent in the ring might not think he has much of a choice at all.

Production: Bert Marcus Productions

Director-Screenwriter: Bert Marcus

Producers: Bert Marcus, Mike Tyson, Grant Jolly

Director of photography: John Tipton

Editors: Derek Boonstra, Davon Ramos

Not Rated, 85 minutes