

Kim Lee

Film Title: *Coach Carter*

Year: 2005

Director: Thomas Carter

Screenplay: Mark Schwahn

Screenplay: John Gatins

Producer: Michael Tollin

Original release form: The film was first released theatrically in the United States, January 14, 2005.

Current Availability and formats: *Coach Carter* is currently available on DVD and Blue Ray for rental and purchase at many retail outlets.

Genre: Drama, inspired by a true story

Story elements: This film depicts the true story of a tough-as-nails high school basketball coach and his ill-mouthing, ill-learned, and ill-tempered “team” in Richmond County, California. Life in Richmond County, California is hard and sadly predictable if you are a young African American or Latino male. The choices for these high school teenagers are often limited to prison, death or college. And, not many make it to college. Ken Carter (Samuel L. Jackson) is solicited by the school’s aging coach, Coach White (Mel Winkler), to take over the school’s losing basketball team. This team is not just losing on the court but in the classroom as well. In fact, many are well on their way to losing in life with the ever present call of drugs, gangs, violence, and teenage pregnancy. Carter knows this neighborhood and these young people well; he has been one of them. Ken Carter graduated from Richmond High School where he held scoring and assists records thirty years prior. He went on to college after high school. Now Mr. Carter is a successful business man with his own sporting goods store in the community. He remembers his friends from his high-school basketball days, some ended up in prison some ended up dead. Carter takes the job and the team because he wants and believes he can affect change. He tells his players he wants to win. More importantly, he wants his team to win “out there”—in the world. Coach Carter wants these young men to go to college. He is willing to do whatever it takes to get them there. The coach insists that his players sign a contract in order to play on his team. There are ten rules. Only one rule pertains to basketball. The other nine rules relate to academics. It will be this contract that puts Coach Carter and his team at the center of controversy. Remarkably, Coach Carter must battle parents, the school board, the principal, the community-at-large, and his players one by one, to achieve his goal of getting these young men to college. Viewers chronicle Coach Carter’s changes in these young players through several smaller vignettes set within this larger narrative. Moreover, the audience

witnesses the changes in some of Coach Carter's greatest obstacles, the school's Principal Garrison (Denise Dowse), the player's parents, and the Richmond County community. Using character development, music, close camera shots, as well as a wonderful story, Director Thomas Carter (no relation to Ken Carter) reveals this warm and inspiring tale.

Film Language elements:

The audience is first introduced to the Richmond County High school basketball team during a game. It is a losing game. After the loss, the team is in the locker room arguing with one another as to who was the worst player on the court. Coach Carter strolls through the locker room with Coach White to discuss Ken's taking the team. As the two men negotiate the duties and difficulties of taking over this particular group of young men, a fight breaks out in the locker room between the players. This "team" is not much of a team. This scene takes place in a dark gym, adding to the feel of disconnectedness.

Ken's struggle over whether or not to take on this role is highlighted by close camera shots. His discussion with Coach White over the challenges facing these boys is up close and personal. His conversation with his girlfriend, Tonya (Debbi Morgan), later that evening is equally intimate for the viewer as well. In addition, music plays a key role throughout his dilemma. As he continues to ponder the offer and challenges, music plays in the background with some of the lyrics clear and pronounced—"dedication," "education," "inspiration," "incarceration," "confusion," "solution." The audience feels and hears the quandary.

The day after he accepts the position, Ken meets his new team, and they meet him in turn. It will be quite a first impression. Again, this meeting is filmed close up and personal. As he introduces his contract to the players, each boy is shown to the viewer.

The first player the viewer meets is Timo Cruz (Rick Gonzalez). Timo has a bad habit of using the "n" word, playing the tough guy, and disregarding any form of authority. This is a problem. Ken Carter is a strict authoritarian. He demands respect as he gives respect. He insists on the players calling him and each other "sir." In addition, Timo is not too interested in signing any contract, particularly one that will have him attending all his classes, sitting on the front row, making and maintaining a 2.7 grade point average, wearing a tie on game day, and providing ten hours of community service to the school. He refuses the contract and continues to use the "n" word. Coach Carter tells him to leave his gym. Timo refuses. Coach Carter threatens to assist him out. Timo asks Coach, "What do you see?" Ken says "I see a very confused and frightened young man." Timo is extremely incensed at this remark. He is not afraid of anyone. And to make his point, he takes a swing at Ken. Ken quickly gains the upper hand and slams Timo into a locker. Timo pathetically whines, "A teacher cannot touch a student." Ken replies, "I'm not a teacher; I'm your new basketball coach." This scene is filmed so close to both faces the viewer almost feels a part of the fight. This scene also sets the tone

for the rest of the players and the viewers as well. Ken and his contract will not be thwarted.

Timo is off the team. And “out there,” Timo finds trouble. He begins associating with and working for his cousin, Renny (Vincent Laresca), a drug dealer. Many of Timo’s scenes off the team take place at night. As Timo and his old teammates face each other, the camera oftentimes pans Timo’s new “team” in slow motion. “Gangsta rap” is the music that follows Timo and his new “team.” Director Thomas Carter wants the viewer to know this young man is in danger of slipping away to the “dark” side. Later in the film, Timo comes to the gym during practice to find out what he can do to get back on the team. This is a key climatic moment for this young man. And again, this scene will set the tone for the other players, characters and viewers. Ken tells Timo, “Son, you do not want to know the answer to that question,” and continues with his practice. Timo does not budge. Ken turns and says, “You owe me 2,500 pushups and 1,000 suicides. Oh, and you owe them to me by Friday.” Timo removes his jacket and gets to work. The players watch as Timo strains and groans to complete his assignment. At the end of practice on this day, Coach Carter walks over to Timo, who is exhausted but determined and says, “Sir, what is your greatest fear? That you are inadequate? Give up, sir. Go home.” This question, “What is your greatest fear?,” will be Timo’s pursuit throughout the film. It also serves as a question for each boy on the team, the parents, the principal, the community, and the audience.

Immediately following Timo’s initial removal from the team, two players, the team’s top scorers, walk out of the gym. Now all the guys are looking at one another, wondering what is coming next. Ken is emphatic. If anyone wants to play on his team, he will sign and uphold the contract. He will face his greatest fear.

The next young man the audience meets is Kenyon Stone (Rob Brown). Kenyon is a good student and a good athlete. He has a girlfriend, Kyra (Ashanti). Kyra is pregnant. She wants to have the baby, find a place for her and Kenyon to have of their own, and begin life as a family. Kenyon is worried. Throughout the film Kenyon will ask Kyra “How?” How are they going to get jobs? How are they going to go to college? How are they going to afford a baby? How? Kyra is not sure and seems uninterested in the questions. Kenyon knows he can get to college. He knows he can play basketball in college. But he loves Kyra. His struggle is how to balance school, basketball, a pregnant girlfriend, and a baby. Music plays a key role in Kenyon’s and Kyra’s relationship. These two are intimate and sexy and so is the music that plays when they are together. Kenyon has a way out of this neighborhood—brains and basketball—but what about his baby and girlfriend? Kenyon will face his greatest fear.

Other players the audience comes to know are Damien Carter (Robert Ri’chard), Junior Battle (Nan Gbewonyo), and “Worm” (Antwon Tanner). Damien Carter is the coach’s son. He is an excellent student attending a nearby private school, St. Francis. Damien wants to play for his father. He commits to maintaining a 3.7 grade point average and

50 hours of community service to the school in order to persuade his father to let him attend Richmond High School. Junior Battle is a very talented basketball player that is attracting the attention of college scouts. Junior's problem is that he can barely read. He is a senior in high school. "Worm is worm," as Kyra says. Worm is a funny young man, a lover of life, not a very good student, and an average basketball player. These are the young men the viewer will follow throughout the film. Each has his own personal battle. Each will have to face his own greatest fear.

Richmond County, California is a neighborhood that does not have much good news. As the local high school team begins to win games, the community becomes caught up in this "Cinderella story." Everything is great. Sales are up at the school's concession stand. Parents are coming to see the young men play ball. They are excited and engaged. Scouts are coming to see the games. The boys are going to school and practices, participating in games, staying off the streets and out of trouble. The local media is following the team's success. Many players are becoming local celebrities. Life is fun. This all comes to a screeching halt as Ken realizes that half of his team is not living up to the contract's academic standards. Many are failing or receiving incompletes, most are not attending classes regularly, none are sitting up front in class. Coach Carter locks the gym, has his players meet in the library, and begins forfeiting games. He tells them that they win as a team and they fail as a team. Until each member of this team is winning academically, there will be no basketball. The controversy is set. Each character, the boys, the Principal, the parents, the community will come face to face with their greatest fear.

Audience/Cultural Context elements: This movie is set in a tough neighborhood, in a tough school, with a tough group of young African American, Latino, and white males. The film *Coach Carter* comes nearly ten years after the highly acclaimed documentary, *Hoop Dreams*. This documentary first introduced middle-class and affluent Americans to the startling reality that many young men living in poverty face: how to climb out? Professional sports? Rap music? Drugs? Gangs? This is exactly what haunts Ken Carter. He tells his young men, "I see a system that's designed for you to fail." He further notes that young black men are 80 percent more likely to go to prison than to go to college. The movie's closing credits indicate that six of the team members did go on to college, five with scholarships. Lives, and games, were won in Richmond County. The film also serves as an indictment on America's continuing struggle with a class structure that leaves many young men in peril educationally, which in turn leaves them in peril socially, economically, and politically. Nearly ten years and not much has changed for young African American men living in poverty. According to a study by Alliance for Excellent Education in September 2008, "African American high school students are notably falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates. [For example,] [i]n 2005, only 55 percent of all black students graduated from high school on time with a regular diploma, compared to 78

percent of whites.”¹ All this is to say that this movie should attract the attention of educators, coaches, politicians, parents, as well as any and all communities who intend to survive to the next generation.

Theology is found: There is only one explicit reference to God. Timo tells Coach Carter that God ain’t gonna help him in this neighborhood.

Theological themes for conversation: Poverty, race, class, violence, community are all issues that face humankind. The Christian church is perfectly poised to address each and every one of these issues. Jesus Christ came knocking down all barriers that threatened to wall off neighbor from neighbor and humankind from God—social, political, religious, economic barriers. Jesus touched and healed lepers. He talked with women and Samaritans. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He fed the hungry. He taught Pharisees. And, in the process, He built a community—the body of Christ. He left the Christian community with this instruction: go and do likewise.

Suggested type of conversation: Devotion, or guided study.

Recommended ways to view and engage the film: There are several clips that would be great for guided discussions or devotions.

Concluding remarks: Coach Carter tells his young men “Richmond High only graduates 50% of its students. Of those that do graduate, only 6% go on to college. That tells me when I look in the classrooms maybe only one student is going to college.” Worm says, “Well, where I’m gonna go if I don’t go to college?” Carter responds, “That is an excellent question. And the answer for young African American men is this: probably to prison. In this city, 33% percent of black males ages 18 to 24 get arrested. Gentlemen, look at the guy on your left, now look at the guy on your right, one of you is going to get arrested. In Richmond County, you are eighty percent more likely to go to prison than to go to college.” These statistics should be OUR greatest fear.

Finally, concerning the question of fear, Mr. Timo Cruz articulates our [humankind’s] deepest fear. He says to Coach Carter, with light streaming down upon him from a large window in the gymnasium, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were all meant to shine as children do. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others. Sir, I just want to say thank you. You saved my life.” Amen!

¹ Alliance for Excellent Education. “Fact Sheet: September 2008.”
<http://www.all4ed.org/files/AfAm_FactSheet.pdf>