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Sports film festival in Oakland aims to provide women with a much-needed voice



Michelle Smith

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House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is interrupted so frequently in a recent White House dinner, one in which she was the only woman seated with 10 men, that she is compelled to ask, "Do the women get to talk around here?"

Hillary Clinton releases her memoir of her 2016 presidential election loss and the most frequently asked questions on cable news and Twitter are "Does anyone really want hear from her?" and "Shouldn't she just go away?"

ESPN's Jemele Hill becomes a national lightning rod after tweeting her opinion that President Donald Trump is a white supremacist, prompting responses from the White House press secretary that she should be fired and a tweet from the president himself demanding an apology.

It is any wonder that women, at this edgy moment in history, seek to carve out spaces for their voices, to feature stories told them by, about them?

This weekend (Thursday through Sunday) at Oakland's New Parkway Theater, the second annual Women's Sports Film Festival will take place. The three-day event includes seven feature-length documentaries and 16 short films featuring athletes from three continents competing in 18 sports and a pair of weekend panel discussions. The themes include pay equity, gender identity, cultural assimilation, and barrier-breaking.

It is a four-day testament to the idea that compelling sports stories come in many shapes and sizes. It is a testament to women's voices.

Last year's inaugural event, believed to be the first of its kind in the country, felt like an affirmation of empowerment. It debuted in the heat of a landmark political campaign featuring a woman as the country's first major party nominee for president of the United States. The festival found a moment that fit the times, an opportunity to feature and celebrate the voices of women chronicling the accomplishments of women on the cusp of history.

"We opened last year on the night that Hillary Clinton accepted the Democratic nomination and it felt like we were ushering in a new era," said Susan Sullivan, the festival's director and co-founder. "Little did we know."

Now, the country is a little more than nine months into a Trump presidency. An era that opened with the Women's March, the largest single-day demonstration in U.S. history, and has already been marked by a series of regressions on issues such as women's health, reproductive rights, Title IX and women's leadership at the national level.

Now the new era feels like something else. And the tone surrounding the festival has changed as well, into something less celebratory and into something more relevant to the political time. Like a time and place to demand to be heard and seen.

"Loud and clear," Sullivan said. "That's exactly what it feels like."

Ticket sales are ahead of last year. Rather than "curating" films — combing festivals and the internet to find relevant documentaries and short films to include — filmmakers and friends have come to Sullivan and executive producer Jennifer Matt with ideas of what to show.

Rita Liberti, a professor at Cal State East Bay and the founding director for the Center for Sport and Social Justice, said this year's film festival has an unmistakable "urgency," given the political landscape.

"The tone is totally different this year," said Liberti, who will moderate a panel on Saturday called "Everyday Activism." "It's still celebratory in its own way. These women in these films are so freaking bold. They blow me away with their courage and their tenacity. I'm just so taken by these personal stories and their ability to connect with other women. These are very powerful messages at this point."

Female athletes have been at the forefront of the current social justice movement, using their platforms to advocate and influence.

It was the WNBA players who first stepped out in front last summer to advocate for community outreach with law enforcement after high-profiling killings of black citizens by law enforcement.

U.S. Soccer team star Megan Rapinoe was one of the first major athletes to follow Colin Kaepernick in his protest of the national anthem.

The U.S. women's hockey team held out in a pay dispute with USA Hockey, and with the support of many members of the sports community behind them, got the pay equity they sought.

This summer, the WNBA had a team hold a fundraiser for Planned Parenthood, saw its league president Lisa Borders declare publicly that the league would support and encourage its players' political stances, and suspended its rules pertaining to the national anthem to allow the players to show their support and unity in the wake of the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Va., that led to the death of a counter-protester.

"It all feels much more serious now," Sullivan said. "These films are dealing with serious issues." None more serious than the themes explored on opening night.

Erin Heindenriech is opening the festival on Thursday with her acclaimed documentary "Girl Unbound," a story about Maria Toorpakai Wazir, a young Pakistani woman who is among the top squash players in the world. Maria played the sport in Pakistan in disguise as a boy before threats from the Taliban forced her out of the country. Now in her mid-20s, Wazir resides in Toronto. Heindenriech met her in 2013 when she began working on her first full-length documentary.

"I have been drawn to telling stories about really strong women and Maria is one of those," Heindenriech said. "Not only to capture that and get to know her, but working with her through the edit process, she is living the belief that men and women are equal.

"In the tribal areas of Pakistan, that's a crazy idea, and that's fascinating as well as terrifying. But the more I worked on this film, the more I saw the similarities to what we are experiencing in the western world. There is this veneer over everything, that leads people to believe that everything is equal, but we know that it's not.

"The whole idea of women's rights, of women being treated equally, it was almost more accepted when we started this project. Here we are four years later, and the themes are more relevant than ever."

The stories being told in the Women's Sports Film Festival are both vital and varied. As vital as the hope of those making sure that these stories continue to be told.

"I've often thought of women's sports, that every swing, every slap shot, every slide or kick is an act of resistance," Liberti said. "Now I feel that even more intensely. We are not just telling women's stories, we are unapologetically telling their stories. We are talking into a space and taking up that space. In this moment, it's a very important thing."

[Michelle Smith](#) has covered sports in the Bay Area and nationally for nearly three decades. Smith has worked for the Oakland Tribune, San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle as well as AOL Fanhouse and ESPN.com. Smith, an East Bay native and San Jose State graduate has wide-ranging experience covering collegiate and professional sports. She was named to the Alameda County Women's Hall of Fame in 2015 and is the 2017 recipient of the

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1 COMMENT

Mark D.

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Reply

Thanks for informing the community about this thought provoking film festival. I'm posting this story on LinkedIn and plan to attend.