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SUNDANCE

AUSTRALIAN RULES

(AUSTRALIA)

A Palace Films release of an Australian Film Finance Corp. presentation of a Tidy Town Pictures production in association with Showtime Australia, South Australian Film Corp., Adelaide Festival of Arts 2002, SBS Independent. (International sales: Beyond Films, Sydney.) Produced by Mark Lazarus. Executive producers, Antonio Zeccola, Bridget Ikin.

Directed by Paul Goldman. Screenplay, Phillip Gwynne, Goldman, based on Gwynne's novel, "Deadly, Unna?" Camera (color), Mandy Walker; editor, Stephen Evans; music, Mick Harvey; production designer, Steven Jones-Evans; costume designer, Ruth de la Lande; sound (Dolby Digital), Ross Boyer; line producer, Barbara Gibbs; assistant director, Phil Jones; casting, Anousha Zarkesh. **Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema), Jan. 11, 2002. Running time: 98 MIN.**

Gary "Blacky" Black Nathan Phillips
Dumby Red Luke Carroll
Clarence Lisa Flanagan
Pickles Tom Budge
Bob Black Simon Westaway
Liz Black Celia Ireland
Arks Kevin Harrington
Pretty Tony Briggs
Darcy Martin Vaughan

By DAVID ROONEY

A moving, insightful coming-of-age drama about an adolescent boy struggling with family conflicts and interracial ferment in the lonely fishing village where he lives, "Australian Rules" is distinguished by its strong sense of place, sensitively drawn characters and the rich emotional landscape of its relationships. Pic is especially effective in capturing the static nature of life in an isolated community and in the way it thoughtfully subverts a story of sporting triumph to examine broader issues. This well-handled first feature by music video and commercials director Paul Goldman should land brisk TV sales and could attract limited theatrical interest outside Oz given the right push.

Adapted by Goldman and Phillip Gwynne from the latter's novel "Deadly, Unna?," the film deals in a distinctly Australian context with such universal themes as parental expectations, racism and interracial romance, small-town mentalities and the marked difference in levels of acceptance for black athletes on and off the field.

Set in remote Prospect Bay on the South Australian coast, the story focuses on white 16-year-old Gary Black (Nathan Phillips), known as Blacky, a smart bookish kid and an eager but unexceptional

player on the local Aussie rules football team. His best friend, aboriginal star player Dumby Red (Luke Carroll), lives in the Mission settlement just outside town with his family, including his sister Clarence (Lisa Flanagan), with whom Blacky shares a mutual attraction. While aborigines are welcome on the football field, where their playing skills habitually dominate each match, most of the townsfolk prefer that they keep to themselves.

When an aboriginal player is arrested prior to the championship final, Blacky is promoted into a key position. But while Dumby's fancy footwork wins the game, he is cheated out of the Best on Field medal by the white coach's son.

While this kind of match would normally function as a moment of heartwarming underdog glory, here it serves instead to spark a darker mood and a series of conflicts. Struck by the emptiness of the victory given the injustice it represents toward his friend, Blacky takes off with Clarence, while Dumby and his ex-con cousin (Tony Briggs) rob the pub where the drunken post-match celebrations have taken place.

Waking up to confront the intruders, Blacky's father Bob (Simon Westaway) shoots and kills Dumby in a moment of confusion, showing no remorse to his devastated son. Clarence and Blacky are drawn closer together by their grief, which further incenses Bob. Nonetheless, Blacky finds the strength to stand up to his father, crossing the line to the Mission to attend Dumby's funeral.

Director and co-scripter Goldman's inexperience shows only in the indifferent choreography of the football scenes and in a slight tendency toward big, physical reactions when displays of contained emotion from the characters might have been more coolly effective. Generally, however, the film's rough edges make it appealing. Smarter than many dramas of this genre, it avoids easy resolutions, and the characters and their relationships are very satisfyingly developed. Goldman sharply depicts a static community cut off from the world, representing but never overstating the typical small-town fauna of faded, put-upon women and boozy, bigoted men.

The cast all have strong moments, in particular Phillips, who warmly conveys a credible sense of Blacky as an everyday kid whose easygoing nature and sense of what's right allows him to move between white and black communities.

Lenser Mandy Walker makes an atmospheric setting of the hazy, sun-scorched locations and burnt colors, while the guitar tunes and gentle synth melodies of Mick Harvey's score are used with unobtrusive economy.



BREAKING RULES: *The friendship of Luke Carroll and Nathan Phillips crosses racial lines in "Australian Rules."*