

DVD Review: 'More Than a Game' Takes Standard Approach to Great Story

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on February 10, 2010 - 3:23pm

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CHICAGO – Some documentaries tell stories that are so suspenseful and crowd-pleasing that one would swear they were written by Hollywood screenwriters. The extraordinary series of events chronicled in “More Than a Game” has a trajectory and formula straight out of a classic “rags to riches” sports picture. Let’s hope Sandra Bullock doesn’t star in the remake.

Director Kristopher Belman sensed cinematic potential in the story of his hometown basketball team, the Fighting Irish of St. Vincent-St. Mary high school in Akron, Ohio, and began filming them in 2002. Four of the players (aka “The Fab Four”) had been friends since childhood: small yet swift Dru Joyce III, imposingly large Sian Cotton, remarkably skilled Willie McGee, and future NBA superstar LeBron James. Belman’s instinct and luck were impeccable, and the footage he captured was arrestingly candid. His resulting film, however, is a touch too slick for its own good.



DVD Rating: **3.5/5.0**

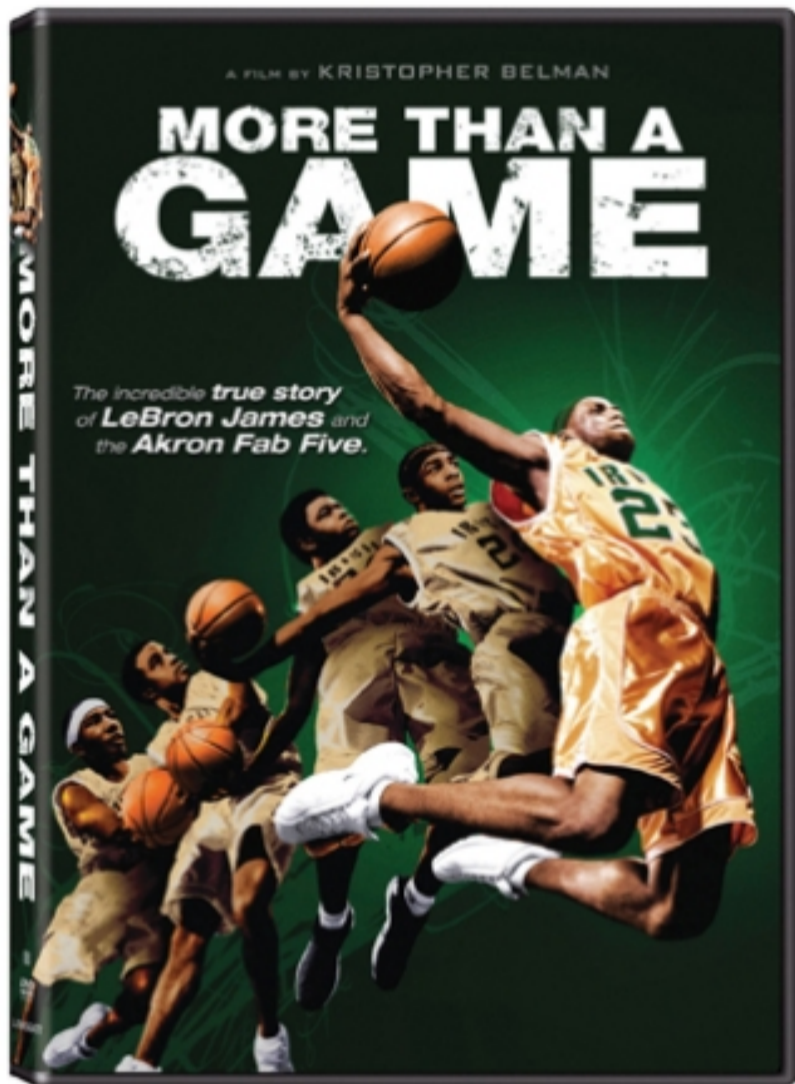
The first half has all the depth of a magazine cover, as Belman rushes through the boys’ early years, depicting them as larger-than-life savants. Joyce’s father, Coach Dru Joyce II, recruited James, McGee and Cotton to be a part of his son’s traveling team, “the Shooting Stars.” The boys chose to attend St. Vincent-St. Mary, a predominantly white school, because of its basketball coach, Keith Dambrot, who believed in the abilities of the undersized Joyce. In one of the film’s best moments, the 4’ 10” Joyce turns a crowd of hecklers into awestruck fans, as he scores basket after basket over the heads of his towering competitors. It’s a shame that Belman felt compelled to join these priceless images with distracting stylistic flourishes, including an incessant orchestral score that sounds tailor-made for ESPN (a basketball can’t enter a hoop without being accompanied by a percussive beat). Potentially darker subject matter, such as the pressure Coach Joyce puts on his son, is routinely glazed over.



LeBron James and the Akron Fab Five make high school basketball history in Kristopher Belman's documentary More Than a Game.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

After the boys won state and national championships during their freshman and sophomore years, Dambrot bowed out and was replaced by Coach Joyce. By 2002, the team had achieved national fame, with James gracing the cover of "Sports Illustrated." Rising adulation led to complacency, and the Fighting Irish placed second in the state championship during the boys' junior year. When Belman's pacing slows in the second half, which is primarily devoted to his subjects' final high school year, "More Than a Game" becomes far more compelling. As Joyce II finds that parenting and coaching skills walk hand-in-hand, the boys regain their focus and humility, catapulting them back into the national championship. James and his friends accept fellow teammate, the oft-reclusive Romeo Travis, into their exclusive group, making them the "Fab 5."



More Than a Game was released on DVD on February 2nd, 2010.

Photo credit: Lionsgate Home Entertainment

The final act is loaded with contrived cliffhangers that are used by Belman as transitions to each of the five young men's belated backstories, which are all heartfelt and memorable. With an audience-friendly PG rating, "More Than a Game" may be little more than made-for-TV fare, but its real-life drama makes it essential viewing for basketball players and fans of all ages.

"More Than a Game" is presented in its 1.78:1 aspect ratio, and includes three brief featurettes. The first, and best, chronicles Belman's story of making the film, which originally started out as a student short. The players were initially skeptical of having a cameraman follow them around, but they eventually accepted Belman as part of the team. James was especially pleased that the film was going to focus on his teammates rather than just himself. One especially telling moment occurs when Belman gets hung up on whether the team would win their senior year championship, as if a loss would somehow ruin his overall film ("Hoop Dreams" certainly didn't aim for a Hollywood ending). The additional featurettes are instantly forgettable: one features sports psychologists making obvious observations (such as the fact that a high school team is only as good as its adult leader), while the other highlights producer/composer Harvey Mason, Jr.'s work on the mediocre score.

'More Than a Game' is released by Lionsgate Home Entertainment and features LeBron James, Dru Joyce III, Sian Cotton, Willie McGee, Romeo Travis, and Coach Dru Joyce II. It was written by Kristopher Belman & Brad Hogan and directed by Kristopher Belman. It was released on February 2nd, 2010. It is rated PG.



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