

Trojan War. Dir. Aaron Rahsaan Thomas. Documentary. *30 for 30*. ESPN, October 13, 2015.

History is a powerful muse at the University of Southern California (USC). In the documentary, “Trojan War”, ESPN gives its viewers a look at one of the nations most successful and unique football programs. Before examining the film and its subjects in some depth, I must make a disclosure. I am a Trojan. Around USC they say that you are a Trojan for life, and as I obtained an undergraduate degree from USC in the year of the millennium, I assume that applies to me as well. This film documents not simply a moment in history, but a moment in my history. For many of the games depicted in the film I was right there, in section 16 of the grey lady watching it unfold in real time.

The film itself is quite good. It’s a surprisingly structured sports documentary. Filmmaker Aaron Rahsaan Thomas, a Trojan himself, examines Pete Carroll’s tenure at USC through the lens of a Hollywood producer. He makes his view of Carroll as a producer clear through a series of interstitials featuring Lawrence Turman, an old time industry player most famous for making “The Graduate”. However, this comparison takes a back seat to the exciting, and incomplete tale of USC during its period of glory from 2002-2005. Along the way, the audience is introduced to a Trojan cast of characters ranging from Snoop Dogg, to Matt Leinart. Perhaps the star of the documentary is outspoken running back LenDale White, the thunder in USC’s Bush/White “thunder and lightning” backfield of the period. The focus of the narrative is on the offense, who put up gaudy numbers, and the lure of Hollywood, that the director feels infused every aspect of the team during this era.

I won’t belabor this review with a recitation of the games and events that the film chronicles. The basic narrative that Thomas presents is a team on the rise, its eventual collision with Texas in the 2005 Rose Bowl, and the fall of Reggie Bush, Trojan hero. To Thomas the classical illusions run beyond the title, presenting Texas as the invading Achaeans to USC’s Troy. Bush, who is not interviewed for this film, is depicted as football’s version of Perris of Troy, vain and flawed, carrying the seeds of his people’s downfall in his suspect decision making. While this makes for an effective narrative, it presents a highly selective view of history.

Absent from this film are many aspects of USC’s story that are relevant for a deeper understanding of what was going on in South Central during this era. No defensive players are mentioned or discussed, despite the fact that Carroll’s teams offered some of the stoutest defenses in Pac 10 history. At one moment in the film Snoop Dogg is shown leading a cheer in a USC meeting room, shouting “Wild Bunch, USC?” repeatedly, leaving the viewer to think that recklessness was a battle cry for the team. Instead, the Wild Bunch moniker was one bestowed on the USC defensive front of the period, a tribute to the 60’s era group immortalized in bronze outside USC’s athletics building. Mac Brown’s Texas team is depicted as a bunch of down home country boys, who used USC’s national prominence as a motivating factor to cast themselves as

underdogs in the championship game. Even a casual college football fan should know that the University of Texas is college football royalty. The Texas athletic department has its own national television station. Not mentioned in the film is the fact that while USC had such famous fan's as Will Ferrell (an Alum) and the aforementioned Snoop Dogg, the Texas sideline hosted no less luminaries than Matthew McConaughey and Lance Armstrong (who is actually featured in the piece) for the game.

Where the film is most incomplete, however, is in discussing the NCAA's response to the allegations leveled at Reggie Bush following his departure for the NFL. *The Iliad*, Homer's classic tale of the Trojan War, lacks perhaps the most enduring story of Troy, the tale of the Trojan Horse. In much the same way, Thomas' story lacks any kind of substantive discussion of the NCAA investigation or sanctioning of USC. It also fails to give any kind of agency to Reggie Bush. The film undertakes no willingness to examine why Bush might have wanted to take unauthorized aid from prospective sports agents, nor does it offer any contextualization of Bush's actions. The film also fails to examine the NCAA's response to the Bush allegations. Never examining the way that other athletes or Universities were treated during the period. This is particularly surprising due to the fact that USC was subject to such uniquely harsh sanctions. In fact, one of the main subjects of the film, Todd McNair (USC's running backs coach), is currently engaged in a long term defamation lawsuit against the NCAA resulting from the actions of its investigation of the Bush matter.

Last Saturday, USC made its first appearance in the Pac 12 title game (it won the south in 2011 but was prohibited from playing in the postseason due to the sanctions lingering from the Bush era). USC's squad, still feeling the effects of NCAA sanctions, and the internal turmoil they caused, was little match for a superior Stanford Cardinal team. However, perhaps the most interesting moment of the night occurred before a single down was ever played. As part of the Pac 12 all century team, Reggie Bush was invited to the game, and stopped by his alma mater's locker room to wish the team well. This was the first time Bush had been allowed to associate with USC in almost 10 years. For better or worse USC is a place that puts a premium on its past, and "Trojan War," gives its viewers a brief glimpse of the halls of Troy.

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