

Giant Jordan star of new IMAX-screen movie

NEW YORK (AP)—The inspiration struck Don Kempf while he was sitting in the back row of a giant-screen movie about Niagara Falls at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry.

He decided he would use the massive IMAX screen for something other than a nature film. He wanted the world to have an eight-story movie about one of his heroes: Michael Jordan.

Three years later, the results of that epiphany arrive in IMAX theaters around the country this weekend — an extremely close-up celebration of the world's most famous athlete, called "Michael Jordan to the Max."

If it's successful, you can expect fewer IMAX movies about natural wonders and more about sports and other fast-moving human dramas. Think Super Bowls instead of supernovas.

"I don't think there's any other way that Michael Jordan should be shown," said Kempf, 33, who with his 29-year-old brother, Steve, formed a company called Giant Screen Sports. "Very few people have had the opportunity to see Michael Jordan that close."

The Kempfs are already working on their next IMAX projects, including films about Wayne Gretzky and World Cup soccer.

IMAX theaters' giant screens fill viewers' peripheral vision, immersing them

in a setting.

In the Jordan movie, the effect puts the audience on the basketball court with 20,000 fans clamoring all around. Slow-motion footage gives the viewers a sense of Jordan's artistry and time to examine rivulets of sweat on his body and the pained expressions on his opponents' faces.

After the invention of IMAX technology more than 30 years ago, IMAX theaters were mostly in museums or amusement parks, and they tended to explore natural subjects, such as the wonder of flight and African elephants.

But around the time the Kempf brothers were putting together their Jordan idea, IMAX Corp. — which makes the projection and sound systems and distributes many IMAX films — was expanding, signing deals with commercial theater chains. There are more than 200 IMAX theaters worldwide, 130 of them in the United States.

The company, based in the Toronto suburbs, posted record profits for the fourth quarter last year; 1999 revenue was \$203 million. The company also landed its first feature-length film, Disney's "Fantasia 2000," which has taken in \$64 million worldwide.

With that in mind, the makers of "Michael Jordan to the Max" believe they have hit on a winning formula. It cost just \$7.2 million to make.

The Kempf brothers hooked up with director Jim Stern, whose first feature film, "All the Rage," also comes out this spring. Stern happens to be a part owner of the Chicago Bulls, which helped the filmmakers get Jordan to participate. Jordan's agent and NBA Entertainment also signed on as producers.

The film follows Jordan through his final performance — the 1998 NBA playoffs, when he led his aging Bulls team to its sixth champion-

ship.

But with non-IMAX old footage and the narration of actor Laurence Fishburne, the film also slows down to recount Jordan's life story, from his initial failure to make his high school team, through his father's murder and his short-lived baseball career to his finals-winning shot in '98.

Capturing fast-paced sports footage courtside presented some challenges not faced by IMAX filmmakers on savannahs or above volcanoes.

IMAX cameras weigh about 100 pounds and are bulky — Stern jokes that they "look like they could pitch batting practice." Also, the cameras can handle only three minutes of film at a time, and it takes about four minutes to change rolls.

That forced the filmmakers to roll spare cameras at all times, so as not to miss any action. They ended up shooting a half-million feet of film, enough for 30 hours. The finished film runs just 45 minutes.

Rich Gelfond, one of the two IMAX chairmen and chief executives who bought the company in 1994 and have led its recent expansion, said the company is closely watching the success of the Jordan movie. IMAX might even be able to show live sports events someday, he said.

He also noted that two of the format's biggest stars this year have been Mickey Mouse and Michael Jordan. "Ten years ago," he quipped, "the stars of IMAX movies were beavers."

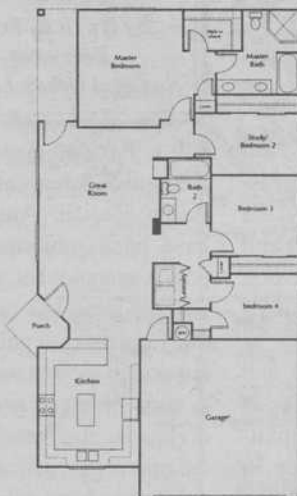
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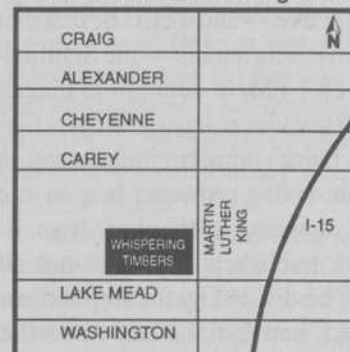
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flair, he said, "My hat goes off to BET — that's why I ain't wearin' no hat."

Oscar-winning actor Denzel Washington hosted the all-star salute to singer-songwriter-producer Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds. Edmonds said, "this TV show really shows what BET is about — great entertainment."

The show concluded with a performance of "Just Enough for the City" by the incomparable Stevie Wonder and other singers including Mariah Carey, Da Brat and Mary J. Blige.

The private, poolside party was further evidence that BET had arrived. The multimedia conglomerate hosted an upscale gala, complete with elegant surroundings and gourmet delights, in the \$785 million Paris, which also houses Tres Jazz, BET's jazz restaurant-nightclub.

BET officials said the 20-year milestone was just the beginning.

"BET is and will continue to be the ultimate source of entertainment and information for the African-American community," BET Founder and CEO Robert Johnson said.

Michael Lewellen, Vice President of Corporate Communications, said BET's partnership with Microsoft, News Corp., USA Networks and Liberty Media bodes well for BET.com.

By all indications, BET's 20th Anniversary is one of many anniversaries to come celebrating the network's triumphs.