

Book to Film Critique

Title: Chill Factor

Author: David Paitson and Craig Merz

Format: Print/Book

Genre: Non-fiction/Sports

Setting: Columbus, Ohio and nearby cities, 1990s

Budget: Moderate

Audience: Adult/General

Summary: When a hockey team uses opening night to have fans shoot frozen Cornish hens from a giant slingshot into the goals, they are letting the town know something new has arrived. And indeed, in the 1990s, an underdog minor league team named The Chill used audacious, irreverent marketing along with aggressive play on the ice to win fans in a market that hadn't supported hockey, or really anything but Ohio State teams up until that point, paving the way for Columbus to receive its own NHL expansion team by the decade's end. Professional hockey had arrived, and The Chill made it happen. With a close relationship between players and fans, and The Chill opening ice rinks and sponsoring skating leagues, they also fostered the next generation of ice and hockey fans, the true legacy left behind when they skated off the ice.

Assessment: *Chill Factor* is a very entertaining book, detailing how this upstart minor league team made a dent in a market that seemed not to care. Clever marketing campaigns and arena promotions, created by the co-author and his team, were geared toward a younger demographic and were incendiary enough to garner media attention, a winning combo that filled the stands where the 'sticks high' aggressive play of the team delivered plenty of thrills, blood, and glory. Chills' fans came first and foremost to be entertained and the team and organization never let them down. So, there is much here that is cinematic, and much that is narrative; after all, who doesn't love an underdog sports story? The Chill barely get to play in their home arena, travel to games in blizzards to find them cancelled, lose their best players to suspension or move ups, are barraged by other teams' fans with popcorn and beer....well, you get the picture. However, the team's travails and fortunes on the ice aren't really the focus of the story. This isn't *Slap Shot* (despite some obvious similarities). *Chill Factor* is, rather, more focused on the marketing of the team, on the behind the scenes work that created a brand,

that made the team a unique entity that fans wanted to be a part of. Now, of course, this is narrative too, and also cinematic, especially given how 'wacky' some of the promotions are. So, we have the drive to give the team an identity and get it noticed, coupled with the players 'antics' on and off the ice, as well as their genuine (at times) talent. The team falls short, again and again, of winning a playoff title. Are we headed for a classic tale of the underdog, perpetual losers rising, or clawing, their way to the top, coming out as winners that one time? Sort of... but mostly the focus has now shifted to the worthwhile pursuit of building a suitable arena to house the team, which would also show the NHL the city is ready for a franchise opportunity. That story is interesting, but much less cinematic and sexy.

Let's stop for a moment though and say there are many ways to be film-worthy these days; long gone is the solo shot at feature release. *Chill Factor* could become a documentary about the team's success (on and off the ice) which led to the NHL franchise, either for a sports channel like ESPN or FOX, or a streaming service like Netflix or Apple. A documentary would stay true to the events in the book where the end game/outcome isn't winning the play offs but securing the arena and NHL team and ultimately revitalizing the city of Columbus. But, for a more narrative skewing project, that wouldn't work as well. For a feature film or a closed ended series, the emphasis has to be on the characters' journey – whether those characters be the players, coaches or team personnel – rather than on the conceptual goal of an arena or major league team. After all, as we become invested in The Chill and its people, by definition the goal of an NHL team that will itself spell their demise is somewhat anticlimactic. If the Chill became the NFL team that would be different, but since the team and what it represents, along with the players and personnel, for the most part will now skate off into the sunset, well, the gain doesn't seem so satisfactory, speaking from a narrative perspective. It may be a gain for hockey as a sport, and Columbus as a city, but again, that is conceptual and somewhat cerebral, and, sure, works for a documentary but for a feature? Not so much. This doesn't mean that a compelling, satisfying narrative couldn't be crafted, especially if some re-focus of emphasis was done, it just means it would take work and perhaps some liberties in adapting, not necessarily with truth with perhaps with sequencing and again, certainly focus. Somehow the push for The Chill to succeed and by it doing so cause its own demise has to be something a pivotal figure rejects but comes to accept, and that final win, over an old rival, clinching the division title, becomes the badge of honor long missing that makes it all worthwhile. The moment of glory attained wearing that jersey is also the moment it all comes to an end, but now hanging it up means something. Again, it's a question of focus rather than invention. Now, is that character who strives to make The Chill mean enough that they then become 'meaningless', their final success their demise, GM Paitson? Or is it personified in a player or a coach or all three? And of course, which coach or player as with the book spanning so many seasons, it is too large a cast of revolving characters for a compressed film narrative. So, choices/elisions/fabrications/combinations would need to happen. Many 'true' stories add a fictional character or combine multiple characters into one. But for whoever that pivotal character is or becomes, they need to have a driving goal of having hockey stand on its own and be taken seriously in the city, a goal that they will go after at no matter what cost, and there must be a cost on a personal level, so that we are sucked in and invested as well.

So -- does *Chill Factor* have film potential? Yes, directly for a documentary and as source material for a feature or closed ended series. The authors need to decide what form they see as the best fit, and if they are willing to see the material change, and if so how much.