

Proposal of the documentary *Wild Ball*

2021.09

I. Basic Information

Title: Wild Ball

Genres: documentary

Runtime: 89min

Color: black and white

Language: Chinese, English

Director: LI Hongquan, DING Beichen

Producer: ZHAO Qi

Co-producer: XIAO Long

Cinematography: LI Hongquan, DING Beichen

Editor: DING Beichen, LI Hongquan, FENG Xi



II. Logline

Retired legendary basketball player Lee Benson Jr struggled to find life purpose by playing village tournaments in rural China. His violence and temper led him to the top on the court, but destroyed him off the court.

III. Synopsis

Wild ball refers to self-organized basketball games in the villages and towns of China. Local bosses will pay a lot of money to invite well-known players from all over the world in order to show off. Even NBA players are invited sometimes. Some wild ball players can earn more than professional CBA players.



Lee Benson, nicknamed “Basketball King in Prison”, used to be a legendary foreign player in CBA. He was imprisoned for 8 years due to a drug-related case in his early years and missed NBA draft. He has left several unbreakable records in CBA and is regarded as a powerful figure in China’s basketball market.

After his retirement, he stays in

China playing wild ball in order to make a living. Though he is thriving and earning a lot of quick money, he has no choice but to live separately from his wife and daughter. He calls his daughter during every game intervals, this is a rarely seen soft moment for him. Wild ball is cruel, only the result matters. Winning is everything. As he grows older, his time has gone and he has lost the respect from bosses and his rivals after a few losing games.....

After many failures on the wild ball court, he decides to return to the U.S. only to find that his wife wants a divorce as a result of long-time separation. They start to fight for their daughter's custody. Lee is jobless and has nothing to do in the States.....For the career that he loves, for his family, for his dignity, is he going to roll the dice or sink into degradation?

IV. Creative Team Members

Producer: ZHAO Qi



ZHAO Qi is a Chinese documentary producer and director. He is the first Chinese to have received the Emmy Award, the Joris Ivens Award, the Golden Horse Award, the Sundance Film Festival Award, as well as the Asia Pacific Screen Award. He is the producer of the documentary *Last Train Home*, which won the Emmy Awards for Best Documentary and the Outstanding Business and Economic Reporting, as well as the Best Feature Documentary at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. His documentary *China Heavyweight* won the Best Documentary at the 49th Golden Horse Film Festival and Awards. The first documentary he directed, *Fallen City*, is the only Chinese film nominated for Best Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in 2013. He produced the documentary *Chinese Mayor (Datong)*, which won the Special Jury Prize-Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in 2015, the Best Documentary at the Golden Horse Film Festival in 2015, and the Best Documentary Feature Film at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards in 2015. He is the director of the first documentary variety show in China, *It's My Life and I Don't Care*. The show won the Reality Show of the Year at the 19th China Video List, the Ten Most Influential Documentaries in China of 2018. His film *The Invisible Shore* was nominated for Best Documentary at the 25th Busan International Film Festival in 2020.

Co-Producer: XIAO Long

XIAO Long is a documentary producer and a documentary festival/exhibition curator. He produced the documentary *Daughter of Shanghai*, which was released in mainland China on July 9th, 2019, and won the Best Documentary at the Chinese American Film Festival in 2019. He co-produced the documentary *I Am a Chengguan*, which was nominated for official competition at the 24th Vesoul International Film Festival of Asian Cinemas



(VIFF). The Chinese-foreign co-filmed documentary *Great Barrier Reef: A Living Treasure* was released in April in 2019 on Youku for which he was the producer and publisher in China. He was also the executive producer for the 2018 “Gold Ribbon” Outstanding Short Documentary Competition, which was initiated by the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union and the China International Television Corporation. 18 countries in Asia participated in the competition, and 45 short documentaries were produced.

As a curator, he has taken part in the following activities: co-founder of FreshPitch Factual Content Conference (2016—); committee member of the WCSEP (2019—); co-founder and secretary-general of the Documentary Sector of the Beijing International Film Festival (2014-2017); curator and host of the National Library “Wenjin” public screening of documentary (2017—); expert member and author of the *Annual Report of the Development of the Chinese Documentary Industry* (2017—).

Director: LI Hongquan



LI Hongquan is an independent director who graduated from the Department of Radio and Television Journalism of Communication University of China. He used to work for some of the top creative agencies in China. As a creative director, he filmed short videos for Converse, Anta, Lining and many other sports brands. He is also a director and photographer. He filmed a series of documentaries for big media platforms such as CCTV, Tencent and Bilibili. His works include *The Heirs*, *Wuhan Fighting*, *Modern Furry Tale* etc. *Wild Ball* is his first feature-length

documentary, which won the silver award at the 2017 Fresh Pitch.

Director: DING Beichen

DING Beichen graduated from the Department of English of Communication University of China. *Wild Ball* is her first feature-length documentary. She was a sports journalist, and took part in the production of several new media sports documentaries. Later, she worked on documentaries *The Plateau Stones*, *Women at Home*, *Inhale, Exhale* etc. as an independent editor. *The Plateau Stones* won the Best Proposal at the Asian Pitch, and nominated for the SIFF Project, West Lake International Documentary Festival pitching session, as well as the Guangzhou International Documentary Festival pitching session.



Editor: FENG Xi

FENG Xi is a Chinese-Canadian film editor based in Montreal. Having lived in China, Canada, and France, she has cultivated a unique blend of cultural and artistic sensitivity. Feng has worked as an editor on several award-winning documentaries, including *China Heavyweight*, *Sing me a Lullaby*, and *Clebs*. She's also an editor alumna of Canadian Film Centre and Berlinale Talents.



V. Director Statement

When a man falls from a skyscraper, with each story, he will say to himself, “so far, it’s not bad”, “so far, it’s not bad”. In fact, how you fall is not important. What matters is the way you are going to land. —*La Haine*

1. We finished filming the whole story at the beginning of 2018. However, Lee’s imprisonment once again shocked us: He was imprisoned in his early age because of gangs and drugs, and started a new life by playing basketball after he got out of prison. He played overseas for many years and reached the peak of his career in China. After his retirement, he went through an embarrassing journey of playing wild ball, and returned to the U.S. But he was imprisoned again for drug trafficking. His life is like a circle (Samsara), which returns to its starting point after years of travel. To keep himself away from the mess in life, he seems to be making a lot of efforts, or in another way, no efforts at all. His experience makes us wonder: Can talent and effort alone change one’s life and one’s destiny? Is life a circle? Is everyone bound to return to his own position and stuck in it?



2. The film is presented with a 4:3 frame, and the color of it is black and white. We want to filter out those strange and novelty-seeking colors, expressing a sense of depression, which is also the feeling the whole story conveys. Also, the use of black and white is a tribute to our favorite film: *Raging Bull*.

3. *Raging Bull*: Lee is a lot like the protagonist in the *Raging Bull*, which also provides the audience with another angle to contemplate the story: Is basketball Lee’s salvation? In the entertaining environment of wild ball, is there a way out for a raging bull like Lee Benson?

- The film tells the story through chapters, whose names are all related to basketball. The first chapter “Isolation” is a basketball term. Normally, it is a privilege reserved for stars in the team; the second chapter “Turnover” tells that Benson is no longer a shoo-in in the wild ball market, and he starts to make mistakes; the third chapter “Half Time” is about Lee’s returning to the U.S. and quitting basketball. For a ball player who has played for nearly 20 years, the experience is like a cue for him to stop.



5. Benson has a 10-minute monologue at the end of the film, more like a confession. He finally puts his guard down, tells about the reason why he was imprisoned, and shares his perspective on life. He accepts the mistakes in his life, as well as the misfortunes. In the confession, he seems to have found peace and salvation. But, he is imprisoned once again in 2019. No

one knows what has happened to him through the year. His ending shocks everyone.

- The film’s soundtrack consists of two hip-hop songs, which is relevant to the black culture, also highlights the hip-hop style of the film. The lead-in music is *Alright* by Kendrick Lamar, and its lyric derives from a prayer on the street: “We gon be Alright.” This song is made for the black community. It is a song of consolation and calls for black people to fight. The ending song is *Sword* by Chinese underground rapper Feng Xiao. Its lyrics explains Lee Benson’s life from another angle: “I used to be with shabby scrap metal. I used to be on display at rich household.” Basketball is the sword for Benson, which he can use to “slice the enemy’s head”, but also “hurts himself”.

VI. Story Outline

Lee Benson is a basketball legend in China. He is the famous “Basketball King in Prison”, who has missed NBA draft because of his time behind the bars. Every time when he is asked about what prison time, he always refuses to bring it up. It is known to all that he is bad-tempered and high maintenance. However, it does not mess with the fact that he thrives on professional basketball courts in China, and creates scoring records that are yet to be broken. In China’s professional basketball market, he is regarded as a legendary figure as Wilt Chamberlain.

After he retired from CBA, he chose to remain in China and linger on the basketball court in remote villages in China. Many wealthy local bosses will organize basketball games by themselves and offer high salary to invite great athletes to play for them. The players will be paid with large sums of cash if they win the game. The level of wild ball games are not stable. If the players are



all good, the game can be as brilliant as a CBA game; but sometimes it's just for entertainment. Lee can make 2 to 3 million RMB (\$300,000-500,000) each year just by playing wild ball. He usually travels around the country, so he has to live separately from his wife and daughter in two different countries, making it possible for

him to date different women, one after another. Except for being unable to see his precious little daughter, his life in China seems just perfect.

In 2016, he was invited to Linxia, Gansu to play another wild ball game. In order to ask for a higher payment, he brought with him an all-American team. He assured Boss Pan that it would be an easy win, and made Pan really happy. Unexpectedly, Lee lost the game, only ranked the 5th. For lack of any contract or insurance, Pan refused to pay him and he lost \$5,000. This was the first time he lost money in a wild ball game.

Not long, he went to Kaili, Guizhou. The team he played was organized by an agent XiaoHu. His two American team members made mistakes shortly after the game started. Benson was so angry that he scolded his team member Hersh right on the court, with



hundreds of audience looking. The two almost got into a fight. Towards the last few seconds in the game, they were only 2 points behind. But his team member CY made a mistake again at this crucial moment and lost the game. Lee was furious and kept scolding CY, who just followed him and dared not to talk back... Misery loves company. After he returned to the hotel, Lee found that XiaoHu lied to the boss about his salary, cutting away a lot of his money. Depressed as he was, he raged to Hu's room, and clenched his fists...

The wild ball market is very cruel. Winning is everything. After a few failures, he could never ask for a high salary again. However, he still went from places to places and played in all kinds of games. Sometimes, he would call his daughter in Europe to check upon her. Knowing that he was not in a good condition, he trained himself harder and tried to find the touch in his heyday.

In the summer of 2017, Lee went to Henan for another game. He played quite well, and scored several three-points. But that still failed to save the game. The rivals played dirty, and the referees just turned a blind eye to their foul play. This was the last straw that crashed him. He broke out eventually, rushing to the referee, ready for a fight. The Chinese on the court were all angry, yelling at him and telling him to go back to the U.S. The situation got out of control...



He returned to the U.S., away from the wild ball court. He did not bring his wife and daughter to his hometown Dayton. Due to long-term separation, his relation with his wife got really bad, and they decided to get a divorce in the winter of 2017. They went to court for their daughter's custody. Apart from dealing with those trivial matters about the divorce, Lee had nothing to do in Dayton but driving around aimlessly. On Christmas eve, he was going for a ride, and finally confessed: It was ignorant for him to get involved with the gangs when he was young. Basketball is the only solution and cure for him. Only by playing basketball can he stay away from the mess and the troubles in his life.....His daughter's birthday is on Christmas day. At 12 o'clock, he pulled over and dialed the number, but his wife hung up on him.....

On the second day, after Christmas dinner with his family, Lee had nothing to do and bitterly felled asleep on the couch. There was a toy bear on the floor, which was his nephew's Christmas gift, it kept singing "happy birthday to you".....

In 2019, Lee Benson was convicted of drug trafficking and manslaughter (selling heroin to others and causing overdose), and went into prison once again.