Celebrated young filmmaker Ryan Coogler comes ‘home’ to Sac State

Ryan Coogler’s 112 career receptions as a Sacramento State wide receiver rank fourth in Hornet football history. His 1,213 receiving yards put him in the school’s all-time top 20. And he’s a three-time winner of the Big Sky Conference all-academic award. Now there’s talk that his next trophy could be an Oscar.

The young filmmaker came “home” to Sacramento State on July 23 for a fast-paced round of media interviews – “Good Day Sacramento,” Capital Public Radio’s “Insight,” News10, KCRA 3, Fox 40, the Sacramento Observer, Sacramento News & Review – and a special screening of Fruitvale Station, the award-winning film he wrote and directed. The screening took place at Century Stadium 14, where Coogler watched a lot of movies during his three years at Sac State.

Also on July 23, Coogler sat for an interview and a photo session that will become a part of the University’s “Made at Sac State” campaign celebrating successful Sacramento State graduates.

Fruitvale Station, Coogler’s film about an unarmed African American man killed at an Oakland BART station by a transit policeman on New Year’s Day 2009, has become a cinematic force of nature. It won the Grand Jury and Audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and captured the Prize of the Future at the Cannes Film Festival.

Reviewers have consistently raved about its raw power and perceptive insights. The Wall Street Journal’s Joe Morgenstern called it “a directorial debut of limitless promise; as a first feature it's almost miraculous.” Audience word of mouth has also increased Oscar buzz about the movie.

During his visit to Sacramento State, Coogler spent some time in the Broad Fieldhouse, which opened in 2008, the year after he graduated with a degree in Business. It’s just by chance that Coogler is one of the Hornet football players depicted in a supersize photograph papering one wall of the Broad.

The guy known as “Coog” was greeted by members of the Athletics staff, and some former football teammates and old friends showed up to say hello. Among those
who dropped by was his college roommate Angelo Muhammad, whom he cast in *Locks*, a short film he made as a student at the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts.

“I told him it was just a matter of time,” Muhammad said. “He always had a creative mind.”

At one point, Coogler walked outside the Broad and onto the familiar turf of Hornet Stadium to watch a new generation of players throwing a ball around. Years after making his last touchdown run as a Hornet, the game of football now informs his filmmaking.

“Whenever you direct something, I learned this from football: If you get talented players, a lot of the work is done for you. If you cast the right actors, if you find talented actors who are great people to begin with, all that work is done for you,” Coogler said in a post-screening interview with his mentor Dr. Roberto Pomo, professor of Theatre and coordinator of Sacramento State’s Film Studies Program.

And when it came to blocking out the chaotic scene in which 22-year-old Oscar Grant is shot on a BART station platform, Coogler said he “kind of approached it with a football mindset.”

Coogler’s cinematic instincts were nurtured at Sac State before he studied film at USC as a graduate student. “He was part of our pilot film studies program,” Pomo says. “He took all our courses and excelled as a writer/director.” The two conferred on several occasions while Coogler was honing his craft at USC.

During the post-screening interview, Coogler spoke about his vivid recounting of Oscar Grant’s last day. He told of filming at the grocery store where Grant worked, at San Quentin Prison where he did time and at the hospital where he died. “The 20-day shooting schedule compelled us to work 12-hour days,” Coogler said. He saturated the soundtrack with sounds of Grant’s environment, including the hum of fluorescent lights in a grocery store for a scene where Grant confronts the manager.

Coogler’s humane commitment suffuses the 83-minute *Fruitvale Station* because he knows it could have been him shot to death that fateful New Year’s Day. Oscar’s “friends looked just like my friends,” he said, noting that he has periodically been stopped by police. Shooting that station scene and making this film “was the hardest thing I’ve done in my life,” he said. “We said a prayer and had several moments of silence before getting it right.”

Coogler’s brother Keenan has a role in *Fruitvale Station* as one of Grant’s friends. (His other brother, Noah, is finishing up a degree in Sociology at Sacramento State.)

Pomo praised Coogler for coaxing a great performance from the actress who played Grant’s daughter. Coogler credited the little girl’s talent and recalled, in turn, his childhood relationship with his father.
The editing process prompted Coogler and two associates to get very little sleep during the several weeks it took to get the final cut. But he’s grateful to the cast and crew for bringing this story to the screen.

He’s also grateful for his Sac State experience. “I liked playing football and learned how to make films under Professors Pomo and (Steve) Buss,” he said. “They were instrumental in my getting into graduate school.” He recalled running to Pomo’s home after football practice for guidance on a story that he was submitting with his application to USC. At the screening, Coogler asked the audience to recognize Pomo and Buss, who was sitting in the theater.

“Dr. Pomo taught me how to watch film,” Coogler said. “In class, we saw ‘Zoot Suit’ and ‘Birth of a Nation.’ I brought my football teammates, and they started taking the classes. Steve Buss seemed to know everything about making a film. He had gone to USC as a grad student. He said that I should apply, that it was difficult to get in. They put me on the path and gave me the tools to be successful. Business (his major) was helpful; they do call it the ‘film business.’ ”

What does the future hold for this modest 27-year-old who is awash in potential projects since he’s become one of Hollywood’s most promising filmmakers? His guiding principle remains “not to think about making a sale but making a film that’s true to your goal and has the impact on the audience you desire,” Coogler says. “All the other stuff will take care of itself.”

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Public Affairs office at (916) 278-6156.
– Alan Miller
amiller@csus.edu

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