



ONCE IN A LIFETIME

If you're not already a soccer fan, the documentary *Once in a Lifetime: The Extraordinary Story of the New York Cosmos* isn't likely to make you one. Back in the early 1970s, the Cosmos were the team assembled by Warner Communications chairman Steve Ross to be the centerpiece of a league that would make the sport as popular in the US as it already was in the rest of the world. After several years of failing to make much headway, he decided to recruit the Brazilian superstar Pelé, who was coaxed out of retirement by Ross's friend Henry Kissinger.

Of course, he wasn't indifferent to the multimillion dollar contract he was offered. At a time when the highest-paid player in sports, Hank Aaron, was getting \$200,000 a season, it was the lure

of money more than anything else that sparked the American public's interest in the Cosmos. *Once in a Lifetime* is enamored less by the athletic abilities of the team's players (who at its peak included the top world soccer stars from 14 different countries) than the businessmen behind them and their ultimately unsuccessful ploys to develop a cash cow. Perhaps this focus was decided by filmmakers Paul Crowder and John Dower after they failed to win the participation of Pelé, who was promoting another documentary that focused entirely on himself. As such, this is recommended primarily to students of 1970s excess, who should thrill to the nonstop soundtrack of forgotten disco tunes.

—m. faust



HALF NELSON

At a time so dominated by sports movies, you would be forgiven for assuming from the title that this is some kind of a wrestling movie. (A "half nelson" is a move in which you turn your opponent's strength against him.) You might also assume, given the knowledge that the film stars the charismatic young actor Ryan Gosling as a high school teacher at an inner city middle school in Brooklyn, that this is one of those inspirational movies about One Determined Teacher Making a Difference.

Well, you'd be surprised, and pleasantly so. *Half Nelson*, written and directed by the debuting team of Ryan Fleck and Anna Boden (filming in the same Brooklyn neighborhood where they live) is concerned less with feel-

good tropes than the real pain of idealism. Eighth-grade history teacher Dan Dunne chafes at the curriculum he's supposed to follow for his students, preferring to introduce them to history as a way of understanding social change. (It's to the film's credit that this comes across as an appropriate and useful technique for the minds of 13-year-olds.) Raised by ex-hippie parents who marched against the Vietnam war, Dan has a perhaps inflated idea of their contribution and his own self-expectations. Dan also has a more personal problem, a crack addiction that he thinks he can keep under control.

Which came first, Dan's disillusionment or his drug problem, isn't addressed by the film, and it's probably irrelevant anyway. His despair becomes palpable as he tries to keep a curious student (Shareeka Epps) from falling under the sway of a neighborhood drug dealer (Anthony Mackie) whose interest in her is not as dishonorable as you would expect.

Half Nelson does such a convincing job of imparting the frustration felt by any thinking, caring person in these times that it can be forgiven for offering a redemptive ending. That Gosling gives a strong performance will surprise only those who have know him from *The Notebook* and not his turn as a neo-Nazi in *The Believer*. That the rest of the cast does equally subtle and committed work is high praise indeed.

—m. faust



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