



Principals try casting their own characters in baseball version of ‘Hoosiers’

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
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Brian Snitker thinks the guy who played Ernie Douglas on “My Three Sons” should be cast as him in an upcoming movie.

“I had the same glasses,” Snitker said. Problem is, Barry Livingston ain’t no kid anymore with those horned-rimmed spectacles.

Bob Fallstrom, alternately puckish and sarcastic, suggests Matt Damon, turning 44, should play the Fallstrom of the same age when the story takes place.

But what about main character Lynn Sweet? This calls for an actor to emote many different levels within one character, plus grow out a mop of shaggy hair and handlebar moustache.

“I don’t know any actors,” said Sweet.

“It’s kind of hard to define,” said Snitker of his old coach and teacher. “He was a role model for us. He was this kind of hippie-looking guy who we all respected.”

Why are these guys – Snitker the Atlanta Braves’ third-base coach, Fallstrom the six-decade veteran of the Decatur Herald and Review newspaper and Sweet the retired baseball coach-English teacher – all projecting themselves onto the silver screen?



Brian Snitker (left) and Lynn Sweet get together in the Braves' visit to Wrigley Field during the second-to-last weekend of this season. Photo courtesy of Brian Snitker.

Simple answer. Their true-life story in 1971 was right out of Hollywood. The tale of the Macon (Ill.) Ironmen baseball team, from a high school of just 250 students, nearly stealing a state championship from large Chicago-area schools seemed like scriptwriters' fantasy. Only this time life imitated art, and art is now trying to cash in.

'42' producers get film rights to Ballard's book

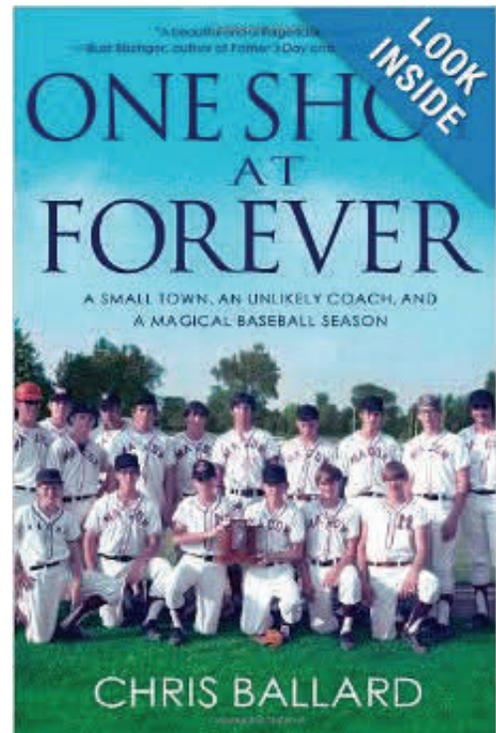
The charming story of the Ironmen, baseball's version of the legendary "Hoosiers" book and movie about the little hamlet's basketball team that wins it all against the giants, was crafted into Sports Illustrated writer Chris Ballard's compelling 2012 book. Now Legendary Entertainment, which produced the critically-acclaimed "42" Jackie Robinson biopic, has acquired the movie rights. The production is in the planning stages, which included producer Mike Tollin and scriptwriter Wes Jones recently visiting Macon to meet many of the characters, particularly Sweet. Jones told Snitker he hoped to have his script done by November.

When the movie is cast, Sweet hopes Tollin recruits some real athletes. Snitker is always available to teach Baseball 101 to the actors, in much the same manner former University of Illinois baseball coach Lee Eilbracht counseled Madonna, Geena Davis and Rosey O'Donnell on baseball skills for "A League of Their Own."

"The movies I've seen, the players themselves look like they haven't played much baseball," Sweet said. "You can just tell by the way they throw, run and swing the bat. I would hope they would get baseball-level athletes."

The movie logically would have multiple storylines. In addition to the outwardly ragtag, small-school, Davey vs. Goliath angle, Sweet's character would be central. Experiencing his own "Green Acres" moment in 1965 – same year the CBS rural comedy premiered – Sweet ended up in Macon after living in Champaign and student-teaching in Chicago.

Macon is a tiny country town 20 minutes south of agribusiness city Decatur, about 200 miles southwest from Chicago. Always his own man, Sweet grew out his hair and acquired a moustache to go along with the times – and against the norms of Macon, where Richard Nixon's and Spiro Agnew's silent majority resided. Sweet thus clashed with conservative school administrators and coaches. Still, he won over not only his players, but also his English students, who



It will be an upset if "One Shot At Forever" doesn't turn into a finished movie.

flocked to his breath-of-fresh-air style amid an otherwise stifling atmosphere. The Macon players would arrive at road games singing Beatles songs in their bus, played “Jesus Christ Superstar” on their tape players and sported peace signs on their hats.

Sweet was self-deprecating enough to answer the query of Fallstrom, then sports editor of the Herald and Review, with the most bizarre response the latter ever received.

“I sent out letters to coaches for their rosters and schedules, with their team’s strengths and weaknesses,” said Fallstrom, at 86 still working regularly in the features department for the Herald and Review.

“Sweet sent back that his weakness was ‘coaching.’”

The Macon Ironmen sounded like a book or movie idea years before Ballard penned “One Shot at Forever.”

“My cousin (Chris Collins) wrote an original screenplay years ago,” said Snitker, a player, coach or manager in the Braves organization since 1977. “He wrote this for a school project. It was an ‘Andy of Mayberry’-type script. He lived through that at the time.

“A woman from New York wanted to do a book. She liked Lynn’s character most. But she wanted to embellish the story so much no one wanted to sign off on it.”

Book educates Snitker on his own story

Ballard brought out facts and depth of characters that had escaped even those who had been at the center of the Ironman saga.

“I didn’t realize all the stuff that went on until I read the book,” Snitker said. “I was 15 years old living this thing. My dad (Richard Snitker) was on the school board. I didn’t realize he was instrumental in keeping Lynn around when he bucked the system.

“I don’t remember a whole lot about the baseball games. I used to tell people on the minor-league buses, I never heard anyone talking about relationships in little towns like I had experienced. For me it was about our relationships with our teammates, our coaches, how the parents were involved, more than we were a country group of guys. We were a pretty damn good baseball team.”

Right fielder Snitker advanced the furthest in baseball as any of the Ironmen. He also had a connection to a previous iconic baseball film.

“Kevin Costner did a real good job in ‘Bull Durham,’” he said. “He’s a real athletic guy. I actually gave (director) Ron Shelton a catcher’s mitt for Costner to use in the movie. I was managing the Durham Bulls that year. A lot of former players who played for me were in the movie. They did it in the off-season. Grady Little hung around as their technical guy. It’s still a great movie.”

When Jones finishes his script, he ought to have Sweet-in-the-classroom scenes. He was a pied piper for many Macon students who desired to be liberated from conventional norms.

“He ran his classroom just like the way he ran his baseball team,” Snitker said. “He was really big on reading. He wanted the reading material to grab you. He was probably the first one to circle the desks. At lunch hour his room was the one where everyone would go, hang out, play cards, listen to music, just kind of be themselves. Break the rigidity of what we were supposed to be doing.”

And Jones should not even stop there.

“Sometimes I don’t believe it,” Sweet said of his time as teacher-coach. “There are a lot of storylines and no movie could do it in two hours.”

Jones will have to accurately capture those storylines within the flavor of the times.

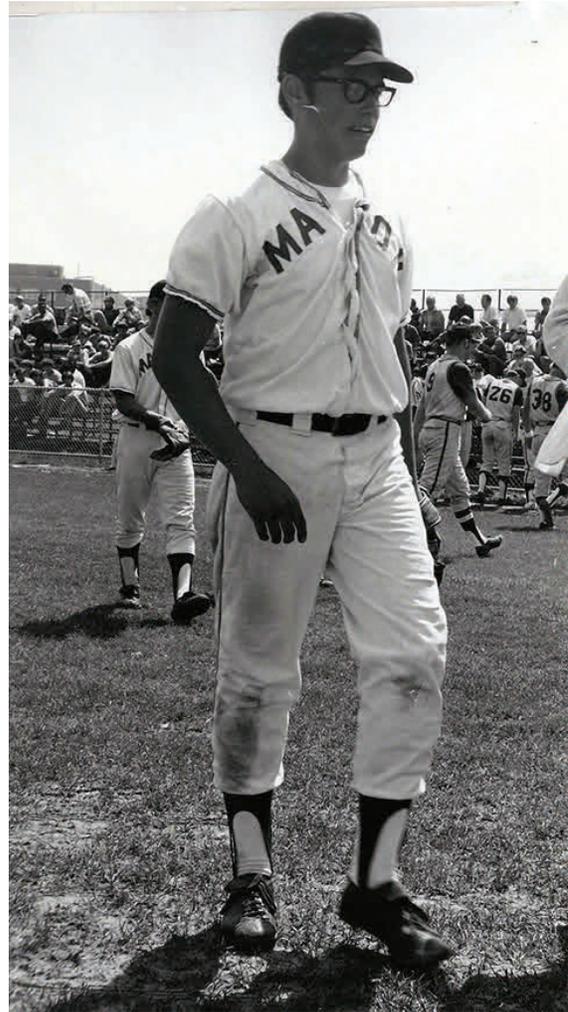
“1971 was a lot different than 1952 (the time of ‘Hoosiers’),” said Sweet. “Things were really happening all around. There was a certain instability I think that encouraged just about everything that happened there. There was a lot of excess. But, hey, things were changing.”

“The interesting thing, it was all true. It will be interesting to see how they end it,” said Jeanne Sweet, who married her husband the day after he thought he might be fired by the Macon school board in 1970 for his unorthodox style and actions.

Sweet ‘just having fun’ as coach

Jones could fast-forward a few years in Sweet’s career, to show what happened to his coaching days and why he has stayed for nearly five decades in little Macon.

“I was just having fun (in 1971),” Sweet said. “Down the line, it wasn’t fun anymore. I got out and got back to what I was really willing to do, which was to teach English. I was just (previously) having a blast.



Brian Snitker wasn't kidding when he said he resembled the Ernie Douglas character on "My Three Sons." The Snitker of 1971 also wore horned-rimmed glasses while he played. Photo courtesy of Brian Snitker.



Bob Fallstrom (left) thinks Matt Damon (right) would be a good choice to play him on the screen. Hmmm, Damon is the same age as Fallstrom would be in the movie. Notice a resemblance? Fallstrom photo courtesy of the Decatur Herald and Review. Matt Damon photo credit [Nicolas Genin](#).

“My ‘Green Acres’ move? They’re (Macon residents) very friendly and nice. (Jeanne) has a big family. They’re like my family now. This was the best pheasant hunting in the world in 1971. I always liked hunting. There were just millions of pheasants around here. It was excellent hunting. There are very few here now and no one hunts them.

“Ask people this, where should I go to have more fun? Help me out.”

A side benefit of the book and movie is that the “other” Lynn Sweet – the longtime ace Chicago Sun-Times reporter now stationed in Washington, D.C., might draw some attention.

“She’s really good,” said Macon’s Lynn Sweet, a prodigious reader as he advocated his students should be.

I know the “other” Lynn Sweet. It’s about time moviegoers get acquainted with her namesake. He’s as real as his Ironmen’s second-place finish among the land of the giants in Illinois high-school history.

(In the next post: Brian Snitker’s post-Ironman journey through the best player development system of modern times.)