

HISTORY

Botek remembers story behind 'Marshall' movie

By Michael Punsalan

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"I got a chill up my spine. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck," said Sam Botek Jr., upon hearing the announcement of Warner Brother's upcoming film, "We Are Marshall." "It was like, 'Oh my gosh, they're actually doing this. They're doing a movie.'"

Opening in theaters on Dec. 22, "We Are Marshall" depicts the true story following the devastating 1970 plane crash which claimed the lives of most of Marshall University's "Thundering Herd" football team. While the grieving families struggled to cope, many found hope in Marshall's new coach, Jack Lengyel (portrayed by Matthew McConaughey), who healed a community while rebuilding a football team. One of the players recruited to rebuild the legendary team was Toledoan Sam Botek Jr.



"Coach Lengyel sat in our living room on Terrace View North, met my parents and discussed the unique opportunity for me to come down there and be a part of this rebuilding process," Botek said. Lengyel also offered a four-year full ride scholarship to Botek, an all-city half back from St. Francis De Sales.

After receiving permission from the NCAA to use freshmen players in a conference full of seasoned teams and upperclassmen, Lengyel and assistant coach Red Dawson set out to restructure the team. Botek would be switched to tight end and was eventually named captain of the kickoff team. The community would soon support Lengyel's actions.

"We started becoming so much a part of the community when we started talking to people who had lost parents and teammates," Botek said. "You became a quick part of that sorrow and determination to rebuild this thing, move on and turn it into a positive. It took time but we did it."

Although the community's support was unique, it also had its share of pressures.

"The nation was watching us. The state of West Virginia. The community. It came all down to that. Everybody was watching how we would do," Botek said. "There was an underlying tone of stress, nervousness and fear that we wouldn't be able to pull it off. It was constantly on our minds because we wanted to be a success."

Botek, who is the president of the Metropolitan Distributing Company in Toledo, was contacted by Warner Brothers a few months ago to appear in the motion picture. Filmed at Marshall University in Huntington WV, Botek was reunited with old teammates and friends for the filming.

"You never expect to see these fellows again and here we are, all together under these circumstances," Botek said. "It was all very touching."

Warner Brother' also invited Botek and his family to the film's premiere gala in Huntington. Botek said "We Are Marshall" holds true to the real story.

"It was written by a Marshall graduate, and from all indications, they really kept true to the circumstances and situations. They're saying it's just a phenomenal film."

Botek, who walked the green carpet at the nighttime premiere, first viewed the film during a special afternoon presentation for original teammates only.

"What happened at the end was so dramatic," Botek said regarding the real life finale of the film. "You look back at it 35 years later, and it's like a dream. I think everybody put it into a very private part of their heart and locked it away knowing it had never been done, and that this was a special moment. We never dreamed that someday a Hollywood movie would be made out the whole situation."

ON THE WEB:

<http://wearemarshall-themovie.warnerbros.com>