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A Year 'Til Sunday.

Dir: Pat Comer

Prod: David Power

Ed: James E. Dalton

Running Time: 73 mins.

A Comer & Co./Power Pictures production for RTÉ, in association with the Irish Times.

There are occasions when vested interests must be declared, when any independence or objectivity claimed for an opinion must be acknowledged as even more diminutive than usual. This is one such occasion. I confess that I am a Galwayman, and, for me and my ilk, every iota of All-Ireland memorabilia that hits the shops, every key-ring, every hat, banner and jersey, every rear-window sticker, will be, for the year that's in it, as revered as a talisman from Knock. Despite their rather unimaginative titles, the souvenir highlights so far have been the official book on the 1998 campaign, 'Into the West', and the 'Setanta Sports' video, 'Out of the West', which came out close on the heels of Seán Óg de Paor as he scored the final point on the 27th of September.

Like the team's performance on that day, however, the good stuff has been saved for last. 'A Year 'Til Sunday', the best title I have come across for a GAA item, is the inside story of Galway's 1998 Championship campaign, filmed, conveniently, by a professional who is also the county's sub-goalkeeper. While 'Out of the West' largely contains match coverage, there is a welcome documentary focus in Comer's project on the less glamorous, beyond-the-sidelines moments in inter-county football, and it is a mark of the significance of this video that GAA players and fans everywhere who, understandably, want at this stage to throttle anyone who knows the chorus to 'The Fields of Athenry', will appreciate its clear exposition of their raw, mutual obsession.

Potential viewers should not be misled by the advertising blurb: '... the first great GAA video' (Tom Humphries). There is no polished sensationalism here; rather, with its focus on the locker-room, 'greatness' is to a considerable degree deconstructed. 'Walk the Walk', says the video's subtitle, with its cover still of a solitary player heading down the tunnel into the stadium light, but talk the talk might be the more apt imperative. After the brief opening footage shots of Galway's last All-Ireland win in 1966 and of some of the subsequent defeats, there is a great establishing shot of car headlights illuminating, through the rain, a narrow road and we are straight into plainspeak with captain Ray Silke's accompanying observation: 'Winter trainin' is a complete and utter pain in the ass.' As the story moves from some excellent, blue-tinged shots of floodlighted, mucky training towards 'the dream of summer days, the dry sod and the fast ball', the *au naturel* talk from players and management, while necessitating that the video get a 12 cert, sets the tone of honesty for the piece. Later, there is a passing reference by one of the players to the loving parody of the famed GAA dressingroom pep talk performed by D'Unbelievables, and, though some purists will no doubt complain, no justification should be demanded for Comer's inclusion of manager John O'Mahony's talks with his team, complete with expletives.

Kids' stuff it may not be, but Comer has a remarkable eye for identifying significant children's moments. The curiosity of young faces sneaking a peek in the window at a team meeting is nicely captured and the real guts of the video appear when a shot of a young boy watching the team in training is juxtaposed with a section where some of the second fifteen on the panel talk about the frustrations and heartbreak of not securing a place. This section lingers well on the process of selection and on what is perhaps one of the most contested matches over the course of a year: the

last training session where the second fifteen play the first team, 'the final realistic chance that anybody has to change their position on the ladder'. It is such elements that make the video relevant to aspirant players from all counties. Dominant scenes involving the team are complemented by other incorporated set pieces, such as the prayers at mass for the local players on the Sunday, emigrants going in to watch the final at pubs in New York and London, and an impromptu performance of 'The Hucklebuck' by a motleyed fan after a match win. There is also a good sparing use of a thematically resonant soundtrack ('Blue skies, nothing but blue skies ...').

One or two complaints should be registered. A chance was missed in the early sections to concentrate a little more on the team's League campaign, which is summarised only in a quick caption. Winter football, where interest is kept alive by hard core fans, never gets the attention it deserves and some coverage of this would have gelled nicely with the early concentration on the grit of pre-summer training and would have given the whole thing added appeal for the many county teams that exit early in the Championship. While the task of editing what would have been a vast mileage of footage into a compact package must have been formidable, I think the video overall could have safely been much longer than the time it takes to play the All-Ireland itself. However, I understand that a much longer version will be prepared for the camp members and it is they, after all, who most deserve their own chronicle.

It is perhaps inevitable that successful teams are, ultimately, heroicized, that their exploits are portrayed as giving shape and excitement to other people's lives, but, with no intrusive voice-over, 'A Year 'Til Sunday' does this through a quiet and determinedly personalised technique. O'Mahony's advise to his players, 'think about your families, think about what it means to people close to you', echoes towards the end as one of the players visits his grandmother and his grandfather who sits up in the bed to have his photograph taken with the Sam Maguire. Many seasoned men will cry.

John Kenny.