

The Long Green Line

Joe Newton has rightfully risen to the level of legend among American coaches. Joe Newton has coached the York High School (Elmhurst, Illinois) "Dukes" cross-country team for 50 years; during that time, the team has won 25 state championships. *The Long Green Line* (www.longgreenlinemovie.com) is a documentary on Coach Newton's attempt in 2005 to win his 25th title. As though written in Hollywood instead of Illinois, the 2005 season was to have its trials and tribulations for the coach and for the team, not the least of which occurred halfway through the season when two of his star athletes were expelled from school (and, of course, from the team) after being involved in a \$1 million arson case.

In cross-country, a team fields only seven runners, the top five finishers for the team scoring. Low score wins, whether in a dual meet or a regional meet. Incredibly, Coach Newton's cross-country team consists of 221 boys! This means that 214 of them will not be suiting up for the next meet, but all 221 of them will be working out together.

The extraordinary disparity in the number of team members who get to wear the green-and-white of York on race day versus those who do not offers tremendous latitude for the filmmakers to pick out certain students on whom they can key throughout the film.

The team's stars are the Dettman twins, yet halfway through the season they come down with some mysterious medical malady that undermines their performance and they only gradually fight their way back to competence.

John Fisher is a high-functioning autistic kid who has a heart bigger than the state of Illinois. There are several football players who lumber through practice but who still show up and add to the team's amazing spectrum of athletes. Then there is freshman Connor Chadwick, who suffers from cerebral palsy but who runs enthusiastically but badly without the use of braces.

The kids are feisty, they aren't always as well behaved as they might be, but god bless them, they have to deal with a coach who has 50 years of feisty under the draw-string of his sweat pants.

Coach Newton is at once caustic and kind, insightful and over the top, a coach who knows when a kid needs an arm over his shoulders or a kick in the ass.

The film uses some excellent graphic devices to help the viewer follow just what is happening. One of the most effective is a line-up of the top seven spots

on the team, along which photos of the various top-level runners are shifted back and forth as they encounter troubles, get kicked off the team, or rise to the occasion.

One shortcoming of the film is the too-frequent use of sped-up photography to get us through the start of a meet or to get the 200-plus runners around the track in a practice. Using the scene of several hundred brightly-clad thin-clads rushing toward the camera at the start of a race in the middle of a field is dramatic and doesn't really need any help to get us through it faster than the kids can run. Some of those scenes, in fact, could have benefited from the use of slow-motion in order to make the image of a thundering herd of high school guys coming right at the camera even more dramatic.

The story of crusty Joe Newton is entertaining. The way he interacts with each and every one of his charges is inspiring. And the kids themselves? When more than 200 kids can get together and move in the same direction with the same goals, ya gotta take notice. —*Rich Benyo*