

Formal essay: Peter Nielsen

“Wheel Turn” was conceived with the idea of taking disabled people as the subjects, and showing how they live full and independent lives. However, with twenty-four minutes to fill, we needed more than that initial idea to sustain the piece. It was here where a bit of luck of preparation paid off, and the team was able to locate two wheelchair basketball teams in Port Elizabeth and East London, who were playing off in a national series.

Within the framework of wheelchair basketball, we would overturn the stereotype of disabled people being passive actors in most stories, continuing on a trend that has been evident in the continual exposure of disabled sports people in south Africa, most notably Natalie du Toit and Oscar Prestorius. At the same time the piece would examine the sport itself, and see how wheelchair basketball itself is a tool or evidence of disabled people leading independent lives.

During the preproduction phase the two sides were located fairly early in the term, before the cameras had arrived. With our cameras only being returned to us two weeks before the playoff game, it was important to be as prepared as possible when production started.

We travelled to port Elizabeth to conduct pre-interviews, and found three case studies whose stories achieved the key aims of overturning the passive stereotype. Firstly, there was Adrian Hubbard, who had represented South Africa at the Paralympics, Deonette Olivier, who represents South Africa at women’s’ basketball and Maria Datnow, who runs a national construction company.

It was decided to shoot three case studies and three consecutive practices at the same time in Port Elizabeth. The East London side was further, located in the location thirty kilometres outside of East London main. Unfortunately, the case studies there did not overturn the stereotype in the same way as the PE side, as they all survive on disability grants. Also, they could use all the help they can get.

Problems we encountered on the two-day shoot to East London included the lack of understanding between the case studies and ourselves. Also, the members of the team did little else except play basketball from the late morning till sunset. As such, it was decided to concentrate on their love of basketball and the self worth it

gives them. Unfortunately, we encountered group dynamic problems, which in the midst of our hardest shoot resulted in the East London material being shallow in comparison to the Port Elizabeth case studies.

As a crew, we knew we had to produce something good after the fiasco of our second term documentary. As such, we travelled with a full kit of equipment, and tried to use it whenever possible. As a crew we were professional as possible. By the time production started, we had a full shooting schedule. On location we took our time setting up interviews and cutaways. We shot non-synch wide shots and other interview cutaways per our treatment, as a second camera was not available.

There were strong visual treatment ideas in our preparation time and there was lots of time to brainstorm new ideas and shots for the forthcoming shoots. As a result, we knew exactly what we wanted to get. For every shoot, there was a new shot list or revised list to incorporate what we thought we had missed after viewing our rushes. We also took notes during all the interviews, in case we needed to bolster the shot list through the day. This strong sense of planning and getting what we needed led to a strong commitment from everyone, waking up at 04:15 to travel away and returning at 23:00.

There were many camera issues throughout production, but shot enough material to overcome technical issues. Three days after shooting was finished, we sat down with all our footage and began constructing our edit, with all footage captured and logged.

The first edit tried to introduce basketball and the case studies in the beginning of the piece, and attempted to intertwine the build up to the playoff game with the case studies' stories. This first edit took a week to construct, and after consultation was discarded for the most part. The story went in too many directions and didn't take the viewer by the hand and lead them through a well-constructed narrative.

The first consultation exposed an important inequality between Black and White representation in the piece, both in time given to the Black case studies and in the depth in which we explored their lives in comparison to the Port Elizabeth team.

Initially, the piece did not contain any voice over narration. After consultation, we decided (and were advised) to use a Black female voice to bolster the amount of time the East London were on screen, even if the level of analysis was not as deep. We also included other interviews from the East London shoot to bolster the number of characters the viewer is exposed to.

This was the weakest part of our piece by a long way. Because their stories didn't fit into what we were trying to accomplish, we accumulated far less material and insight into their lives. In the final product, the representation is still not equal, but it is definitely better. It serves as a reminder to always get more than you think you need just in case your edit takes a different direction.

Once our first edit had been discarded, we employed a far simpler narrative structure. The first eight minutes establish the case studies as victims in the 'traditional' passive role. Then using wheelchair basketball as a catalyst, we overturn this initial impression to show how wheelchair basketball changed their lives, and how it is also part of how they have achieved in other areas of their lives.

Luckily, the team had enough time to start a new edit almost from scratch. We were able to pull strands of the narrative from our first timeline into the new edit to form a more 'complete' story. The second edit was completed, bar the final game, four days before the deadline. This time allowed us to work on catching up paperwork and cleaning up individual projects. We still have time to find good music stings for certain parts of the narrative to add an extra layer to the work. Also, the piece of music that ends the piece took two days to find, so it was important to have the extra time to fine tune small elements of the visual edit, as well as giving lots of time to grading and final audio mixes.

Through this approach, the benefits of wheelchair basketball on their lives are illustrated, which leads into the active relationships they are also part of. From marriages to friendships, the passive stereotype is effectively overturned in the run-up to the final game, which represents the finale of the piece. By the time the viewer reaches the final game sequence, the initial impression of 'victimhood' should be forgotten. In the end, it doesn't matter who wins and loses, as the final shots of the piece are the two teams shaking hands and forming new relationships. Indeed, they formed a combined team to take part in a national tournament in September.

The main ingredient to our production was consistent work and planning, which afforded the team plenty of postproduction time. We were as professional as possible; in as short a time as we could be once we received our camera. Despite our group dynamic issues, the piece got done in a manner that reflects the amount of time and work that was put into it. Twenty-four minutes was a lot harder than initially anticipated. Ultimately, the piece was ahead of deadline and accomplished with lots of consultation and guidance. It represents the closest thing we could get to broadcast

quality in the time available, and is something we can all take away with us next year.