

The New York Times

By MANOHLA DARGIS

NOVEMBER 19, 2008

Back in 1968, When a Tie Was No Tie

For most of the world, I suspect, the year 1968 signifies upheaval, revolution, power to the people, Vietnam and My Lai, Paris in flames, Martin and Bobby, Nixon versus Humphrey. Another great rivalry played out that year in the form of a college football game. And while it seems absurd to include such a picayune event in the annals, the filmmaker Kevin Rafferty makes the case for remembrance and for the art of the story in his **preposterously entertaining** documentary “Harvard Beats Yale 29-29,” preposterous at least for those of us who routinely shun that pagan sacrament.

True gridiron believers doubtless know every unlikely, heart-skipping minute of this showdown. (The schools, like some others, honor their football rivalry with vainglorious capitalization, calling each matchup The Game.) On Nov. 23, 1968, the undefeated Yale team and its two glittering stars — the quarterback Brian Dowling and the running back Calvin Hill — went helmet to helmet against its longtime rival, Harvard, also undefeated. Mr. Dowling, a legendary figure whom grown men still call god (and the inspiration for Garry Trudeau’s Doonesbury character B. D.), had not lost a game he started since the sixth grade, a record that well into the fourth quarter, with Yale leading by 16 points, seemed safe.

Everything changed in the final 42 seconds as all the forces of the universe, or so it seemed, shifted and one player after another either rose to the occasion or stumbled with agonizing frailty. Gods became men as the ball was lost and found and one improbable pass after another was completed. In front of the increasingly raucous packed stadium, each play became an epic battle in miniature with every second stretching into an eternity. As in film, time in

football doesn’t tick, it races and oozes, a fact that Mr. Rafferty, working as his own editor and using the simplest visual material — talking-head interviews and game footage — exploits for a narrative that **pulses with the artful, exciting beats of a thriller.**

What’s most surprising about this consistently surprising movie is how forcefully those beats resonate, even though you know how the story ends from the start. (Take another look at the coyly, cleverly enigmatic title, borrowed from the famous headline in The Harvard Crimson.) One reason for the excitement is the game, of course, which remains a nail-biter despite the visual quality of the footage, which is so unadorned and so humble — and almost entirely in long shot — it looks like a dispatch from a foreign land. And in some ways it was: Football fans still wore raccoon coats to games and the women in the stands cheering for Yale could not attend the college. The same month, Yale announced it was (finally) opening that door.

This history helps explain why there are no women here, at least in close-up. “**Harvard Beats Yale 29-29**” is very much about men, triumphant, regretful, defiant, sentimental, touchingly vulnerable men who are made all the more poignant with each image of them as young players.

For some, the game was and remains the greatest moment of their lives — even better than sex, one volunteers, prompting Mr. Rafferty to ask off-camera if the man had then been a virgin (no). Mr. Rafferty, himself a Harvard man, films his subjects (Tommy Lee Jones, a Harvard lineman, included) with a lack of fuss in plain kitchens and cluttered offices. He lets them roam around their memories and, for a time, gives them back sweet youth.

