

## Social Justice Movie Night Hosted by SFHS Athletics Discussion and Reflection Guide:

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Based on the book "A Most Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team" by Arshay Cooper, this film chronicles the first Black high school rowing team in this country (made up of young men, many of whom were in rival gangs from the West Side of Chicago, coming together to row in the same boat).—[IMDB](#)

# a most beautiful thing

*There was something about the water that gave us peace. That was something that we all had never felt before. And we all needed that. —Arshay Cooper*

### Essential Questions:

- What agency do we have to address access, equity, and inclusion in athletics at Saint Francis?
- How does "A Most Beautiful Thing" help widen our lens to better see the systemic inequities that exist in athletics?

**NB:** We all bring our own perspective and can only speak to our own lived experience; we ask that you consider these essential questions as we watch and discuss this film.

As part of our school-wide SJEI objectives, we aim to use a critical lens to

- Gain insight into the lived experience of the Black athletes featured in the documentary
- Engage in responsible viewership via a vi increasing awareness of how these stories are told and analyzing how information is given to us

### Discussion Questions: the following questions will be unpacked together after the film.

1. "Rowing gave me the opportunity to build a team, to build a brotherhood. And that is something I never had." —Arshay Cooper.
  - What made their experience at Manley High School a "brotherhood?"
  - What do you do as a coach to foster relationships among your athletes to build a "brotherhood" or "sisterhood"?
  - The term "brotherhood" or "sisterhood" is commonly used among athletes to describe their experience on a team. At their best, the terms imply connection, family, and trust, At their worst they can encourage exclusivity, desensitization, and other behaviors (e.g. "locker room talk", use of the N word) that conflict with our core Holy Cross values. Can you speak to this?
  - What is some other language (e.g. gendered, hate) in athletics that is problematic and/or exclusive?

2. "I'll never forget the first time I was on the water. We get in the boat. Bow pair started taking some strokes. We were moving. As we were moving, you could see the skyline, you could see the John Hancock building. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen." —Arshay Cooper

The direct access to nature that some sports provide offers added benefits for mental health and well being.

- Does the sport you coach offer a connection with nature? How does this influence your athletes' experience?
  - For those coaches that work in this context, how do you engage with the natural world? Are you intentional about it or is it an afterthought?
  - How does the cost, setting, and culture (equipment, time, transportation, club experience, etc.) limit access to your sport? What sports are more or less inclusive? What agency do we have at Saint Francis to address issues of access and equity?
  - Even if your sport does not provide a direct or unique access to nature, how does it provide an escape for your athletes? What are the dangers when your sport no longer is an escape? What is the role of the coach in this scenario?
3. Arshay helps Alvin to recognize he has moved from making a *bad* choice to a *new* choice.
    - How often are young people afforded with new choices—albeit “good choices.” And how does race, gender, socioeconomics affect this option even further?
    - How do we talk to our athletes about making choices?
    - What role do you think race, gender, and/or socioeconomic status play into our athletes' decision making and what decisions they perceive as being available to them?
  4. “They didn't have to say “yes.” —Craig Nash, Manley High School counselor  
“Why did the men say “yes?”
    - Why did you say “yes” to your sport?
    - Have you ever asked your athletes why they have said “yes” to your sport? What might they say?

5. How does film perpetuate stereotypes? Particularly in athletics?
  
6. What is our responsibility and commitment to address equity and access in athletics in our roles at the intersection of social justice, equity, inclusion, and athletics?

**Reflection Questions: The following questions are meant for you. We invite you to spend more time considering ideas and insights they might spark.**

1. Ken Alpert and Michael O’Gorman have unique, strong personalities and that prove to be helpful in making the idea of a rowing team at Manley High School a reality.
  - What memories and observations from their athletes do you appreciate?
  - What do their testimonies reveal to you about Alpert, O’Gorman and one another?
  - What has coaching revealed to you about your personality? Your character?
  - What are the unique qualities you possess as a coach?
  
2. The training trip to Philadelphia proved to be a turning point—individually and collectively for this crew. How? Why?
  - What have been social, interpersonal and experiential turning points that your athletes might recognize.

3. Arshay confronts Alvin Ross about his membership in a gang. Alvin's honest response is a sign of the brotherhood that has developed between them. This is true kinship.
  - How and when have we been witnesses to such kinship as coaches.
  - We all have athletes that play different positions (e.g. Preston was the stroke) but what are other roles do they play on your team (e.g. Arshay is the spiritual leader)?
  - What can I do as a coach to intentionally foster new, creative and meaningful roles for my athletes?
  
4. Arshay thrives on one crazy idea at a time. And yet, this is a story of one crazy idea leading to another.
  - Reunite with his crew
  - Travel to Oakland
  - Row with the Chicago police
  - Welcoming Urriah Hall to speak to the crew.

What do you think of his leadership approach? As a coach, do you undertake anything crazy to meet team goals?

5. "A Most Beautiful Thing" is a story about the first all black high school rowing team who find beauty in a sport. To you, what is the most beautiful thing about this film?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. The purpose of this evening was to bring coaches together for the purpose of learning more about equity and inclusion in sport. What is something you can commit to in order to widen your lens and more effectively address these issues in athletics on/off our campus?

"Being the first all black crew changed our life." —Alvin Ross