

Girl Wrestler

a film by Diane Zander



Tara is thirteen. She likes to go to the mall... and she wrestles boys.



A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES RELEASE

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Synopsis



GIRL WRESTLER follows 13-year-old Tara Neal, a Texas teenager who upsets traditional expectations by insisting that girls and boys should be able to wrestle on the same mat. It follows a crucial period in Tara's wrestling career—the last year that she is allowed to wrestle boys under state guidelines. When Tara enters high school, her opportunities to compete will virtually disappear because so few girls wrestle. Over the course of the season, amidst family conflict, pressures to cut weight and fierce policy debates over Title IX, Tara embodies a modern kind of

girlhood, one that physically embodies feminism by literally placing girls into grappling competition with boys. Ultimately, Tara's story is a direct and immediate chronicle of such broader cultural issues as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, athleticism and eating disorders, gender discrimination in organized athletics, and the meaning and value of sport in American culture.

Festivals and Awards

For the most updated list, please visit www.wmm.com.

Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival
South by Southwest Film Festival
Full Frame Documentary Film Festival
Dallas Video Festival
Athens International Film and Video Festival
Memphis International Film Festival
Northampton Independent Film Festival
Ladyfest East Film Festival
Frameline - San Francisco Lesbian & Gay Film Festival



"An empathetic and subtle portrait of a teenaged girl's athletic passion."

David Fellerath
indiewire



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Credits

2003 · 53 minutes · Video · Color

Director/Producer/Sound/Camera/Co-editor

Diane Zander

Additional Camera

David Brown

Additional Camera/Sound

Elena Carr

Heather Courtney

Jenn Garrison

Mocha Jean Herrup

Mark Jones

Gerrie McCall

Matt McClung

PJ Raval

Tim Wilkerson

Additional Sound

Jamie Gluck

Kerry Mecusker

Co-editor

Joanna Rabiger

Music

Mark Addison

Nina Singh

Sarah Glynn

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Director Biography



An Emmy-award winner for her work on the documentary MOVING STORIES, **Diane Zander** makes documentaries while teaching media production and documentary filmmaking at University of Texas at Austin. Her film and video work has been shown at festivals across North America and has appeared on “Image Union,” a Chicago PBS showcase for independent film and video. Diane has been honored with grants in support of her work from the Texas Council for the Humanities, Texas Filmmakers’ Production Fund, Women in Film, the Liberace Foundation, and the Caucus Foundation for Television

Producers, Writers, and Directors. Her previous work includes PRETTY AS A PICTURE (1999), BEAUTY SCHOOL (1997), and PATERNITY IS UNCERTAIN (1997). The majority of her film and video work deals with gender and how female identities are constructed and complicated.

Diane served as an associate producer, writer, and editor for WTTW-TV Chicago PBS on “Moving Stories” and as a video journalist for CNN Headline News. She also has worked on numerous independent productions as a cinematographer, sound recordist, and on-line editor. A summa cum laude graduate of Northwestern University with a degree in Radio-Television-Film, she received her Masters of Fine Arts degree in Film and Video Production at the University of Texas at Austin.

Director’s Statement

Finding a young girl who wrestles is a trying task. This documentary began with two months of searching for a girl wrestler for a cinematography project. Once I met Tara, the experience of shooting footage of her wrestling at a tournament in December 1999 astounded me. I felt like I had stepped into a six-ring circus of testosterone: fathers were screaming at their little boys, constantly coaching them in toughness and aggression. Add the roar of the crowd—more parents and families screaming from the stands—and the atmosphere was overwhelming. In the middle of this space of aggression and intensity was Tara, a composed and determined girl, the only girl in the tournament. What struck me most was the way Tara spoke about the power she feels both physically in the act of wrestling and as a girl going against the grain. I do not remember sensing that kind of power at her age.

Almost a year later, while developing ideas for my thesis documentary, I remembered Tara’s strength and clear voice. I spent the next several months following Tara and documenting her life in sport, school, and at home. As I began shooting, I realized that Tara’s story becomes a vehicle for a dialogue about girls in nontraditional sports, the emergence of alternative femininities for girls, identity formation and gender, and the meaning of sport in American culture. Likewise, Tara acts as an access point to explore a thoroughly male culture of wrestling. What I encountered, though, was an environment that did not adhere to the perhaps stereotypical expectations we might have about wrestling. Many men supported



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Director's Statement (Page 2)

Tara's quest wholeheartedly, and many women did not. Understanding and documenting this was crucial to representing the sport more accurately and making complicated what could be described too simply.

This documentary is not the HOOP DREAMS of girls' wrestling. It's not an exposé about discrimination in wrestling. What I hope that this documentary accomplishes is to complicate these archetypal stories by offering a tale of one girl who just wants to play, in an environment where some men and some women disagree with her choices and where some men and some women wholeheartedly support her decisions.

GIRL WRESTLER is extraordinarily important to me, both artistically and personally. After spending months following Tara, I have grown to care about the dramatic turns of her life. At times it was difficult to keep the camera rolling when I would prefer to turn it off and comfort her after losing a match, being teased by boys she wrestled, or negotiating personal conflicts. But this is what convinces me that this is a significant project not just for me, but for a wider audience. Girls who are doing what she does need people to cheer them on. We as a culture need to become her fans and affirm that what she does makes a positive difference.

Diane Zander, June 2003



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Film Festival Documentary Wrestles with Issues of Girls in Sports

2004-04-22

Film festival documentary wrestles with issues of girls

By Lauren Coyle

Athens NEWS Campus Reporter

An hour-long documentary exploring the intersection of gender and sports in American culture will be shown for free at 5 p.m. on Tuesday, April 27, as part of the Athens International Film and Video Festival.

The annual festival runs this Friday through next Thursday at venues in Athens, though most showings are scheduled for the Athena Cinema and Baker Center. For information, go to www.athensfest.org.

In "Girl Wrestler," director and producer Diane Zander traces the life of Tara Neal, an enthusiastic wrestler at a pivotal point -- next year in high school she no longer will be allowed to wrestle boys under state guidelines. Her chance to wrestle will be virtually gone because there are so few girl contenders. "The message, I think, is about what sports means in this culture," said Zander, a lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin. "Sports are really just a vehicle for our ideas about culture -- what a boy should be, what a girl should be, and how parents and kids should or shouldn't communicate with one another."

"'Girl Wrestler' is a documentary that uses a girl's outsider point of view to get inside the world of Olympic-style wrestling and shows what challenges and obstacles and conflicts there are, not just as a girl, but as a competitor," Zander continues. "Ultimately -- amidst the thrill of competition, the critiques of folks who think girls shouldn't be on the mat, the struggles with parental expectations and weight management -- we are able to reflect critically on our ideas about sports and gender roles, by connecting emotionally to a girl who challenges those ideas."

The documentary traces Neal's complicated struggles as she wades through issues such as opposition to Title IX, the federal law granting women's sports programs proportional funding in public schools. As she journeys to the national championships, she must respond to those who claim girls should not wrestle boys. She also endures a battle with her body, as she strives to "make weight."

"Ultimately, Tara's story is a direct and immediate chronicle of such broader cultural issues as the social construction of masculinity and femininity, athleticism and eating disorders, teenage identity, gender discrimination in organized athletics, and the meaning and value of sport in American culture," states a news release about the film.

Zander said she was inspired by the concept of boy-versus-girl, the eloquence of Tara Neal, and the broader implications for gender and equality. "I started by being interested in the image of a boy wrestling a girl," Zander said. "It's both a spectacle and a metaphor -- you're constantly trying to figure out where that arm went, where that hand is."

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Girl Wrestler

But beyond that, a girl wrestling a boy stands in for a larger struggle for participation, equality, and fair play. Once I found Tara, the girl wrestler in the documentary, I was struck by her bravery and her no-nonsense attitude."

The documentary provides a potentially eye-opening experience for viewers, Zander said. "I am excited for people to see a young girl in a movie who is doing something positive and nontraditional," she said. "Seeing someone move against the grain, move against the status quo, makes us realize what boundaries there are in this culture. Experiencing the world from someone else's point of view for a short time can be an extremely revolutionary and transformative thing."

The Athens International Film and Video Festival will include 16 feature films, shown at the Athena Cinema, and 150 competition films, most of which are shown for free at Baker Center.

The festival is organized by the Athens Center for Film and Video, a project sponsored by the College of Fine Arts. It's intended to bring to the Athens community new, international, and independent films that would otherwise not be shown here.

"I'm excited about the breadth of work that we're able to bring to the screen, and I'm excited about the community support the festival enjoys," said Ruth Bradley, director of the Center for Film and Video.

This is the 31st festival, and last year's sold just over 6,000 tickets. A committee of eight people screens the films beforehand and selects those that will be part of the competition, Bradley said.

"For the features, we have a 'wish list' of features that anybody -- and lots of people -- add to," she said. "Then, it's a process of figuring out which prints we can put our hands on, which also exemplify a diverse, representative sampling of world cinema."





Of pins and passion

Chris Garcia
XLxtra

Legitimate wrestling is all about the lunge, the grab, the mount, the pin. In the abstract tangle of bodies, a misplaced grope (well, hello) is forgiven as par for the kill.

Wrestlers have a sense of humor about it. The contortions can be so suggestive the athletes have gone ahead and dubbed various moves "the crotch grab," "the Saturday night ride" and "the honeymoon." The names come with a blush.

Boy wrestlers do the moves with other boy wrestlers all the time and it's fine. But when a boy is wrestling a girl, those fast hands and explicit positions start to look like a whole other sport. This makes some boys (and some wrestling officials) squirm.

Thirteen-year-old Tara Neal is a girl wrestler who thinks they should get over it already. Tara, of Cedar Park, likes to wrestle boys flat to the mat. She's beaten every girl she's wrestled, and in her league there are no girls her weight or age she can wrestle. So she wrestles boys, and wins a lot.

Her struggle to keep wrestling boys is the subject of "Girl Wrestler," a 60-minute video documentary by Diane Zander, a lecturer in the radio-television-film department at the University of Texas. The movie will have its world premiere Sunday at the South by Southwest Film Festival.

"Girl Wrestler" is as much about the girl as the wrestler. Tara's fear of being barred from wrestling boys when she gets to high school -- the Texas University Interscholastic League prohibits girl-on-boy wrestling after junior high -- is the backdrop for a profile of a steely teen whose pensive dedication to her sport seems to eclipse the quotidian distractions of adolescence. We see Tara cruising the mall and palling around with girlfriends, but mostly we see her in tights bracing for the bout.

"She's mature beyond her years," says Zander, who spent six months in 2001 filming 82 hours of footage of Tara. "She sees right through everything. Social psychologists will say that girls are more emotionally in-tune at that age, and I definitely got that."

Zander tried to interview every boy Tara wrestled, but was mostly rewarded with grunts and monosyllabic shrugs. Tara, conversely, radiated an alertness and spoke with eloquence. Her self-possession and blinkered focus on the sport seemed to muffle the standard teen ebullience.

"She's more complicated than that," Zander says. "She's not a bouncy teenager. She's gutsy but not in a bubble-gum way. Her humor is more like dark irony."

That's what drew Zander to Tara, a stout, soft-spoken girl with freckles and red hair that goes from



Margaret Byrant, left, jokes around with her daughter, Tara Neal, before the screening of Diane Zander's documentary, 'Girl Wrestler.'
Brian K. Diggs/AMERICAN-STATESMAN



Girl Wrestler

long to pixie-short in the course of the film. Zander liked her poise and attitude the first time she met her at a tournament she was invited to by Tara's coach.

As a filmmaker, she was fixed on the idea of a girl wrestling a boy after she saw a segment about it on a television news magazine. She held fast to the image and wanted to expand it into a project for her graduate studies at UT.

"There are images you're always drawn to as a filmmaker and I'm always drawn to ideas about gender and socialization," says Zander, 28. In 1999, Zander shot about two hours of Tara wrestling and practicing. She had her image. Then she mothballed the video.

A year later, mulling over an idea for her thesis film, Zander returned to the footage and recontacted Tara for what would become "Girl Wrestler." Plunging into the testosterone province of wrestling allowed the filmmaker to wed her interest in gender issues with that fascinating initial image.

"This was a way for me not just to talk about a girl pushing boundaries, but a way to explore a very masculine world as well," Zander says. "When I went to that first wrestling match in '99, I was blown over. It was so intense. It felt like a mass hysteria. The boys are as young as 4 and some are crying and their dads are telling them to buck up and stop being a sissy. Sports are an interesting device through which we can see a lot of things about American culture. It becomes a way to see gender really play out."

Some of Zander's assumptions about gender were dispelled in the process. She found more men than women who were sympathetic to Tara's desire to wrestle. "One mother told me quite clearly that this is the gladiators and men should be on the mat, women in the stands," she says.

The film depicts mostly mild opposition toward female wrestlers. Occasionally a boy will forfeit a match to avoid wrestling a girl. Yet when Tara starts attending Cedar Park High School in the movie, she effectively can't wrestle. There is no girls wrestling team, so she has to join the boys team and hope that there will be other girls to wrestle. (Now 15, Tara has since quit wrestling.)

Zander foresaw the gender drama and the battles with weight that most wrestlers confront -- Tara is in a constant struggle to drop five pounds -- but couldn't foresee the friction between Tara and her supportive father who pushes her harder than she's comfortable with.

"Her dad is a generous man trying hard to raise his daughter right," Zander says. "He's just trying to instill some moral responsibility in her." Tara's parents are divorced, and when her dad stops bringing his daughter to wrestling matches, Tara's mother enters as a vibrant new character. "She's a very strong personality and through her you can tell why Tara is who she is," says Zander.

Zander, an Emmy-winner for associate producing "Moving Stories" for PBS, will take the film to several festivals seeking distribution. HBO has expressed interest, she says. "Girl Wrestler" may be the first in an unplanned series of gender-centric films by Zander. She's considering the Dallas-based group Second Amendment Sisters for her next subject. "They claim that having a gun is the only way to be a real feminist because it's the ultimate equalizer," she says.

Whatever her subject, Zander will be using the nonfiction form to explore and express salient issues of real life. "I want to keep doing this for as long as I can," she says. "Making and seeing documentaries allows you to live the life of someone else for a little while and to see the world through their eyes. It's a revelatory experience that can change your politics, sensitivity and range of empathy toward people.

"And that's an exceptionally important act in the world if you're actually serious about connecting with other people. You should see things that allow you to look at the world from a different point of view every once in a while. That's the way change is made."

The Austin Statesman
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3/6/2003

Independent's Day

'Girl' wrestles with intriguing issues

By Jennifer Prestigiacomo (Daily Texan Staff)

When other girls at her middle school were picking up their pompoms, Tara Neal was picking up boys - literally. Instead of participating in the typical female activities like cheerleading or volleyball, Tara chose wrestling. Her amazing story is told through the lens of UT lecturer Diane Zander's camera in her documentary *Girl Wrestler* that will premiere at SXSW next week.

"When I met Tara, I was just taken by the clarity that she had; she's very eloquent, mature and confident," Zander said. "I was struck by not only her personality, but also the thoroughly male environment she navigated."

The hour-long *Girl Wrestler* encompasses many of Tara's trials: being the only girl on the mats and dealing with family issues and legal issues. With the implementation of Title IX, Tara and girls like her were prohibited from wrestling boys beyond the middle school level.

"They spin it as 'Well we're the only states that have girls wrestling championships.' Well, that's great, but there aren't enough girls to really constitute a team, and if they won't even let girls wrestle boys in practice settings, girls don't really have a way to compete," said Zander.

Zander has always been interested in exploring gender issues since she began making documentaries at Northwestern University, which she graduated from in June 1997. Zander, who teaches two radio-television-film undergraduate classes this semester, has won an Emmy for her work on the WTTW TV (PBS) Chicago documentary series *Moving Stories*.

Sharon Ross, an RTF instructor, has collaborated with Zander for several conference presentations and co-taught with Zander at a summer camp that trained young girls to operate video equipment and produce their own news segment. Last semester Ross invited Zander to show a part of *Girl Wrestler* to her Women, Feminism and Media Senior Fellows class.

"I think that what makes her, as a filmmaker, very unique is that her knowledge base is just astounding, and she is one of the few people out there in her generation of filmmakers who is really committed to documentary and committed to visions of gender and identity in documentary," Ross said. "She does social issues from the very personalized perspective which I think makes her films really entertaining, and interesting to people."

"I have always been interested in documentaries," Zander said. "I think there is a real potential for people to create empathy if they can view the world through someone else's eyes, and that has real significant potential for political change and social change."



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by Tobias Peterson and Terry Sawyer

Final Weekend / Film: *Bucking the System, One Documentary at a Time*

The final weekend of SXSW is most visibly the musical half of the festival. With the film awards handed out Tuesday night and the final "big" screening (an unfinished edit of Christopher Guest's latest mockumentary *A Mighty Wind*) held on Wednesday night, no cinematic events remained to lure people back to the theaters.

That is, of course, unless you count the films themselves. As festival-goers crammed into music venues all over in town, a full compliment of SXSW films continued to screen. This allowed those who were unable to catch everything they wanted to see in the first, frantic days of SXSW to more leisurely take in the films they missed. It also allowed the films continued exposure in their various bids for distribution. Although, in this final weekend, the cinematic acts might have taken a back stage to the musical ones, the screenings proved that a lot of talent remained to be seen on screen as well as on stage.

Girl Wrestler

While both *Flag Wars* and *Target* take on the pervasiveness -- and destructiveness -- of capitalism, *Girl Wrestler* does the same for patriarchy. Hitting home for many in the Austin audience, the film takes place in central Texas, and tells the story of Tara Neal, a young girl whose interest in wrestling is met with skepticism, disdain, and resistance at every turn.

The wrestling that Tara's interested in is not the fake, Vince McMahon, Rock, chest-shaving, body slamming kind of wrestling. Tara's participates in the collegiate and Olympic, Greco-Roman style of wrestling, where the contact is real, unscripted, and -- at times -- brutally physical. As such, Tara directly challenges stereotypes of delicate femininity as well as the antiquated notion of separate spheres in athletics: girls participate in passive, "safe" activities while boys play in "tough," competitive sports.

Title IX, a federal provision that mandates equal spending for men and women's athletics in schools, has done much to ease this distinction and raise the visibility of women's athletics as well as women as athletes. Much resistance remains, however, and *Girl Wrestler* provides a first-hand account of the ongoing debate that surrounds women's forays into the field of athletics.

Unfortunately for Tara, Texas is one of two states (Hawaii is the other) that ban girls from wrestling boys after the age of fourteen. To compete with other girls, then, she must travel great distances to national tournaments in the hopes that other girls who share in her predicament will be there to compete. When she is allowed to wrestle boys on local club teams, Tara must still contend with skeptical coaches, motivated opponents (none of the boys want the ignominy of losing to a girl), and rabid parents (even more bloodthirsty than the wrestlers). These harsh conditions combine with the already strenuous demands of the sport (Tara frequently fasts to maintain her weight) to make Tara's pursuit of the sport an extraordinary challenge.

To the film's credit, though, *Girl Wrestler* is not a glorification of Tara's accomplishments. She's shown losing several of her matches, as well as going to the mall, and arguing with her parents. In short, the film makes the point that Tara is a normal teenager inscribed by abnormal restrictions. The film is not building her up to be a champion, but simply advocating for her right to compete.

And, ultimately, this right to equal treatment is the film's foremost concern. *Girl Wrestler* offers an important -- if not discouraging -- measurement of gender equity in modern America. Though progress has been made, the film points out that women continue to face both institutional and social censure in their bid for equal standing. Tara, the film shows, is taking on more than her opponent when she wrestles, she's up against a history of segregation and the repressive weight of stereotypes.



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September 24 - 30, 2003

GIRL WRESTLER

5, 7, and 9 p.m., Tues., Sept. 30, at Little Theatre

Eighth-grader Tara Neal wrestles boys. And she wins a lot. But next year in high school, the rules say she'll have to stop—only same-sex wrestling is allowed at that level in Texas. The rationale? Wrestling is too sexual; and besides, girls are too fragile for such rough sports. Tara and her family think that's a crock. Shown as part of the Little Theatre's First Person Cinema series, Diane Zander's compassionate film documents part of Tara's eighth-grade season—her triumphs and losses on the mat and her struggles off of it. Mostly, Tara relishes what could be her last year wrestling competitively. It's hard not to root for vivacious Tara as Zander captures her primping and shopping at the mall with her friends, interacting with her coaches and teammates, and bonding with the handful of girl wrestlers at the national championship. (NR) KATIE MILLBAUER



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