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Wisconsin Film Festival: 'Being Bucky' is a badger of honor

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'Being Bucky' captures the personalities under the mask of Bucky Badger. - Michelle Stocker/The Capital Times

Being Bucky Badger just suits some guys better than others.

It takes a lot of time. It takes an ability to wear a big clunky smelly thing on your head. It takes an ability to remain silent.

And it takes an ability to lose one's self and be one's self at the very same time.

That's the world filmmakers John Fromstein and Scott Smith dived into with their documentary "Being Bucky," which screens at 6:15 p.m. Saturday, April 4 as part of the Wisconsin Film Festival. Advance tickets are sold out, but some rush tickets should be available at the door, and the film is coming back for a regular theatrical run at Point Cinemas beginning on April 10.

The filmmakers spent 18 months with the students who represent the University of Wisconsin as its famous mascot. They're individuals who share a collective goal and purpose that is summed up in the film's title: "Being Bucky."

Or, the film's tagline tells it pretty well, too. "Mascots are people, too."

The documentary was a quick sellout for the Wisconsin Film Festival, so quick that the guys who are in the film couldn't even get tickets.

"We had to have a separate screening for them," said Fromstein, the film's executive producer and a 1979 UW-Madison graduate. "It was a good problem to have."

The film sprang from a conversation Fromstein had with his son, Charlie, a 2008 UW-Madison grad (another son, Ben, is a sophomore there). One of Charlie's friends went to an informational meeting about Bucky tryouts and returned saying it was too intense for him.

"My son called me and said, 'You gotta come shoot this thing, it looks really funny,'"

Fromstein said. "We looked around, did some research and thought there might be a bigger story here than meets the eye."

The film starts with the Bucky tryouts, where aspiring entrants have to answer questions about the university and show their skills in skits and dancing. Anyone who thinks that sounds easy has never tried to improvise a dance routine to a medley of songs that includes "Bohemian Rhapsody" and "I Will Always Love You."

Push-ups are required. Skating is optional. All told, seven are asked to join the ranks of Buckydom every year, and the film follows their story from there.

"It started out being about Bucky, but it became more about the kids who are Bucky," said Smith, the film's director, who grew up in Madison. "The more we talked to the guys, it became clear to us how they are individuals when they're out of the suit, but when they are in the suit, they are the same."

All have the challenge of being Bucky while being full-time students, and also juggling their lives outside school. To hear one student talk about how being Bucky brings joy to his family as his father battles Alzheimer's disease, or another talk about the farm back home, are reminders of the real dramas that play out in everyone's lives, even those who wear a Bucky suit.

The filmmakers followed the Buckys to a mascot camp at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where other mascots were jealous they didn't have a film crew following them, too.

When it came time to film the mascot portion of the College Cheerleading and Dance Team National Championship, however, the filmmakers hit a big snag. Bucky came in second, but the filmmakers couldn't show it because the event sponsors reserve the footage for their own DVD.

Most importantly, though, the filmmakers got access from the university. That helps it be a Wisconsin story, but Fromstein and Smith also know it goes beyond that.

"We hoped that if we could just tell a story that was compelling, people would react to it," Smith said. "We felt like it could be, in a sense, any mascot anywhere. It just happens to be Bucky."