

Dr. Catana Starks: An almost mystical belief of not being limited by circumstances

Written by Joseph P. Hill



Two words can sum up the life of Dr. Catana Starks – determination and achievement.

Now the story of one of her many accomplishments (she's the first African-American woman in history to coach a male college sports team) is a movie. "From the Rough: It's All About Believing", starring Taraji P. Henson (formerly of CBS' "Person of Interest") as the Starks character and the late Michael Clarke Duncan (his final role on screen) opened last week at Regal Brooklyn Center Stadium 20.

The story is about Starks, who was the golf coach at her alma mater, Tennessee State University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in Nashville. Being a part of history is not the real story, though Starks' distinctive coaching style and her achievements in the face of many challenges in her position and in life is what will leave audiences inspired. She had to drive the team bus, wash her players' golf clothes, and had to constantly find places for her team to practice. Starks credits her strength to two women in her life – her mother and her grandmother.

A native of Mobile, Ala., Starks was diagnosed with severe asthma (doctors told her mother she could never participate in sports.)

"My mother, she had an almost mystical belief of not being limited by circumstances," said Starks. "So I grew up with a basketball goal in the backyard."

Asthma wasn't the only challenge she grew up in the segregated South of the 1940s.

"I learned to swim, I had to walk four miles in Mobile to get to a Black pool," said the now iconic figure.

Michael J. Critelli, the producer of the movie, said Starks has always chosen tough challenges.

"She not only sought out sports but swimming, which has to be the most difficult sport for somebody with asthma," said Critelli. "Starks' instrument of choice was the most physical musical instrument, or one of the most difficult, which is the saxophone."

After getting the men's golf coaching job, Starks, the former swim coach at Tennessee State, couldn't find golfers. None of the males on campus would play.

"Initially that didn't work out because I was female," said Starks.

Dr. Catana Starks: An almost mystical belief of not being limited by circumstances

Written by Joseph P. Hill

She had to innovate by recruiting internationally, via telephone. The calls attracted players from Sweden to South Africa.

"I just decided that if I were to get the kind of players I needed to build my program that I had to look someplace else and that's what I did," said Starks.

During nearly 20 years at the helm, her former players have distinguished themselves throughout the world including Sean Foley, a Canadian, who is Tiger Woods' swing coach, Sam Puryear, the former Michigan State University golf coach, (the school's first African-American golf coach) and Robert Dinwiddie, an All-American golfer at TSU and a current member of the European Tour having achieved three consecutive Top-10 finishes in South Africa.

Starks determination paid off when the TSU Tigers won the National Minority Golf Championship in 2005.

"We shot the lowest round ever played in the tournament," said Starks.

And another distinction for her tenure, 90 percent of the players graduated.

Ironically it was a conversation with one of Starks' former students that led Critelli to make a film about her.

"I wanted to meet the woman who had been the influence on this other gentleman's ability to coach (as) well as he did," said Critelli.

Five years later he produced "From the Rough."

"It's a film where the female protagonist and multi-racial cast are not focused on race," said Critelli, the retired 30-year Pitney Bowes executive turned film maker. "The movie is about the interesting complexity of life in which race, gender, global relations, and economics and social pressure, class issues come together, as they do in the real world."

Dr. Catana Starks: An almost mystical belief of not being limited by circumstances

Written by Joseph P. Hill



© 2014 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved. TM & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.