

Breaking Away with the Little 500

The Indiana University (IU) Little 500 was initiated by Howdy Wilcox in 1951 as a student fund raiser. It was patterned after the Indianapolis 500. The event continued to gain recognition over the years, starting out as a single race for men, with the women's Little 500 race beginning in 1988. Today, both sexes also participate in other cycling events leading up to the main 50-mile race consisting of 200 laps around a cinder track.

When I was at IU as an undergraduate, I rode in three Little 500 qualifications and two races, and when I was in graduate school, I was a coach.

One of the racers from the 1960s wrote a screenplay about the race, which turned into the movie called "Breaking Away". The basic story was about a group of local kids "AKA, townies" who felt like second class citizens to the IU students. In particular, it focused on a local boy who was an accomplished cyclist, but he and his friends could never compete in the Little 500 because they were "not rich enough" to be college boys. Although the movie focused on bike racing, it was also a love story and an overall coming of age story for the local boys. The local boys were eventually allowed in the race, and were called the "Cutters", a not so flattering slang name for those who worked in the stone quarries that were part of the Bloomington and surrounding areas.

The movie was filmed on the IU campus and in the surrounding area. Bloomington is a beautiful community, as is the campus, with lots of trees and rolling hills. Filming began in the summer of 1978 and continued through the Fall. Total budget for the film was \$1.5 million. The movie premiered in Bloomington in 1979 on the night of the Little 500.

The Director needed a lot of extras for the entire movie and in particular the Little 500 part, which was the culmination of the movie. The filming of the Little 500 race took four days. The first two days were on a weekend. They needed a big crowd in the stadium to film most of the panoramic race scenes, so a lot of students came, brought a few adult beverages, partied a bit at the stadium (an old football stadium with a cinder track), listened to bands that played, and had a chance at winning some pretty nice prizes. The Fall weather cooperated which was nice. When the crowd was present over the weekend, most of the filming focused on the beginning and end of the race scenes, where the fans were excited and cheering. Lots of fun and a real party atmosphere.

The riders were mostly students who had ridden in the race the previous year, along with a few others who were invited. This is how I got involved because a good friend was one of the local people who helped with the race scenes. He knew my history with the race, and made sure I was in not only the weekend scenes, but also those shot on Monday and Tuesday. Those were the tight shots similar to what you can see in the pictures I provided. In the picture with the small "pack" of riders, I am the lead rider in the light blue shirt. We were being filmed from the back of a pickup truck. The rider in the white shirt and red helmet was none other than Dennis Quaid, who became a star in his own right after Breaking Away, which I believe was his first film

of any substance. The hardest part about riding with the stars was that we were in excellent cycling shape, and they were not, although Dennis Quaid was decent. The director kept having to tell us to slow down and let them either catch up or take the lead in the pack. This took some real acting on our parts to do so without laughing. But we figured it out, and it worked ok.

In the other picture, taken from the YouTube video of the movie, I was sitting on a stationary bike in one of the pits. You can see that I am now in a brown shirt with yellow sleeves. Since I was not one of the actors, there was no chance that your average movie fan would figure out that I changed shirts. I still remember that I was told to nod my head after our team did a successful “exchange” where the bike was handed off between two riders. The director was nearby and I yelled at him “Hey Peter (Peter Yates), did you see me acting?”. He gave me a thumbs up, perhaps the first “like” I have ever received.

Those of us who rode in the race scenes were paid for our services. They paid us minimum wage of \$2.65 per hour, 10 hours per day, for four days. At the end of every day we would line up and get our \$26.50 cash. Oh, and they even fed us at breakfast and lunch. Seems I remember donuts and sandwiches were usually on the menu.

So how often and how long was I in the movie? Well, I was filmed in many scenes, some shot over and over. I remember one shot in particular involved only two of us extras and the main star. We took about 3 hours to set it up, and it lasted all of five seconds. Sadly, most of my scenes ended up on the cutting room floor. I think I counted about 12 different times where I showed up (very briefly) in the movie, the most prominent one on the stationary cycle. But that didn’t matter. The entire experience was very exciting, and unforgettable for anyone involved. The film won at least one or two Oscars and Golden Globe awards, and was nominated for several more. I am fortunate to have been a part of it all.

If you have not seen the movie, I would encourage anyone reading this to watch it sometime. Although the Little 500 was the culminating event, there was much more cycling in the movie, featuring beautiful scenery. And I must admit, the movie turned out much better than most of us imagined.

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