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One Man's 17-Year-Long Struggle to Create 'Unbroken'

It took almost two decades of rejection to produce the most important film of producer Matt Baer's life, but the wait was well worth it.



Matt Baer and Louis Zamperini in Louis Zamperini's home. (Photo courtesy Katie O'Malley)

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Michelle is a reporter and producer based in Los Angeles.

Bio



During the 1998 Winter Olympics, filmmaker Matt Baer watched a short CBS Sports special about Lou Zamperini, a former Olympic runner who survived WWII through a series of remarkable circumstances. Zamperini, who endured a plane crash into the sea in addition to being held in Japanese prison camps, inspired Baer to attempt the next-to-impossible: get a Hollywood movie made.

Without an A-list director, a best-selling book, or a built-in fan base, Baer was turned down several times by Hollywood. But 17 years, a lucky break, and an important friendship later, Baer has a film that opens in wide release on Christmas Day. Today—a few weeks away from opening night—Baer's hope is that audiences will embrace Zamperini's triumphant story.

TakePart: After all that time, how did you finally get *Unbroken* made?

Matt Baer: When you're talking about making a studio movie, the vast majority of studio movies now are either comedies or horror movies or the big, epic tentpole movies, like the Marvel movies. In order to get something like *Unbroken* off the ground at a major studio it needed a pedigree that Laura [Hillenbrand]'s book [2010's *Unbroken*] had.... Its success showed that the story would clearly resonate.

TakePart: Did you get the opportunity to meet Louis Zamperini? What was he like?

Baer: It was one of the most important relationships in my life because Lou believed in me, in selecting me as the producer of his life story, and I always wanted to honor that belief even though the odds were almost always against it. I loved his energy, and he had the most remarkable brain I'd ever encountered. Until the last six months of his life he had a memory that was extraordinary. He was encouraging and supportive.

Something people wouldn't get from the film is that he always had a spectacular sense of humor. And the fact that Lou, after all he had been through, maintained a great sense of humor—to me that says everything about how he was. He would always be teasing me. If I put on weight, he would poke at my stomach and say, "What's going on here?" Lou was always a rascal and also loved to flirt. He constantly flirted with Angelina, despite Brad Pitt sitting right next to her.

TakePart: Did Louis get to see his film before he died?

Baer: He saw every draft of the script from 1998. Whenever we tried to do things that weren't true, he gave me great grief about it because he wanted the true story told, and the true story was so remarkable. Then when he was in the hospital, Angie was able to show him some of the footage from the film on her laptop, so he had a definitive feel for what the movie was, and he was ecstatic with it.

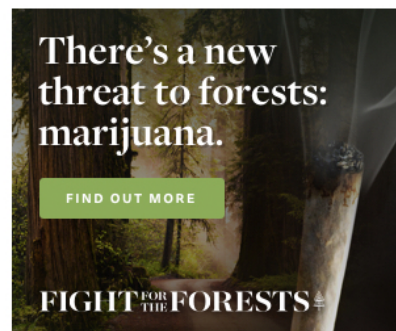
TakePart: What was it like working with Angelina Jolie?

Baer: It was a tremendously satisfying experience from the beginning because I was finally in a partnership with a director who felt as excited as I did about this material. She had the power to push it over the hump. She was very open and flexible to having her vision in line with a dollar-and-cents price. I simply looked at Angie as a really talented filmmaker with a clear vision of how she wanted the film to go.

TakePart: Where did filming take place? And why?

Baer: We did some of our shooting on the water. But primarily it had to be on a [water] tank of size, so there are two tanks that are functioning: one that is in Mexico, which is the Titanic tank, and one tank in Australia. So Australia was chosen because of having a

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tank and because the country has so many different settings and landscapes that we were able to double everything that we needed, prison camps, track and field stadiums,...and then on an emotional level Australians were heavily involved in WWII—especially as prisoners of war.

TakePart: What does this film mean to you personally?

Baer: Producing *Unbroken* changed my life because it finally got made. As a result, it gives other producers something that they're sorely lacking. Given how many times they're said no to over and over and over again, it gives my fellow producers hope that if they believe in something badly enough, maybe they will catch a lucky break.

TakePart: Who do you think should see this movie?

Baer: If you were to ask Laura Hillenbrand, if you were to ask Lou Zamperini, "Who is the target audience?" "Who will it have the most impact on?" they would say, "Young people," because *Unbroken* is the story of young men, 18 to 23 years old in war, in such a different time. What they had to go through was so different from what young men [at war] live with today. There's no cell phone; there's no Facebook. There are people in the sky with 500 bullets flying over their heads while working in faulty airplanes. Every time an 18- to 20-year-old man would go up in an airplane the odds were high they would not come out alive.

TakePart: Do you have any cool stories from the #IAmUnbroken campaign?

Baer: I have seen and heard a number of stories that have been submitted for this, read the letters, seen footage, and each one is spectacular in terms of showing great people who had been through obstacles but came out on the other side. And many of them had referenced *Unbroken* [the book] as something that they had utilized for encouragement in their own life. Lou loved that; he loved that aspect of what the book had done for other people.... He received so many letters that the book had provided inspiration for them—whether they were in the hospital or whether they were recovering from an injury—so I am thrilled with the #IAmUnbroken campaign just because it was right on point for what Lou wanted.

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(Quotes have been edited for space and clarity.)

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