

Planells talks about sports choreography

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BOUNCE BACKBy: Monique Savin

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Will Ferrell's back in action with his second sports spoof in two years.

Last year, it was figure skating and *Blades of Glory*. This year's pick is basketball and *Semi-Pro* (opening Feb. 28), in which Ferrell plays singer-turned basketball player Jackie Moon, who uses the profits from a chart-topping song to buy a basketball team, the not-so-aptly named Flint, Mich., Tropics.

But when leagues merge, Moon's team, worst in the league, is in danger of folding and must win to stay afloat.

Audiences know the fun ahead when a reporter asks Moon, "How did you learn to play basketball?" Handling the ball like a hot potato, Moon replies, "I saw it on TV a couple of times and I thought, 'I can do that!'"

Off-camera, Ferrell and fellow cast members Woody Harrelson, Andre Benjamin (a.k.a. Andre 3000), Rob Corddry and DeRay Davis weren't as foolhardy. They enlisted help from a real pro.

Hernando Planells, an NBA scout, coach of Japan's Ryukyu Golden Kings in Okinawa and the film's basketball trainer/choreographer tells Sun Media in a telephone interview, "All of the actors played basketball at some point." They just needed his expertise to make their skills dazzle on-camera.

To do that, Planells used training secrets behind the scenes.

"We enhance training fundamentals with jumps, passing, speed ladders, and shooting drills. The way sports movies are made now you have to make it look real. People want to see great action. The actors have to come up with the big shots, the buzzer-beaters."

Knowing how to choreograph a winning play is crucial to any film's success.

"The script says, 'Player passes to player and the guy scores,' so I come up with the plays before the actor shoots the ball. Like dance steps," Planells says. "Choreography makes plays look better, actors look smoother as basketball players."

Facets of the game are emphasized differently for a basketball comedy or period piece.

"In a period piece it's more important how the play looks and that's very important to the actors. But in comedies it's about getting the laughs so the actors change it all the time."

Taking the cue, Planells injected levity into training for the stars by coming up with ideas how plays could be funny or how a character would shoot a basketball.

"Jackie Moon is the displaced, flamboyant player and owner of the team," says Planells.

Moon likes to play it sexy. Benjamin's character, Clarence Withers, "is the serious basketball character."

As in the real NBA, personality influences the playing style of each star.

Ferrell, who sports a natural afro, tells ET Online, "We've had a number of the different teams recreated -- we've got all the costumes, you know, completely authentic, from the Tropics Girls to every sort of gimmick you can think of which used to be the ABA; the old Adidas high tops, which, believe me, do not have the same cushioning as today's shoes, as my knees have now found out. But I've got the killer knee pads and, of course, the very authentic shorts."

What's not authentic in the film are the basketballs themselves. "That's the weird thing -- we're not actually using real balls in the movie," Ferrell confides to ET Online. "We're CGI-ing all the balls."

Computer-generated imaging is movie technology that was used for comedic effect.

As a pro scout with an eye for talent, Planells confided his top pick from the Semi-Pro cast. "Andre Benjamin is the most talented."

But it is Ferrell who audiences want to see. Fans loved his adventures in the world of NASCAR (Talladega Nights), soccer (Kicking and Screaming) and pairs skating (Blades of Glory), but this might be the movie that motivates them off the bench onto the court.

"Once audiences see how much fun basketball is, the movie will bring people out to play and give them the opportunity to take care of themselves," Planells says.

For more from the coach's playbook, visit hernandoplanells.com. And check out Comedy Central's Reel Comedy for '70s-themed style advice from the cast.