

WALKING TALL

Production Notes

Chris Vaughn (The Rock) has come home. He's a retired U.S. Special Forces soldier who has returned to his hometown to renew old relationships and make a new life for himself. But while Chris was away, his boyhood town wasted away to a dilapidated, crime-ridden shell of itself. His wealthy high school rival, Jay Hamilton (Neal McDonough), has closed the once-prosperous lumber mill – once the area's largest employer – and has turned the town's resources towards criminal gains. The place Chris grew up is now overrun with crime, drugs, and violence.

Enlisting the help of his old pal Ray Templeton (Johnny Knoxville), Chris gets elected sheriff and vows to shut down Hamilton's operations. His actions endanger his family and threaten his own life, but Chris refuses to back down until his hometown once again feels like home.

Chris Vaughn won't talk softly any longer...and he carries a very big stick.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures presents The Rock as Sheriff Chris Vaughn in a Hyde Park Entertainment/Mandeville Films production of the action drama *Walking Tall* (in association with Burke/Samples/Foster Productions and WWE Films). Directed by Kevin Bray, *Walking Tall* also stars Johnny Knoxville, Neal McDonough, Kristen Wilson, and Ashley Scott. The screenplay is by David Klass and Channing Gibson and David Levien & Brian Koppelman, based on a screenplay by Mort Briskin. The film was produced by Jim Burke, Lucas Foster, and Paul Schiff, and Ashok Amritraj and David Hoberman; Keith Samples and Vince McMahon executive produced.

Walking Tall's top-flight production team includes director of photography Glen MacPherson, production designer Brent Thomas, editors George Bowers and Robert Ivison, costume designer Gersha Phillips, music supervisor G. Marq Roswell, composer Graeme Revell, and co-producer Bill Bannerman.

WALKING TALL – SYNOPSIS

The first big screen version of *Walking Tall*, starring Joe Don Baker as real-life Tennessee Sheriff Buford Pusser, debuted in 1973 and was a huge grassroots hit with moviegoers. Its two sequels, *Walking Tall Part II* (1975) and *Final Chapter: Walking Tall* (1977), starred Bo Svenson as Sheriff Pusser and were also popular, memorable versions of the lawman's heroic stand against crime in his small, rural Southern town.

In the new *Walking Tall*, the original theme remains – one man standing up for his beliefs and vowing to do what's right against great odds – but the story itself gets an update. Buford Pusser is now Chris Vaughn (played by The Rock), a man who returns to his boyhood home in the Pacific Northwest after leaving to pursue a decorated career in the U.S. Armed Forces after high school. Slipping back into town unannounced, Chris is shocked and saddened by what he sees. His beloved town has been ravaged by poverty and corruption, its vital lumber mill is closed, and a crime-ridden casino is now the town's biggest employer.

It seems Chris's well-heeled high school rival, Jay Hamilton (Neal McDonough), has become the new robber baron of Ferguson, Washington. His wealth and influence have allowed him to open the casino, a gambling mecca called the Wild Cherry. Even Chris's high school girlfriend, Deni (Ashley Scott) is one of the casino employees; she dances there as a stripper.

Upon Chris's return, he and some old friends, including best friend Ray Templeton (Johnny Knoxville), visit the Wild Cherry on Jay's "good will" invitation. But Chris discovers cheating at the craps tables, and a fight erupts with Hamilton's security guards that ultimately leaves Chris overpowered, savagely beaten, and left for dead.

Chris's family – dad Chris, Sr. (John Beasley), mom Connie (Barbara Tarbuck), sister Michelle (Kristen Wilson), and her son, Pete (Khleo Thomas) – help him recover and plead for him to leave things as they are. But Chris is a man who won't back down. He decides to run for sheriff and rid his hometown of crime with the law as his main weapon.

With Ray as his deputy, Chris sets out to clean up the mess Hamilton has made. Now Sheriff Chris Vaughn, he wields a huge stick fashioned from lumber mill pine. He's one man against many – but he is *Walking Tall*.

MAKING WALKING TALL

The quest to bring *Walking Tall* to today's audiences began with eventual producer Jim Burke and executive producer Keith Samples, producing partners who acquired the rights to the story several years before production. They admired the spirit of the original films and their hero, Sheriff Buford Pusser, and they thought studios would be attracted to a modern film with the same thematic elements at its core.

"The first films really struck a chord with audiences in the 1970s," says Burke. "*Walking Tall* asserted that one man could stand up against corruption and make a big difference. It was inspiring, and we felt the time was right for such a story to be told again."

Burke and Samples joined forces with producers Ashok Amritraj, David Hoberman, Lucas Foster, Paul Schiff, and executive producer Vince McMahon to create an updated version of a story that still reverberates with filmgoers thirty years later.

"This movie is very much inspired by the original," explains producer Schiff. "It's loosely based on that storyline, but we didn't want a literal remake of that film. We wanted to create a contemporary take on the original film, which many people remember for its intensity and raw power."

Key to outlining a new version was creating its main character, the fictional Chris Vaughn. Whereas Sheriff Buford Pusser was a real Tennessee county lawman who battled crime in his southern hometown, Chris Vaughn encountered similar obstacles but in his own story, set in the faux Northwest hamlet of Ferguson, Washington.

Central to remaking the story was keeping the main idea that a lone steadfast person amid tyranny can overcome any obstacles. Also retained was the weapon of choice from the original films: a big wooden stick fashioned into a powerfully destructive club. As U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was fond of quoting: "Speak softly and carry a big stick."

But who would be physically imposing enough to convincingly wield such a formidable truncheon – basically an enormous 4x4 – and still be able to handle a complex acting role? The filmmakers quickly turned to film superstar The Rock, a man known as much for his strength and kind personality as he is for his quickly growing movie stardom. Luckily for the filmmakers, The Rock was a longtime admirer of the original films and their hero.

“*Walking Tall* appealed to me because I was a huge fan of the original film and of Buford Pusser,” says The Rock, who has grown from his position as champion of World Wrestling Entertainment into his new role as star of such films as *The Scorpion King* and *The Rundown*. “The theme behind *Walking Tall* always made a connection with me, the simple story of a guy standing up for himself. It transcends time and it is a story everyone can relate to.”

The Rock, born Dwayne Johnson into a family of wrestlers and fight promoters, also thought the climate was right to bring to the screen a story of one man succeeding against the odds. After all, The Rock fought his way up through the ranks of the wrestling world in record time, becoming one of its youngest champions at age 24.

“It was the right time for this movie to be made, and it was the perfect time for me to take part in it. I also wanted the legacy of Buford Pusser and what he stood for to be treated with the respect it deserves,” explained The Rock.

When a working script had been completed, the search began for the right director to guide the material. The filmmaker chosen proved to be another fan of the *Walking Tall* series, Detroit-born helmer Kevin Bray. A graduate of the New York University film school, he initially became an award-winning music video and commercial director before making his feature directorial debut in 2002 with the popular caper film *All About the Benjamins*, starring Ice Cube, Mike Epps and Eva Mendes.

When asked about *Walking Tall*, director Bray recalls the original film’s sense of realism and virtue, and he praises the fact that certain things stick with the viewer. “No matter what age group you’re speaking to, they all remember *Walking Tall*,” he says. “They remember the main character, Sheriff Pusser. They remember the stick. And they certainly remember how real the film seemed.”

Bray had first suggested that an updated weapon – an aluminum baseball bat – would replace the wooden stick of yore. But others persuaded him to stay with the more organic and symbolic version because of its power with filmgoers.

“They all fought me on that one,” recalls Bray. “I was trying to make the weapon more synthetic, more 21st Century. But they were right about the wooden stick. It is more appropriate to the main character, a man who grew up with lumber and as a boy probably used the forest as a playground.”

The forest was another new character in this reinterpretation of the *Walking Tall* legend; it was decided to relocate the story away from its original Southern roots to a small town in Washington’s Cascade Mountains. This shift freed the production to film in Vancouver, British Columbia, where similar mountainous territory exists.

Plans were made to create a new vision for Chris Vaughn’s story, complete with lumber mills and casinos instead of the moonshine stills and country backroads of thirty years ago. Chris Vaughn would have no wife or children, but would still be embraced and supported by a loving family and old friends, including his best pal Ray Templeton (Johnny Knoxville) and his high school girlfriend, Deni (Ashley Scott). The villains of the story would now be high-powered businessman Jay Hamilton (Neal McDonough) and his henchmen who have created a nefarious casino oozing greed, drug sales, and prostitution into the once clean-living town of woodsmen and shopkeepers.

Director Bray and production designer Brent Thomas went about creating the town of Ferguson and its central attraction, the Wild Cherry Casino. Thomas started by doing his casino homework, studying the plans and workings of existing gambling houses.

“My team and I specifically wanted to visit casinos in the Northwest, including those in Washington State,” said Thomas. “We also poured over building plans from casinos all over the world to get the best ideas from them. We then threw them all out and took a little bit from here and there to create a brand new casino that fit our needs. After all, this was a casino that had to contain some major stunts and fights!”

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

Another important element for the new film would be its stunts. Having a performer such as The Rock as a lead actor presented an opportunity to create a whole new spectrum of action that could never have been attempted in 1973. Although recent films often utilize enhanced stunt techniques featuring visual effects and extensive wire work, the *Walking Tall* filmmakers decided to keep the film's many fights on a grounded, realistic plane to match the original film's memorable raw intensity.

Kevin Bray and stunt coordinators Jeff Habberstad and Mike Crestejo concentrated on designing complex *mano a mano* fisticuffs that would use The Rock's prowess in the wrestling ring as well as create action scenes that were visceral and believable for the audience identifying with the plight of Chris Vaughn.

"We are living in a world where recent technology has changed what action scenes can be," explains producer Paul Schiff. "The wire work and artificiality defy the laws of physics with people flying through the air. We decided it was important to be intense, brutal and real when creating our fights. We wanted to go back to the basics and find the roots of those fights we all remembered from the classic films of the seventies. We were fortunate to have a director who also wanted a 'low-fi,' earthbound approach to the key fights in this film, and who also wanted those fights to be believable within the world of our story."

Reality was what Habberstad and Crestejo also had in mind when rehearsing the parries and thrusts of the film's many complex brawls.

"I think people really appreciate seeing something with real people, not a cartoon," says Habberstad, who has created fights for films such as *Spiderman* and *Mission: Impossible 2*. "People are going to watch our fights and know we had real people – no fake flying, no computer generated actors, but the real thing."

In designing the film's climatic battle royale between Chris and his nemesis, Jay Hamilton, it was important to cast an actor who could conceivably stand up to The Rock's immense physicality and power. Surprisingly, that actor was Neal McDonough, better known as the nattily-dressed star of the television series *Boomtown* as well as the futuristic cop in *Minority Report*.

"Neal's a tough son of a gun," says Habberstad. "We dropped him, we slammed him and he just took it and asked for more!"

McDonough, it seems, has a hidden athletic side. Not only is the actor in fantastic physical shape, but he was once a star pitcher for the Syracuse University baseball team. For director Bray, it was McDonough's acting prowess that made the difference in his ability to create an antagonist big enough to take on The Rock.

"Neal is super focused and always gives such amazing performances," says Bray. "The fights would not be what they are without Neal. He was the cheerleader, the coach, and everything else while we shot his fight with The Rock, and you could sense The Rock learning a few things from Neal as well."

For The Rock, fighting the film's final donnybrook with McDonough was indeed a match made in cinematic heaven.

"Neal is an exceptional athlete, and his athleticism shows in our fight scenes," says The Rock. "I was really surprised, because a great athlete does not always make a great fighter. There's an X factor, a switch you turn on. Neal is one of those guys who has that switch."

For McDonough, the film's bruising finale was a challenge and a pleasure for an actor not used to enduring such raw tests of strength and timing.

"It was really physical for me," says McDonough. "Falling fifty feet through a sawmill, beating each other with axes and wood – really raw stuff. It was so much fun! Rock's a muscular guy, to be sure, but I am in pretty good shape; I box and play baseball all the time. But I haven't ever worked with an actor who works as hard as Rock does."

The Rock was determined that he prepare well so he could accomplish as many of the stunts in the film as possible to give it that realistic edge. He worked many hours with the stunt department, honing dangerous and complex moves into lightning-quick dances of violence. Although his extensive stuntwork on previous films is well documented, The Rock strived to do as many fight moves as possible without opening himself to injury.

"It was important to me to put visceral, raw action on the screen," says The Rock, "and that's why it was best for me to do as many stunts as possible. If I can make the movie better, if it satisfies the audience to see it's really me in those action shots, then

it's important. I never hesitated to get a little blood on my cheeks or a little dirt on my hands.”

For those stunts that were even too dangerous for The Rock, there was a solution: his personal stuntman, Tanoai Reed. It isn't unusual for stuntmen to resemble the star they are doubling, but Reed has an inside track: he and The Rock are cousins, sharing a half-Samoan heritage. Reed has the same powerful build as The Rock and has worked as a top stuntman since breaking into filmwork on *Waterworld* as a teenager in Hawaii.

But it was The Rock's growth as an actor that ultimately impressed Kevin Bray and the producers. Yes, the performer could handle the physicality of his role, but the way he was able to capture the subtlety of his character really impressed the filmmakers.

“There is a pivotal scene in the film where The Rock's character must convince an entire courtroom jammed with people that he is an innocent man,” explains Kevin Bray. “The Rock probably had never had a speech of such fundamental power to perform, and it would have been easy to come off too melodramatic. But, he just nailed it...and people broke out in applause after he did his takes. That really gave him confidence.”

The Rock agrees that the courtroom scene was indeed a landmark in his portrayal of Chris Vaughn. In the scene, the battered Vaughn must stand up to judge and jury for his rights, baring his scarred chest as a shocking reminder of the violence inflicted upon him by casino thugs.

“I was hoping to test myself dramatically in this role,” says The Rock. “That particular scene was a turning point, to be sure. From an audience standpoint, if that scene doesn't work, the movie suffers. But the scene went very well and Kevin came up to me and said I did a great job. That meant so much and I will always remember that. It was a good day at the office!”

Almost as daunting for the star was his involved love scenes with actress Ashley Scott, star of the television series *Birds of Prey*. Although the two weren't fist-to-fist, they had some lip-to-lip contact. Such love scenes were a first for the brawny actor,

who heretofore had just enjoyed a brief buss onscreen with actress Kelly Hu at the end of *The Scorpion King*.

“First of all, it isn’t a bad thing to kiss Ashley Scott over and over again – as an actor, I went deep inside myself to get my mind in the right place,” laughs Rock. “But really, it was the fact that Ashley and I became good friends during filming. We got to hang out and to know each other long before we had our love scenes.”

For Scott, it was indeed a pleasure to kiss The Rock, as well as to enjoy her first major film role after success in television and as a top model. Getting to know her co-star as a friend helped ease the romantic tension of their love scenes.

“I could not have chosen a nicer guy,” says Scott of The Rock. “He’s a doll; he’s smart, he’s gorgeous and a real devoted family man. Let’s face it, it’s nerve-wracking doing screen kissing and it can get awkward. But it was fun with him, and I am sure my girlfriends want to hear my inside scoop on it.”

Another important component was choosing the actor to play the film’s comedic character, Ray Templeton. Ray supplies much of the film’s levity as well as its down-to-earth humanity, and he’s sure to be a popular character with audiences. Johnny Knoxville, known to a generation of teenagers as the daring star of MTV’s *Jackass*, was cast as Chris Vaughn’s sad sack sidekick.

“Johnny was great for the movie,” says The Rock. “We created a cool relationship onscreen and became good friends off-screen as well. He’s a constant joker, who unfortunately has a habit of burping directly into my face right before Kevin yells action. That’s okay, because I’m bigger and I can kick him whenever I want. Besides, he got his on the football field.”

One of the first scenes shot in the film was a touch football contest between Chris and Jay and their posses. For The Rock (a former college and pro football player), it was a breeze, as it was for college athlete Neal McDonough. But for Johnny Knoxville, the football scenes played like a real Hell Week. Not only was he a wee bit smaller than most of the players, but the scene called for his character to take a blistering blindside hit.

“Yeah, I’ll always remember the football scene,” says Knoxville. “They had a stunt guy standing by, but I thought it didn’t make sense to shoot it with him instead of

me. I mean, I'm an athlete, right? That was a very, very long day of shooting. Not to mention the casino fight. I get pretty beat up in there, too."

ON LOCATION

As the scene of several damaging fights as well as a setting for opulence and debauchery, the Wild Cherry Casino presented the film's biggest design challenge. Filled with hundreds of extras, it boasts over a hundred working slot machines and thousands of lights...many of which wound up broken after Sheriff Vaughn swings his big stick.

Propmaster Dean Goodine created several versions of "The Stick" for The Rock to swing. In the film, Vaughn fashions his weapon from a piece of discarded lumber found in the back of his truck. He pares it down to a rounded club with a leather-covered handle for better battering. A full-sized wood version was created, as well as a rubber one for easy handling and safety.

The exteriors were just as important for director Bray, who used several British Columbian communities as stand-ins for Washington's town of "Ferguson." Much of the city streets, ferry scenes, and exteriors of the Wild Cherry Casino were shot in the picturesque city of Squamish, high in the mountains an hour north of Vancouver. Locations for the Vaughn house were found in the suburb of Surrey, south of Vancouver, while other scenes were filmed in surrounding communities such as Port Moody, White Rock, and Richmond.

Through the shooting experience, the theme of *Walking Tall* retained its clarity and prominence. The story of one man's ability to stand up for himself against deadly odds rang true with cast and filmmakers alike.

"Our central character succeeds on sheer heart," says director Bray. "He perseveres. I wanted to capture a reality in his story so that the audience can see an example of how one person can effect change."

Producer Schiff agrees: "As our world gets more complicated, people feel more isolated and powerless. It is a refreshing idea that you can have an impact if you take a

stand. I think we all have a vision of what it means to 'walk tall' in our lives. And maybe this film can help someone walk taller than they normally would otherwise."

For The Rock, the central theme of *Walking Tall* is universal. "The title of this film exemplifies what I think every person feels at some point in their lives," says The Rock. "There are moments in life that define us. In Chris Vaughn, people can see one man making a difference. He's one man standing up in his own small way. It's a great story, and we really had the passion to do it justice."