

Son's Santo film gripping

Jeff Santo took a drag from his cigar. Smiling nervously, he asked, "So what'd you think?"

A few minutes earlier Wednesday, Santo showed a special sneak preview at the Gene Siskel Film Center for his new movie, "This Old Cub." The film is a 90-minute documentary on his father, Ron.

"I can't be objective," I told Jeff. "Maybe somebody who wasn't from Chicago could give you more of an unbiased view. But I can't."



Ed Sherman
On media

The more I thought about it, the more I realized Jeff will have a hard time finding anybody to give him an

objective assessment in Chicago. Perhaps that is why the movie will do so well here.

If you grew up watching Ron Santo play third base for the Cubs, and have seen him maintain his incredible attitude despite horrific health obstacles, you can't help but get caught up in this film. You feel his enthusiasm, his frustration, his heartbreak, his joy of life, his pain, his self-deprecating sense of humor and, ultimately, his determination to keep pushing on.

Santo's career and life always have run the gamut on emotions. His son's movie captures them all.

Jeff, a filmmaker based in Los Angeles, took the approach of telling a story. He even uses "Act 1" and "Act 2" to describe the two segments of the movie.

The first part of the movie focuses on Santo's career as a player. There are classic highlights and vintage old footage. Jeff used Chicago-born actors William Petersen, Bill Murray, Gary Sinise, Dennis Franz and others to help Santo tell the painful story of 1969. Another Chicago product, Joe Mantegna, provides the narration.

Yet through that first part, Jeff cuts back and forth between highlights of a young Santo, whose two legs helped him become one of the great Cubs players of all time, to shots of Santo in the hospital coping with the amputation of

his legs. There are scenes of Santo clicking his heels in 1969 followed quickly by the present-day version pulling himself up on a walker.

The tone is set for the movie's transition to 2003, and its two storylines: Santo's quest to get into the Hall of Fame and his struggle to overcome a second amputation. This is the core of the film.

Jeff and a camera crew followed his father throughout the season. But for the most personal moments, it was Jeff alone doing the shooting.

Jeff shot the most poignant scene, documenting the routine Santo has to go through just to take a shower. Sitting quietly in his room in a pair of shorts, Santo is shown putting on both prostheses and then their protective covers.

There's another powerful

scene in which Santo labors to get up the stairs overlaid with audio of him talking about determination. When all the behind-the-scenes footage is put together, it makes it even harder to believe Santo was able to work an entire season in the Cubs' radio booth.

The film builds to Santo's disappointment at not making the Hall of Fame and the redemption of the Cubs retiring his number 10. Even though you know the outcome, the shots of Santo's Cooperstown heartbreak are extremely moving.

Movie critics will find some flaws in the production. They always do. But ultimately this is a movie Cubs fans and Santo fans will want to see.

Jeff is in talks with Tom Hanks' company, Playtone Productions, to distribute the film. He is shooting for an early March release with the movie showing at independent theaters.

Jeff's hope is that the film appeals to more than sports fans, and that viewers will get caught up in the inspirational story of a man who has been able to overcome obstacles.

"We're hoping it will transcend the sporting world," Jeff said. "We told the story the way we wanted to. We hope it touches some people."

Santo already has touched millions of fans as a player and person. His son's movie will make the connection grow even deeper.

Santo update: Jeff recently showed the movie to his father.

"He really liked it, but it brought back some old emotions," Jeff said.

Jeff reports his father has "good days and bad days" with his latest health problem. He had surgery for bladder cancer in late October. This obstacle is different than when he had his legs amputated during the previous two off-seasons.

"It has been tougher," Jeff said. "When he lost the legs, he was hurting. Then the pain went away. This time he was feeling good, and then he's hurting. It's a difficult mental thing to go through."

Santo, though, is aiming to make an appearance at the Cubs Convention in late January.