

T-REX



GRADES 8-12 CLASSROOM GUIDE

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TEACHING THE FILM:

T-Rex is a documentary film about 17-year-old Claressa Shields, a.k.a. “T-Rex”, a young African-American female boxer who beats the odds by taking home a gold medal in the 2012 Olympics. Fueled by her passion and endurance, Claressa overcomes personal, social and economic challenges to become the first Olympic female boxing champion. Her story will inspire students to think about their own goals and to envision overcoming challenges. A classroom screening of the film may complement a Social Studies, African-American Studies, Gender Studies or Health curriculum. Taught in conjunction with this guide, the film will invite students to think critically about the relationship between opportunity and class, race, and gender.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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SAN FRANCISCO
FILM SOCIETY

USING THIS GUIDE

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **T-Rex**. Support

materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

ABOUT THE FILM

Zackary Canepari & Drea Cooper
USA, 2015
91 minutes, Color, English
Grades 8-12

In the new Olympic sport of women's boxing, 17-year-old Claressa Shields— nicknamed "T-Rex" for her ferocious fighting style—bursts out from the total obscurity of a small Flint, Michigan gym to compete for a coveted gold medal. The product of an unstable home life in a city better known for its high unemployment and murder rates than for its declining industry, Shields refuses to surrender to the negative forces surrounding her. Instead, she nurses a dream of becoming a champion boxer, willing herself to the gym where she changes the mind of a coach who doesn't believe that women should use their fists. T-Rex captures Shields' long-shot quest, the tenacious sparring with boys during her training, private moments of doubt and the frustrating struggle to find endorsements in a world not sold on women's boxing, all of it leading to electrifying bouts during the 2012 London Olympics. Filmmakers Drea Cooper and Zackary Canepari capture Shields' mighty ascent in a tale that possesses all of the adrenaline and force of her right hook, yet is also intimate, emotional and exhilarating.

Program Note: mild profanity

Recommended Subject Areas:

African American Studies
Health
Peer/Youth Issues
Social Studies
World Affairs

Key concepts / buzzwords:

African American women
Boxing
Community
Competition
Class
Endurance
Family
Hard working
Olympics
Opportunity
Role Model
Social Mobility
Success



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

T-Rex is an inspiring story that will challenge students to look inward and to examine their own goals, as well as the obstacles standing before them. To get students in the right mindset to watch the film, you might ask them to reflect on the meaning of hard work and inspiration as it applies to their own experiences:

- Think of a time when you wanted something badly, and you worked hard to achieve it. What motivated you to work toward that goal?
- Where does hard work come from? What inspires someone to work longer and harder than they are required to work?
- What is inspiration? Can you think of a person or a story that inspired to you keep going when things were tough? How does one person's struggle inspire other people to keep going?

You may wish to revisit these questions after watching the film.

POST-VIEWING DISCUSSION:

Character and Story

1) What is your overall impression of Claressa? What kind of a person is she?

- Does Claressa remind you of anyone you know in your own life
- Can you relate to Claressa or see any parts of yourself in her?

- Claressa definitely has physical strength. Do you think she also has emotional strength? What does it mean to be emotionally strong or resilient?
- Can you think of any moment in the film in which Claressa shows her emotional strength?

2) Claressa beat incredible odds and rose to international prominence at a very young age. How do you think she achieved that?

- What makes Claressa successful? What motivates her?
- What does Claressa want from life? What does she fear?

- What did Claressa learn from her failure?
- How did she grow and change during the course of the film?
- Can you learn anything from watching Claressa's experience?

3) How would you describe Jason, Brianna (Claressa's sister), Michelle (Claressa's mother), and Rell?

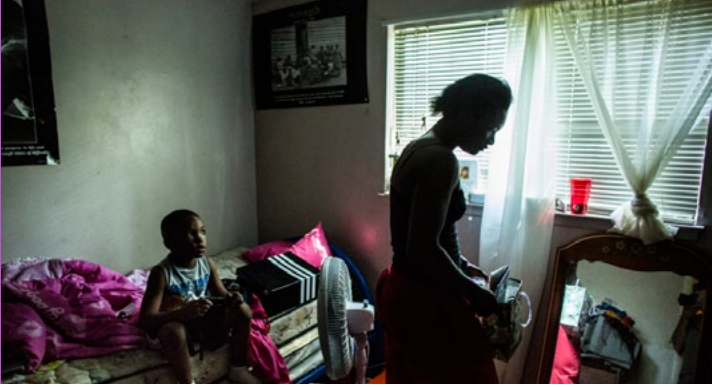
- What is Claressa's relationship to each one of them?
- How do they support, challenge, and/or motivate Claressa?
- Do you think Claressa would have been able to accomplish all that she has achieved without their

support?

- Were there moments in which family relationships and friendships brought Claressa down?
- How can a young person draw motivation from family, friends and mentors who are loving, but who have their own struggles?

4) Describe the training center where Jason coaches. How did Jason become a coach there? What motivated

WHAT DOES IT
 MEAN TO BE
 EMOTIONALLY
 STRONG OR
 RESILIENT?



him to become a coach?

- What is Jason's background and story?
- What opportunities does the gym provide for children and teenagers in Claressa's community?
- Why do you think the specific training to become a boxer or a fighter is so helpful for these young people?
- What does boxing teach about discipline?
- What outlet does boxing give for a young person's anger?

Context

1) What challenges does Claressa face growing up in Flint, Michigan?

- What problems exist for families and young people in Flint?
- Which of these problems are specific to Flint, and which of them exist in communities across the United States?
- What is the history of Flint, Michigan? How did the city's history contribute to the cycle of poverty that Claressa broke free from?
- What kinds of support do young people need in order to break free from a cycle of poverty?
- Do you think it is enough for one or two young people to break free?
- What kinds of support and investment would make it easier to live, to grow up, and to have a family in a city like Flint?

2) Claressa spoke several times in the film about her 'low-class' background. What did she mean by that?

- What is class and what does it mean to be 'low-

class'?

- Why does class exist in America? What role does class play in America's economic system?
- Is it possible for Americans to move up the economic ladder and to escape from being 'low class'? What role do sports and celebrity play in navigating class boundaries? Do you think it is easier for athletes or stars to move up in social class?
- What role does class play in 'The American Dream'?
- Can you imagine American society if class ceased to exist? What would change?

HOW DO FEMALE ATHLETES CHALLENGE GENDER STEREOTYPES?

3) What challenges did Claressa face as a young woman in a man's sport?

- Why do you think it was so difficult for people to accept the idea of a female boxer?
- Were you skeptical about the abilities of a female boxer? Where do you think our skepticism comes from?
- What social roles do women traditionally play and what ones are reserved for men? How have these roles changed over time, and how do they remain the same?
- How do female athletics challenge our biases and assumptions about what women can do with their bodies?
- Do you think that Claressa's

example might inspire more women to engage in physically demanding sports?

4) Think about the opportunities that allowed Claressa to become a professional boxer.

- What opportunities did Claressa have that other teenagers her age may not have?
- After winning the Olympics, did it become



easier for Claressa to earn more money through endorsement and sponsorships? What challenges did she face in gaining endorsement and sponsorships?

- To what extent does socio-economic background determine the opportunities that are available to a young person?
- To what extent does geography affect opportunity?
- If Claressa grew up in a different city, do you think her story would have been different?

Style and Message/Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) Did you like **T-Rex**?

- How did the film make you feel?
- Did Claressa's story remind you of other films or stories that you have watched or read or learned about?
- What elements of this narrative are universal to inspirational stories in American culture? Which pieces of the story are specific to Claressa's life and her experience?

2) What are the prevalent themes in this film?

- What resonates with you and stays in your mind once the film has ended?
- Do you think there is a meaning or a message in **T-Rex**?

3) This is a documentary film with a strong story line.

- Why is story important in a nonfiction film? Do you think that a documentary film should have a plot?
- Why do you think the filmmakers wanted to tell Claressa's story? What about Claressa's story made it a good subject for a film?
- What do you think the filmmakers thought of Claressa? Can you see their perspectives in the film, or is it purely objective?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Journaling activity:

If you could have a conversation with Claressa, what would you want to say to her?
 Would you want to ask her any questions?
 What advice do you think Claressa can share with young people who are facing challenges?
 Did you learn anything from Claressa's story that might apply to your own life?

2) Interview a Female Athlete:

Claressa is a powerful role model for girls who want to break free from stereotypes about what women should do with their bodies. The more role models we have, the better!

Using whatever tools are available to you, interview a female athlete at your school or in your community. You might use a smart phone to make a short video about your subject, or take notes with pen and paper and write an article for your school newspaper.

Ask your subject how she feels when she is playing her sport. What does it feel like to be good at sports? How did she become an athlete? What does she gain **from it**?

Ask her what she thinks about gender stereotypes. Are they present in the world of sports? How does playing women's sports help to combat gender stereotypes?

In our culture, young women sometimes think of their bodies as something to be looked at from the outside: Am I thin? Am I curvy? Am I hot? Instead of thinking about our bodies from the outside, what if we thought about them from the inside: How do I feel when I move? How does sports encourage a body image that is centered in oneself, rather than located in the gaze of other people?



California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- **Grade 8:** Standard 1.9 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, illustrators, news photographers) communicate information and affect impressions and opinions.
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare’s Henry V with Kenneth Branagh’s 1990 film version).
- **Grades 9 & 10:** Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- **Grades 11 & 12:** Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education. <http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker’s guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy. http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm

Common Core Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

This lesson addresses the English and Language Arts standards for Reading Informational Texts grades 8-12. Additional specific standard applications are listed below:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.



MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM	<p>All Media Is Constructed.</p> <p>How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used?</p>
AUTHOR	<p>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</p> <p>Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
CONTENT	<p>All Media Is A Language.</p> <p>What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
AUDIENCE	<p>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</p> <p>Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
PURPOSE	<p>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</p> <p>Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>



THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

1895 The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

1900-1920 Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

1926 John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

1929 Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

1935 Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

1939 John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

1960s The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

1968 The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

1988 The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

2000s The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

PRESENT DAY The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.



THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover,

an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

The Film's Official Website:

<http://t-rexthefilm.com/>

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Contextual Information About Flint, Michigan

Grist: "This is Flint, Michigan": <http://grist.org/urbanism/2011-02-15-this-is-flint-michigan/>

BlackCityinfo.com, Flint, Michigan: <http://www.blackcityinfo.com/michigan/michigan-flint.html>

MLive News, A Case Study on Flint: http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2011/10/new_case_study_uses_flints_fin.html

Belt Magazine: "Flint in the Hole": <http://beltmag.com/flint-in-the-hole/>

Mother Jones: "The Collapse of American's Imperial Car Industry": <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2009/06/collapse-americas-imperial-car-industry>

MLive News Article on Segregation in the Flint School System: <http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index>.

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Women's Boxing

WomenBoxing.com: <http://www.womenboxing.com/>

The Atlantic, "The Real Knockouts of Women's Boxing": <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/01/the-real-knockouts-of-womens-boxing/384568/>

USA Women's Olympic Boxing Team: <http://www.teamusa.org/usa-boxing/national-teams/elite-women>

International Female Boxing Association: <http://www.ifba.com/>

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Civil and Social Justice Resources

Seattle U, Poverty Education Center Resources for Teachers: <https://www.seattleu.edu/poverty-education/resources/lesson-plans/>

Teaching for Change: <http://www.teachingforchange.org/>

Edutopia: Creating Classrooms for Social Justice: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/creating-classrooms-for-social-justice-tabitha-dellangelo>



REVIEWS

The Hollywood Reporter

3/31/2015 by Justin Lowe

Drea Cooper and Zackary Canepari's documentary showcases a teenager striving for Olympic glory in women's boxing.

When women's boxing was added as a competitive category for the 2012 summer Olympics, the field was wide-open to potential contenders for the U.S. team, but the likelihood of an African-American teen qualifying for the squad seemed like a remote possibility. A scrappy doc profiling boxer Claessa "T-Rex" Shields' unlikely ascension to Olympic competitor, Drea Cooper and Zackary Canepari's film exhibits some admirable virtues but faces limited opportunities beyond the film's public-broadcasting reach.

An Independent Lens release from PBS, T-Rex begins by studiously and sympathetically depicting Shields' impoverished roots growing up on the treacherous streets of economically marginalized Flint, MI, as the daughter of divorced, alcoholic mother Michelle and ex-con father Clarence. At only 16 yet the eldest of three kids, Shields is acutely aware that her exceptional fighting skills may be the only ticket out of town that her family may ever latch onto. Mentored by volunteer coach and former pro boxer Jason Crutchfield since she turned up at the local gym at age 11, middleweight Shields boasts an undefeated record as she heads into her Olympic qualifying round. Surprisingly, an unexpected loss at the 2012 World Championships works in her favor after a technical advance catapults her into a spot on the U.S. women's boxing team.

In the run-up to the London Olympics, USA Boxing rules require Shields to train exclusively with the team's

coaches, relegating Crutchfield to the sidelines for her Olympic bouts. Shields is by far the youngest and least experienced on the U.S. team, although the film spends scant time contextualizing the dynamics of the squad or the perspectives of her teammates. Similarly outclassed by her competitors, who are all older, taller and more experienced, Shields is forced to draw on substantial inner reserves of skill and determination to compete on an Olympic level, spurred on by her prime motivation: safeguarding the future of her family.

Sports enthusiasts will be familiar with the film's straightforward account of Shields' rise to Olympic contender, which was widely covered by the national print and broadcast media throughout her unpredictable, charismatic journey. "A coach always wants a champion," Crutchfield observes at one point. "I just never thought it was going to be a girl." Many may find Shields' Million Dollar Baby-style tale personally relatable, and urban gyms could even see an influx of young women pursuing boxing and other pugilistic sports as the film receives Independent Lens support for community screenings nationwide. Inspiring as her journey may be, however, the film tracks an overly familiar arc, dwelling on Shields' disadvantaged background, teenage romance with another young boxer and family turmoil but providing limited focus on the sport of women's boxing or the complexities of obtaining training sponsorship or lucrative endorsements.

Filmmakers Cooper and Canepari take a DIY approach by assuming the essential directing, shooting and editing roles on the documentary, concentrating their interviews primarily on Shields, her family and her boxing community. Most of the fight sequences originate with other sources, interwoven with the Shields family's home videos and marginal video-diary segments shot by Claessa herself.