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Following the hopefuls with Hail Mary

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If you talk to athletes after their careers are over, and they take a look back, it's surprising how many there are who will tell you it's not the moment they won the gold medal or the championship. It's the journey.

Beginning at 10 p.m. on Sept. 15 on Citytv, in several major markets across the country including Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Saskatchewan and Edmonton, a new 11-part mini-documentary series of half-hour programs deals with what for many is the end of their journey and for others the beginning of a long-shot trip to a pro career in the Canadian Football League.

It's called *Hail Mary*, and for Eskimo fans it'll be an extra special program for consecutive Saturday nights throughout the remainder of the season, because the program features the Eskimos and is produced by Edmonton concerns.

The idea originated with Margaret Mardrossian, executive producer of Anaid Productions. Mardrossian lived in Edmonton for 20 years, where she built the company which is now headquartered in Vancouver and Edmonton. Her husband, Barry Gifford, is a long time Eskimo fan.

"I was never a football fan, but doing this series has made me a football fan," she said.

"It was my idea in the sense that I thought 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to follow a pro sports team to produce a series similar to *The Rig*?' she said of a 24-part series on the oil and gas game which aired on OLN.

"We spoke directly to Rogers in Toronto and they said it was a great idea. So we went to the Edmonton Eskimos.

"We took a crew to the last two open try-outs in Cincinnati and Atlanta and then we came back here and followed some specific hopefuls who came to rookie camp," she said of the series which takes you through training camp and ends with who made the team.

"Six players. All with the same goal. To play pro football," is how the promo sets

it up.

"*Hail Mary* is their story. Of being on the outside looking in. Of overcoming incredible odds. Of being at their best with everything on the line. *Hail Mary* will show the human side of football. It'll take you on the heart-warming and sometimes heart-breaking journey that players experience both on and off the field."



A new 11-part documentary series follows six players — including Eskimos rookie star Joe Burnett — on their various roads to the CFL.

Mardrossian said the series opens with Paul Jones conducting the opening tryout camps in Cincinnati and Atlanta "with Eric Tillman almost like a narrator about what's going on.

"I think what's compelling about this series is really getting a look at the emotional aspect of what they go through. There are some great emotional moments. It's more a show about people than about football."

That said, the producer she selected to do the show, David Benson, is no stranger to football.

Producer of *The Rig* and many other projects in 15 years of doing documentaries, Benson, for several years after working football games as a TSN cameraman (and at the Lillehammer Olympics), has been the lighting director for TSN games in Edmonton, Calgary and Vancouver, working in the booth with Chris Cuthbert and Glen Suitor. He's done the last five Grey Cup games.

Benson also coaches the Millwoods Grizzlies pee wee football team.

A born-and-raised Edmontonian, he said the Eskimos provided "as much access as we could possibly expect to get."

The results, he says, "shows the heart and depth of lives of aspiring football hopefuls trying to make it to a pro football team.

"It takes a player like Joe Burnett and gives you a real idea of where he came from on his way to becoming an Edmonton Eskimo," he said of the rookie star of the team.

The series was shot in June and July and has been in post production ever since.

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