



Written by [Eric Egan](#) on March 7, 2015

“McFarland, USA” — A Solid Family Film

Disney-produced *McFarland, USA*, directed by kiwi Niki Caro (*Whale Rider*, *North Country*), presents Kevin Costner in the real life role of Jim White, a down-on-his-luck high school football coach from middle-class suburbia who is forced to take a job as a cross country coach in the titular McFarland, California.



McFarland, a poor town smack dab in the middle of orange groves and lettuce fields, is populated almost exclusively by the migrant workers who provide the back-power necessary to turn all that produce into product. Indeed, it is McFarland itself that plays the most important role in the film. One gets the sense of what it's like to live in a small, hot, central California town where hope is in an even more constant drought than water.

And where hope is in short supply, there is plenty of fertile ground for an inspirational story.

McFarland does a serviceable job of harvesting that inspiration for the receptive audience. However, *Chariots of Fire* this isn't, and any overly critical audience member will note that there is little that achieves greatness in the movie. The direction is good, the cinematography decent, the writing not bad, and the acting above par. But the whole endeavor could have plumbed more depths had the filmmakers been more in tune with the fairly incredible true story from which the movie draws its life.

At its heart, *McFarland, USA* is a fish-out-of-water tale: Jim White dropped into the heartland of California's Mexican-American culture. When White is fired from his head football coach job at a prestigious high school somewhere more stereotypical of a Disney sports film, he has to move his family across the country into a small, adobe-style home in McFarland. The character arc of the White family is pretty predictable Disney family/sport movie fare. At first stunned by the armpit of a town they have moved into, when they see their neighborhood filled with stucco-sided homes sporting sun-baked dirt “lawns,” they feel they might as well be on another planet.

But McFarland is a place where the dreariness of a produce-picker's life is mitigated by the tight-knit community glued together by the Mexican-American culture that is the town's hallmark. Over the course of the film, the Whites, and Jim in particular, learn to love their new world and appreciate the culture once so foreign to them.

The main channel through which White becomes connected with the community is the cross-country running team he puts together for McFarland High School. The members, a rag-tag bunch of Mexican-American field pickers, at first dismiss White as just another “gringo.” Like any good sports film, however, the students must learn as much from their coach as their coach learns from them. Costner



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and the actors that portray the team's seven runners manage to fabricate a believable and endearing chemistry. Though never much of a versatile actor, Costner seems perfectly at home in the role of wise father-figure and coach. Though it's no Oscar performance, I was pleasantly surprised.

The film also explores internal family friction — both in White's family and those of his students — over the amount of time devoted to running practice. Necessarily, these extra hours take away from the time the students can work for their families, and also from the interaction of White with his wife and daughters. This constant threat to the running program and to the relationship between the Whites and their new community is what provides the meat of the film's conflict.

Unfortunately, *McFarland USA* never reaches the full emotional potential of the true story it portrays, no doubt due to a combination of deficiencies in the writing, directing, and editing. The lack of proper pacing and buildup, with far-too-quickly resolved conflicts, dilutes what should have been high-stakes moments. With no poignant lows and powerful highs, some of the film's emotional impact is dulled.

Luckily, the pacing issues aren't too much for the film to overcome. *McFarland, USA* manages to stir the spirit just enough to keep itself from drowning in mediocrity. Though not perfect, it remains a worthy effort for a night out with the whole family. In the days of *Fifty Shades of Smut* and *The Latest Christian Film that Has a Good Message Wrapped Up in Bad Writing and Acting*, that's as refreshing as a freshly picked tangerine after a three-mile run.

McFarland USA opened in theaters February 20 and has pulled in a respectable \$24 million to date (considering the genre and the \$25-million production budget). It is rated PG.



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