

notable men

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— Hernando Planells

Making the Team: *Hernando Planells*

WRITTEN BY **NANCY PARDUE** | PHOTOGRAPHED BY **JONATHAN FREDIN**

SOME OF US DREAM of making the team. Sports choreographer Hernando Planells creates the team, big-screen style.

You've seen his sports scenes in films such as *Coach Carter*, *The Longest Yard* and *Spider-Man 3*. But they're just a part of his story.

Planells' coaching career began at age 19; at 20, he became the nation's youngest varsity basketball coach, at Immaculate Heart High in Arizona. Since then, he's led high school, college and professional teams and conducted coaching clinics across the U.S. and abroad, most recently as head coach for the Ryukyu Golden Kings in Okinawa, Japan.

"I've played sports my whole life, and always loved it," Planells said. "I always wanted to do something in sports."

Along the way, he met "movie people" from the TV show *SlamBall*, in which full-contact basketball is played with trampolines. He was intrigued, and with no acting experience himself, embarked on a new phase of his career.

Now as coach, choreographer and even NBA scout, he's expanded his niche in the field he loves.

Planells was born and raised in Los Angeles, where he founded Elite Athlete Training, working with many athletes who went on to college and professional careers. But following his Kings job in Japan, a magazine article applauding the assets of the Triangle brought him east.

"Cary is the greatest place to live, especially with a family," he said; his includes wife

Carmel and children Preston, 9, and Gabrielle, 6. "And it's a hotbed of college teams. Now I plan to live here the rest of my life and get involved in the community."

By day, Planells leads children toward physical fitness, as athletic director at Cary's Hopewell Academy, and coaches all ages at Hoops City U in Durham. He recently announced another new venture: on-camera sports production workshops and acting camps that he'll teach at Hopewell and in the Cary community.

He's drawn to coaching, he said, to help people "set goals and perform well, mentally and physically. Twenty years from now, athletes and actors will remember that one coach, and how he brought them to a new level." Planells says training actors is not much different from students; on set, however, his "students" can include the likes of Toby Maguire and Channing Tatum.

And in *The Longest Yard*, Planells led actor Adam Sandler and real-life pro football player Michael Irvin in a convincingly fierce prison-yard basketball game.

Planells studies a script to develop the scene, then trains actors specifically for their part, be it to shoot a 3-pointer, break a tackle or hit a fastball.

"We only focus on those mechanics, so he can hit it when the director says 'action,'" he explained. "We find what they're good at and adjust to capture the shot."

The motivation? Authenticity.

"In any type of sports production, it's authenticity — the actor wants it to look real and great; he wants to look like a pro athlete.

It's hard to hit the shot, remain in character, say your lines, and be believable."

It's not all work, however.

"My all-time favorite was Robin Williams," Planells said. "We spent two days together working on a basketball scene that was cut from *License to Wed* — but it was great fun, with him doing his comedy routines."

Planells' latest work includes C9 Champion sportswear print ads for Target, and upcoming films *Grown Ups*, starring Sandler, and *Just Wright*, starring Queen Latifah, both set for release this year.

"It doesn't matter how big the scene, my role is an important part of the process," he said. "For example, no one remembers the basketball scene in *Spider-Man 3*, inside the mansion on the staircase, a slow, deliberate dribble. When I first got the script I said, 'Are you kidding?' but they wanted it to be tremendous.

"What I do to make an impact is important to the process, and I want to deliver a product that blows their mind."

It's a complicated life for Planells, but he loves it.

"What motivates me, besides my family, is trying to make everything I do look as professional as possible," he said. "I'm blessed to have opportunities to prove to myself I can do this.

"The base is coaching; that's always the same. Above the base is the switching of hats, who is your audience, how to adjust to fit their needs. And at the top it's always the same — impacting lives, no matter what age. It all ties in, in an odd, abstract way." ◀