

'Con Man' will steal your attention

By Aaron Barnhart

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"Con Man," the latest gem out of Liz Garbus and Rory Kennedy's documentary shop, tells the story of a Kansas City, Kan., native named Jim Hogue. Like many Americans, he wanted to leave the hometown behind and make a fresh start. So he reinvented himself - literally.

At Palo Alto High School in California, Hogue stole the identity of a deceased infant and passed for a 16-year-old. He was 26 at the time. Later, posing as a brilliant 18-year-old named Alexi Santana, Hogue got admitted to Princeton University. On a scholarship. He asked Princeton for a deferment because, he said, his mother was dying of leukemia.

In fact, at the time Hogue was in prison.

"Con Man," airing at 6 p.m. Tuesday on Cinemax as part of its "Reel Life" series (which, by the way, is reason alone to get Cinemax), is a fascinating and sympathetic study of an obviously brilliant guy with a pathological aversion to living by the rules.

"Con Man" is also about the person who made the film, Jesse Moss. He had befriended Hogue at Palo Alto High; 15 years later, Moss went looking for him. This film records his cross-country search for the elusive "real" Hogue, who had rarely been seen after serving his last jail sentence.

Along the way, Moss interviews classmates and associates who were fooled by Hogue. Most of them still speak of him with awe and respect, even affection. An old friend from KCK astutely compares Hogue's passion for long-distance running to his habit of deception: "When you run, you're telling your body a lie," says the friend.

After two years, the filmmaker finally catches up with his subject, now a loner living in one of the most desolate parts of the United States. He seems a broken man but also strangely defiant about his life choices. He tries to pass it off as just his alternative lifestyle.

This 55-minute film humanizes the onetime Washington High School track star. Yet I thought Moss could have looked more critically at Hogue. One person says he committed a "victimless crime," but Hogue was a thief as well. "Con Man" mentions his role in a stolen bicycle ring but doesn't bring up a more serious conviction for stealing jewelry (at Harvard, no less).

One admirer said that if Hogue hadn't been caught, he probably would've wound up on Wall Street one day. Now there's a comforting thought.

Pro at Con: Documentary follows track star's life on the run

BY: ANN E. MARIMOW

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Jesse Moss always wanted a chance to speak with Mystery Boy, the orphan with the shadowy past who showed up one day at Palo Alto High School and became an instant track star.

But soon after his arrival in 1985, Mystery Boy was exposed as 26-year-old college dropout James Arthur Hogue. He disappeared as his fiction unraveled, resurfacing years later with yet another mysterious identity at Princeton University.

"The story never left me," said Moss, then a Palo Alto High sophomore and now a New York City filmmaker.

Curiosity became obsession. Moss, now 31, spent two years tracing Hogue's trail of reinvention around the country to places like Kansas City, Kan., and Aspen, Colo. He turned his findings into a documentary, *Con Man*, airing at 6 tonight on Cinemax.

Moss began his search in Hogue's hometown of Kansas City, Kan. Hogue's childhood friend, Keith Mark, recalled a gifted runner who always finished first and was recruited to run for the University of Wyoming in 1977.

"To be a distance runner, you have to be a con man and a liar to yourself," Mark told Moss. "You have to convince yourself that you're not hurting when you know you're hurting and you have to con yourself into running five more miles when you want to quit right now."

At Wyoming, Hogue performed poorly, outrun by world-class recruits from Kenya. He dropped out after two years.

Mark suspected that Hogue later pretended to be a teen-ager to make up for his short-lived college running career.

In 1985 in Palo Alto, Hogue lasted just six weeks in the guise of the fictional Jay Mitchell Huntsman, a 16-year-old orphan from a Nevada farming commune. He came to be known around campus as Mystery Boy.

Questions about his identity arose when he clocked the fastest time at the prestigious Stanford Invitational Cross Country Meet. A police investigation revealed his true identity. Hogue agreed to withdraw from Palo Alto High.

Two years later, Hogue moved to Utah with \$ 20,000 in tools and bicycle parts he stole in Southern California.

In Utah, Hogue invented his next role, Alexi Indris Santana. He was accepted at Princeton after applying as a self-educated 18-year-old. A \$ 15,000 scholarship helped cover the cost.

Hogue deferred his admission one year. He claimed his mother was dying of leukemia in Switzerland. He was actually in Utah State Prison for stealing the bike parts.

Hogue's Princeton classmates would describe him as an exceptional athlete and student.

In 1999, Moss presented a work in progress to the Independent Feature Film Market. HBO, whose parent company also owns Cinemax, would commit only if Hogue agreed to participate.

Moss teamed up with writer David Samuels, whose profile of Hogue appeared in the New Yorker magazine last fall. They flew to Aspen - Hogue's last known address - and through a chain of coincidences got word to him about the film. On their last night in town, Hogue finally called.

On camera, Hogue wears a baseball cap and sunglasses. When his eyes aren't covered, he looks away. At 42, he still has the slight frame that allowed him to pass for a teen-ager.

Hogue's biggest deception was exposed at an Ivy League track meet at Princeton in 1991 when he was recognized by a former Palo Alto track teammate. Arrested, he pleaded guilty to forgery, wrongful impersonation and falsifying records. He served three months in a county jail.

In a taped police interview, Princeton Detective John Reading asked: "Can you explain why you have done this twice?"

Hogue responded: "Because I wanted to start all over again without any burdens from my past."

Today, Moss says, Hogue is still a drifter who keeps his possessions in a storage shed and earns a living doing construction work. He has not yet seen the film.