

A Landmark Achievement



The Express, shot by Kramer Morgenthau, ASC, highlights Ernie Davis' remarkable success on the football field.

by David Heuring

Unit photography by

Ernie Davis, whose nickname was "The Elmira Express," was a supremely talented football player who led Syracuse University to an unlikely national championship and, amid the civil-rights movement, became the first black athlete to win the Heisman Trophy. The new film *The Express* tells his story, beginning with his hardscrabble youth in Uniontown, Pa., and ending with his death at age 23, when he was on the cusp of a career with the Cleveland Browns.

During prep for the film, which was shot over 53 days in and around Chicago, director Gary Fleder and cinematographer Kramer Morgenthau, ASC referenced other football-related narrative films as well as documentary footage of Davis playing in the 1961 Cotton Bowl. The filmmakers subsequently devised four distinct looks, each depicting a different time in Davis' life, and decided to achieve the looks with a combination of in-camera techniques and the digital-intermediate (DI) process.

The first period, delineated by very muted colors, encompasses Davis' boyhood in the 1940s. The second, featuring brighter, richer colors, comprises his introduction to the alien world of Syracuse University. The third look covers the Cotton Bowl, where Davis and his teammates confront virulent racism; for this, Morgenthau fashioned a hard-edged, bleach-bypass look with extreme highlights to communicate the characters' struggle. The fourth look, depicting Davis' struggle with leukemia, returns to a more muted palette.

The Express was shot mostly in Super 35mm 2.40:1 because "we wanted an epic feel, and because it suited the horizontal field of view in a football game," says Morgenthau. The filmmakers opted for a classical approach to movement and composition, although the style becomes more aggressive as the story reaches its climax at the Cotton Bowl, an inhospitable venue for black players of that time.

Two Panaflex cameras — a Platinum and a Millennium XL — were used throughout the shoot, and both were often equipped with Primo 11:1 (24-275mm) zoom lenses. (The camera package included Primo primes ranging from 14mm to 150mm.) Morgenthau shot most of the picture on two Kodak Vision2 emulsions, 500T 5218 and 250D 5205. "I often pushed the 5218 1 or 2 stops to bring out the grain and pick up more stop at night," notes the cinematographer. "A little more texture seemed right for this era." A second unit led by director Allan Graf and cinematographer Bob Scott, who are known for their work with NFL Films, handled much of the football material that did not involve the principal cast. This unit usually used Arri 435Xtremes and often shot at 28 fps or 32 fps to take the edge off the action without obvious over-cranking.

For his first-unit material,



Morgenthau "didn't do anything fancy with the football coverage," he says. "We used straightforward dolly moves and telephoto lenses to track the action. The camera was not so much a participant as an observer, allowing the viewer to follow the game more objectively." A

Steadicam operated by Jacques Jouffret was regularly employed both on and off the field, as was a Technocrane; at times, the camera was also mounted on an ATV that followed the ball during games. To achieve the looks he and Fleder had in mind, Morgenthau initially

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tk considered using older lenses, but he eventually decided he “could get more precise control with Primos combined with filtration — 1/8 and 1/4 [Tiffen] White Pro-Mist filters had the right balance,” he says. “The Vision2 stocks are so clean and perfect, and I wanted images with a slightly more impressionistic quality.

I knew I could effect that look in the DI, but because there is a finite amount of time for that, I thought it best to get as close as possible in the camera.”

To re-create training films and other period footage, Morgenthau shot 16mm black-and-white Eastman Double-X 7222

and Kodachrome film. “On Ebay, I was able to track down some Kodachrome 7267, which has been discontinued,” says Morgenthau. “We found a drugstore in Kansas that still sells and processes it. We shot a wide variety of footage in regular 16mm with a handheld Bolex Rex-5 and a Vietnam War-era Angenieux 12-120mm zoom lens. Some of it is full-frame right against the 35mm.”

The cinematographer emphasizes that the film’s period feel began with Nelson Coates’ production design: “The colors were very carefully chosen, and at times we had a very restricted palette. When you see the Kodachrome images with all the period costumes, it’s kind of eerie — you feel like you’re there.

“The costume designer, Abigail Murray, had the football uniforms individually made,” he continues. “They were very true to the period, and you can see all the nuances of the texture and the tailoring on film. On a period piece,



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tk what's in the frame is half the game." Although Morgenthau's approach to lighting *The Express* grew from the script, he notes that personal taste inevitably comes through in the images. "Theoretically, the story should dictate the photography, but I think all cinematographers have a silent voice. I like to lean towards reality, but at the same time, I express myself and extend the characters' reach through the lighting. Things need to look true to what's happening in the scenes and underscore the drama at the same time. I usually light to extreme levels of

highlight and darkness, pushing beyond the limits of the film; to me, extreme highlights make for an emotional use of light. Those extremes of contrast exist in nature, but film handles them differently, and when it blows out, the light flames and glows and bounces off things in the room. In that way, film emulates reality *and* expresses the emotions of the scene."

The extreme contrast becomes especially pronounced during scenes that take place at Syracuse and in Texas. "There's a scene where the Syracuse coach, Ben

Schwartzwalder [Dennis Quaid], breaks up a fight between Ernie [Rob Brown] and one of his teammates," says Morgenthau. "The coach is standing directly under a narrow-spot Par can pointed straight down, and the lens is flared by the light that's kicking off his forehead — that's how bright it is. But it's organic to the moment, which involves extreme drama, anger and racial tension, and the stress of the football season."

Gaffer Brett Laumann, who worked with Morgenthau on such features as *Fracture* (2007) and *Havoc* (2005), says, "I like working with Kramer because he tends to go more toward the extremes. If things seem a little too dark or a little too hot, that's okay with him. His style is sometimes a little expressionistic, which I particularly enjoy."

On *The Express*, he notes, large soft sources were the norm. For example, in a scene depicting young Ernie eating dinner with his family, "we couldn't use spreaders or put anything in the ceiling at the location," explains the gaffer, "so we suspended five China balls and ran a piece of Duvatyn skirting around the whole thing, [in effect] creating a large softbox."

"Throughout the film, we used a lot of book lights, often with a 5K bouncing back through light grid or full grid," continues Laumann. "And we used Source Four [Lekos] inside extensively. For a college dance, we hung 24 Source Fours up high, all with the same gobo pattern of small dots. With smoke in the room, it created hundreds of shafts of light and gave the scene a nice depth." In other instances, the Source Fours were used without a gobo pattern to help balance the frame. Laumann observes, "Kramer gets very precise. He'll say, 'Give me a beam of light here that is 4 inches tall and 6 inches wide.'"

Several important scenes



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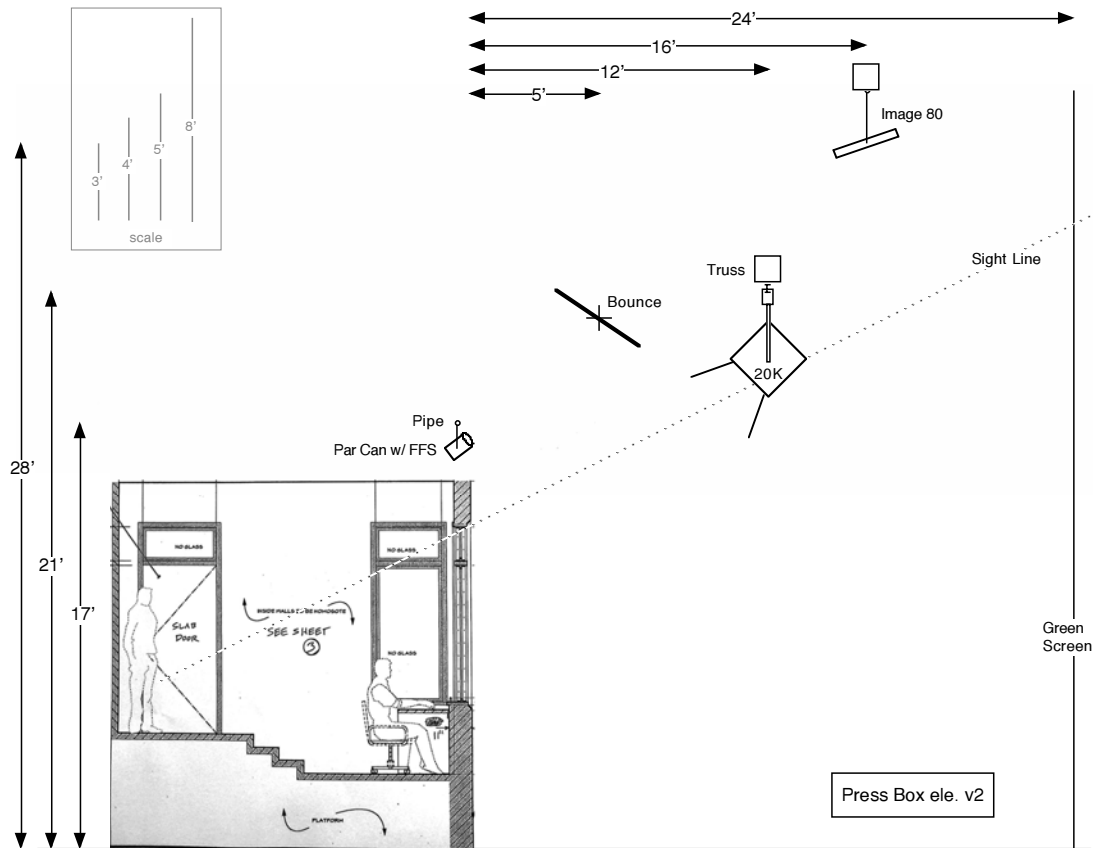
[5205]. We also strapped the Platinum outside the bus with a side mount. I played the inside down 1 or 2 stops and kept detail in the exterior landscape and sunset skies.”

When a sudden shift in the schedule left Morgenthau and Laumann with only five hours to rig the nighttime bus scenes, which were shot onstage at Chicago Studio City, they elected to go with poor man’s process. Laumann recalls, “We had planned out a large dimmer rig that included more than 600 channels, but then we had to put something else together on the fly. We needed lights that actually moved, as opposed to just panning; when you physically move the light, the shadows shift and the light wraps in a way that sells the illusion [of movement] much more effectively.

“We had four doorway dollies with Juniors on top — two moved back and forth in front of the bus

tk depict bus rides that take Davis and his fellow Orangemen to their games in the South, where they encounter bigotry and catch glimpses of the growing civil-rights movement. For

daytime bus rides, “we took a very minimalist, available-light approach,” says Morgenthau. “We shot Double-X with the Bolex, and we handheld the Platinum with



and two worked up and down the sides,” he continues. “We cobbled together enough dimmers for a variety of lights, and we had electricians turning other instruments on and off. We also hung Kino Flos gelled with 1 / 2 Plus Green overhead with rope to give us some ambient night light.” Green, orange and red gels accented other lamps outside the bus. “We also strung Christmas bulbs a few yards behind the bus and moved them, so from inside you can see moving points of light that are deeply out of focus,” adds the gaffer.

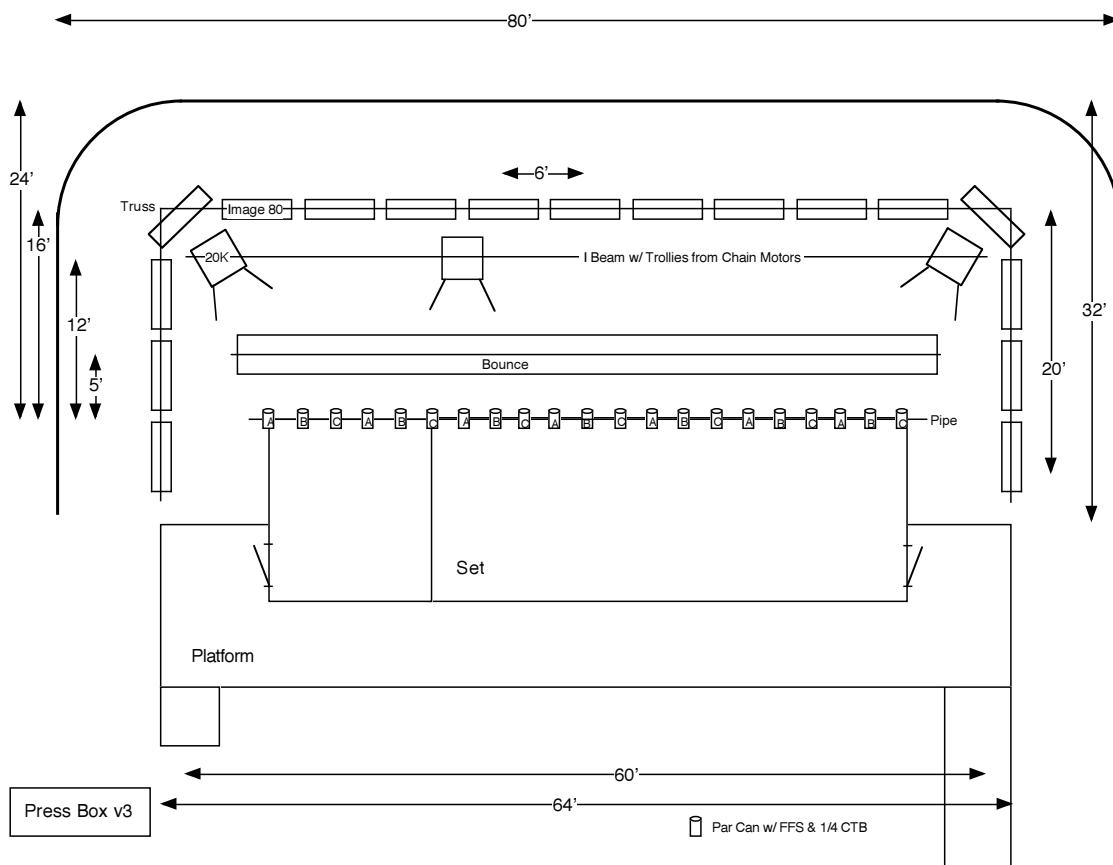
The existing interior practicals in the period-correct bus didn’t work, so the crew bought a handful of inexpensive puck lights with small halogen bulbs from a hardware store. These were rigged for 120-volt power, and the painter dressed the wires to conceal them. A few 100-watt Peppers were bounced into seat backs to light actors, and small



Litepanels LEDs — sometimes handheld and sometimes mounted — were used to throw additional light onto an actor’s face or accent architectural details inside the bus.

To film the games, the production used a number of football fields and stadiums in the Chicago

area. For one night game, Morgenthau notes, “I chose to turn off the existing stadium lights and use tungsten fixtures. The existing lights weren’t bright enough for high-speed work, and they had a discontinuous spectrum that would have resulted in a less full-looking



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negative.” The crew ringed the stadium with five 80’ Condors with two 12-light Maxi-Brutes in each; they needed enough light to shoot at a T2.8 at 60 fps. “We lit mostly from one side or the other to create a silhouette-y feeling,” says Morgenthau. “There was a lot of dust and dirt kicked up on the field, which really worked magic with the light and the

high-speed work.”

Eventually, Syracuse makes it to the climactic Cotton Bowl, where they play Texas for the national championship. The sequence includes a huge brawl triggered by a racial epithet, as well as Davis’ game-winning 87-yard touchdown. “It’s the pinnacle of the film and of Ernie’s life,” notes Morgenthau,

“and in this instance, I opted for the flexibility of DI tools to create the look. I used the DI to create a bleach-bypass look—the whites are blown out, the blacks are crunched, and the colors are desaturated, creating a harsh, unforgiving look.”

Although the bowl game was filmed during the day (at Northwestern University’s stadium in Evanston, Ill.), Morgenthau had an extensive lighting plan. “To create the consistency of light over seven shooting days, and to give the scenes an intense, unforgiving quality, we chose to ring the stadium with 11 10K Xenons on scaffolds or rostrums,” he says. “That created a sun we could always rely on, and the extra pings and edges of highlight enhance the almost surreal look. Each Xenon lamp had an operator who would pan with the action. It was an unusual approach for a day exterior, but it gives the game a sort

of larger-than-life feel. We wanted to give the audience an idea of what was going on in Davis' mind."

Given that it was so important to read Davis' emotions, Morgenthau and his crew took a "by-any-means-necessary approach to getting light in Rob's face," says the cinematographer. "Sometimes it was an 18K Arrimax, sometimes it was a Source Four Leko with an HMI bulb, and sometimes we did it with Xenons; it depended on the situation, how far Rob was from the camera, and the focal length. It's not necessarily the most subtle thing, but it was important to see his face and his emotions." Laumann adds, "We most often used [the 18K Arrimax] without the Fresnel lens. It has an engineered mirror that makes it much softer and smoother than most Pars. You don't feel the edge as much, but it puts a lot of light in a very small area."

Morgenthau spent about 80 hours on the DI at EFilm, where he worked with colorist Steve Bowen to finesse the concepts he initiated with his original photography, smooth over differences caused by Chicago's fickle weather, and match the second-unit footage to first-unit. "We output four negatives and made direct prints from those, saving a generation," notes the cinematographer. "It was something I advocated and the studio supported. In my opinion, what you lose in going to 2K for the DI you gain back to a certain degree by skipping the extra generation you'd normally have in printing."

Though Morgenthau has a firm grasp on the technical side of cinematography, he notes that he prefers to concentrate on storytelling. "What a filmmaker was thinking and feeling when he devised a shot is more interesting to

me than what piece of gear he used," he says. "I like to know the technical information, but I also know that what's done with the tool is more important than which tool was used. Filmmaking is an artistic interpretation of life done by

TECHNICAL SPECS

**2.40:1
Super 35mm and 16mm**

**Panaflex Platinum, Millennium
XL;
Arri 435Xtreme; Bolex Rex-5**

Primo lenses

**Kodak Vision2 250D 5205, 500T
5218;
Eastman Double-X 7222;
Kodachrome 7267**

Digital Intermediate

Printed on Kodak Vision 2383