

Windsor Film Company presents
in association with CHARTHOUSE Films

RILEY



2023 | USA | 93 min | Color | Narrative

Film Info

<https://www.windsorfilmcompany.com/>

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This is my story. It's inspired by my real-life background as a high school football player, struggling to accept and embrace my sexuality. With **RILEY**, more than anything, I wanted to re-explore these moments, in a nuanced and truthful manner, to illustrate the emotional landscape of a young man as he learns to understand and love himself.

- **Writer / Director Benjamin Howard**

LOG LINE

The life of a disciplined high school athlete begins to unravel when his queer identity competes against the idea of who he was supposed to be.

SYNOPSIS

In this powerful coming-of-age drama, Dakota Riley is a star-player on a high school football team whose hidden sexuality threatens to unravel his life. His girlfriend, family and teammates all suspect something is coming undone. Things are complicated by a series of secret sexual encounters online and with a classmate. When his identity is thrown into disarray, he is forced to confront the consequences of denying himself, and come to terms with who he really is.

Based on writer-director Benjamin Howard's real-life experience as a high-school football player struggling to come out, **RILEY** features nuanced and authentic performances, including a standout turn by lead actor Jake Holley.

PRINCIPAL CREW & CAST

Written & Directed By	Benjamin Howard
Executive Producer	Ron Najor, Carroll Middelthon
Producer	Benjamin Howard, Tommy Anderson, Laura Scarano
Editor	Benjamin Howard
Director Of Photography	Michael Elias Thomas
Original Music	Jerik Centeno
Production Designer	Brittney Khansari

Key Cast:

Dakota Riley	Jake Holley
Jaeden Galloway	Colin McCalla
Skylar Braxton	Riley Quinn Scott
Liam Hauser	Connor Storrie
Carson Riley	Rib Hillis
'Obi-Wan' Hookup	J.B. Waterman
Miriam Riley	René Ashton

DIRECTOR Q&A

Benjamin Howard, Writer / Director

What is your inspiration for making RILEY?

I was 12 years old when I strapped on my first pair of shoulder pads. In high school, I lived a disciplined life as a prep athlete; early morning workouts, pasta dinners with the team, two-a-days in 90° weather. Through it all, a troubling suspicion simmered in me. As it began to boil, that suspicion turned into a clichéd denial about my sexuality: 'It's just a phase,' I reassured myself. It was a feeling I grappled with at every weight-lifting session, every Sunday morning church service, and every school dance. The inspiration to write this film came from that feeling. Living this fraudulent version of myself, especially as a high school athlete, placed a heavy weight on my humanity and dignity, forging me into the man I thought I was supposed to be, instead of the man I was. So, I wanted to write a story that captured and expressed those burdens and feelings-- burdens that thousands of queer youth continue to carry today. The film aims to shine a light on the coming-out process through a contemporary lens, and to tell the myriad of young, closeted, questioning people – and athletes in particular - that they aren't alone, and that everything is going to be okay.

There's an inner monologue in all of us; a voice, telling us we're supposed to be something or do something, reinforcing learned ideas that we've internalized as truth. That voice can be unkind sometimes, and tell us certain things have to be certain ways. I made the film for the people who are plagued by that voice, so they might unshackle themselves from that nagging voice in their head telling them they're not good enough. For me, that voice was loudest as a high schooler. From a personal standpoint, I made this film for that younger version of myself; the closeted, lonely kid who didn't have an outlet to process things, or a support system to feel comfortable opening up to, and coming out to. I made the film to reassure that younger Ben that he is exactly who he is meant to be.

Your protagonist Riley is an exceptionally conflicted character. What inspired you to show his struggle in such a raw and complex manner?

Growing up is complex. Identity is complex. Sex is complex. For everyone. But when you take the already awkward, angsty years of teenage adolescence, and mix in this element of queerness and "otherness", things get... *really* confusing. I dragged myself through years of denial, trying to reject premonitions that I prayed would never come (but feared were undeniable). I was lucky, though, as I had a guise to perform under; football. Playing football offered protection from this version of myself that I so heavily denied. Football allowed a distraction from those feelings, but, simultaneously, forced me to confront them. This was complex to navigate; while my identity as a successful athlete allowed me to "code-switch" into a fraudulent version of myself, it also placed me into situations that forced me to confront this "thing" I just wished would go away: awkward dates with girlfriends, tense moments in the locker room, secret hookups with gay classmates. I wanted to see Riley placed in these situations the same way I was, to illustrate how terribly confusing and awkward they were, not just because they were my own lived experiences, but because they are the lived experiences of so many other closeted queer kids too.

What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

I want audiences to leave the film feeling hopeful. Hopeful that things will be okay with our struggling protagonist, hopeful that he has allowed himself to live truthfully. I want them to think that Riley has conquered this demon inside of him, and while he may not be ready to come out to everyone just yet, he's at least come out to himself... and that, for me, was the hardest part. I think a reason so many folks resonate with the film, gay or straight or otherwise, is because they see themselves in Riley. We've all struggled with authenticity, with figuring out who we are, who we want to be, what we want to say, and oftentimes that can be so difficult to navigate. I want audiences to be inspired to live their lives as truly and authentically as they can. This is also a movie about being kind to yourself, and I hope audiences are kinder to themselves after watching it.

The nuanced and realistic writing really grounds the story and performances. Could you talk about the relationship between the script and your actors' portrayals, in particular your lead Jake Holley?

The casting process was a productive collaboration between my casting director, Paul Ruddy, and I. Paul brought my lead Jake Holley in for my short film "Rendezvous" back in 2020, which "Riley" is based on. Jake hit a homerun on that project, and was an easy choice to bring back on for the feature. He's the kind of actor that invests every part of himself into a character; I appreciated that so much, especially with how nuanced and shifty the character is.

I think getting the performances started with drafting an ultra-personal script. 90% of the film is pulled directly from my lived experience. The script was such a strong blueprint for my direction. In many ways, it wasn't so much a matter of working-through a scene to discover a cinematic rhythm; it was simply pulling from lived experience, and watching our incredible cast bring things to life in their own ways. And I'm very proud of Jake's grounded performance, especially considering the level of intimacy the script calls for and because the script is so personal.

What were your creative inspirations for RILEY?

I was directly inspired by a handful of contemporary films that prioritize nuanced character, writing, and performance to tell complicated personal stories: the gritty, African-American 'coming of age' film DAYVEON which superbly illustrates a young kid going to desperate lengths to fit in. It showcases what happens when you try fitting a round peg into a square hole. Chloe Zhou's THE RIDER explores the absurd level of commitment that athletes aspire to reach, and warns of the dangers of pushing yourself to extremes. Stylistically, the brilliant coming-of-age film SUPER DARK TIMES acted as aesthetic inspiration for us; we wanted to contrast our use of color in intentional ways, and keep the world dark, gritty and striking. Finally, I have to admit that my favorite movie, BOOGIE NIGHTS will always sneak its way into my approach somehow, whether through the characters or through the visuals. The dreams and aspirations of Dirk Diggler in BOOGIE NIGHTS mirror those of Riley, as do the self-sabotaging tendencies of the main character as the story progresses. And although I'm not sure they're as evident in my work, my favorite directors are the Sadie Brothers, David Lowery, and P.T. Anderson.

The film ends on an optimistic note, but Riley still has a long journey to fully accept himself. What was your intention with the ending?

The hardest part of my coming out process was coming out to myself. And that is the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to see if this character could navigate through these defining moments in his young life, and end up loving himself on the other end. The film is a journey of self-acceptance; it's a really internal struggle, which was difficult to write for and direct, because internal struggles can feel melodramatic on screen. I had to find ways to *externalize* what Riley was struggling with, because he was ultimately just struggling with himself. Riley's biggest villains were the voices in his head, telling him that he had to be a certain way... and when he eventually conquers those villains, in the film's final moments before the "big game", we know he's going to be okay.

What was the inspiration for the evocative and accomplished cinematography, and how did you achieve it?

This is another aspect of the film I truly can't take credit for; the look of the film was fully achieved by our very talented cinematographer, Michael Thomas, who took my initial ideas to unimaginable heights. Depending on the moment Riley was living through, we wanted the camera to either be part of the story (wider lenses, placing camera physically closer to characters), or just observe the story (longer lenses, spying on characters from far away). We played around with warm hues and cool hues, and found a rhythm between the two that helped juxtapose different moments in Riley's journey. We pulled inspiration from many filmmakers, including Andrew Haigh, David Lowery, and Chloe Zhou, and from cinematographers including Joshua James Richards, Andrew Droz Palermo and Bradford Young.

What are you working on next?

I'm in the early stages of getting my next script off the ground, a (*a-hem*) BOOGIE NIGHTS-inspired story about a character's hedonistic journey through the glittering chaos of the gay porn industry.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Benjamin Howard, Writer / Director

Benjamin is an award-winning filmmaker and alum of UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television. Raised in San Diego's East County, Benjamin's record-setting career as a high school football player nearly had him pursue an athletic career in college. When he tapped into an undiscovered enthusiasm for filmmaking, Benjamin re-committed himself to storytelling instead. He attended the San Diego State University undergraduate film production program, graduating in 2017, and began studying in the graduate program at UCLA in 2018. In 2019, his short film "Deviant" won a Student Emmy Award for its shocking exploration of ex-gay conversion therapy used on queer youth in the 40's and 50's. Since its release in 2021, the short has amassed over a quarter-million views online. Benjamin's UCLA short film "Rendezvous" was selected for the esteemed Director's Spotlight in 2020, the yearly collection of the 10 best films to come out of UCLA's prestigious film program. Benjamin expanded "Rendezvous" into "Riley", which premiered at festivals in 2023, and marks his directorial feature debut.

Tommy Anderson, Producer

Tommy is an award-winning filmmaker and founding member of CHARTHOUSE, where the ideas of exploration and venturing into unfamiliar territory often dominate their stories. Tommy is a graduate from the film department at the University of Notre Dame, and his work includes Play It Cool (2022), First Time Caller (2023) Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction (2023) and Ruminations (2024).

Laura Scarano, Producer

Laura is a producer based in Los Angeles. After studying at Pratt Institute, she worked in nonprofits in New York City, enabling students to become the next generations of fine artists, filmmakers, and writers. Throughout her career, her mission has been to elevate creatives, giving them a platform to showcase their work and implement change in the world. Scarano has produced a repertoire of feature-length and short films emphasizing queer stories. Her work has been screened in film festivals including but not limited to Hollyshorts, Urbanworld, Montclair, Short Shorts Film Festival & Asia, InsideOut Toronto, and more.

Michael Elias Thomas, Cinematographer

Michael is an accomplished cinematographer whose early efforts filming live dance performances while at the University of Alabama ignited a passion for capturing moving images. Michael relocated from his hometown of Birmingham to Los Angeles in 2015, where he studied at UCLA's MFA Cinematography Program. After earning his MFA in 2018, Michael began building a diverse portfolio of work, from music videos to features, for artists like Wrabel, Daya, Buika, Lila Downs, Barbara Morrison, and more. Highlights include "First Position" (2019), "The Latent Image" (2022), "Desert In" (2022), "Riley" (2023), and a notable collaboration with Opera Philadelphia for the mesmerizing "La Voix Humaine" (2021).

Jerik Centeno, Composer

Jerik is a classically-trained composer and audio engineer. He worked on Marvel's "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings" as Scoring Coordinator and assistant to esteemed composer Joel P. West ("Short Term 12," "Just Mercy"). Recently, Jerik scored the short film "In Her Ear," which premiered at the LA Shorts International Film Festival. Additionally, he co-composed the documentary "The Bitter Root" with West, which premiered in 2021. Jerik also regularly works with composer Jimmy

Lavalle (The Album Leaf). Collaborations with Lavalle include “Into the Dark,” “3022,” and 2023 Film Independent Spirit Award Nominated film, “Something in the Dirt.”

Brittney Khansari, Production Designer

Brittney is a graduate of San Diego State’s Television, Film, and Media program, where she earned a Bachelor’s in Production Design in 2022. With a versatile portfolio spanning short films, theater, and features, Brittney’s capstone project “The Obedience Project”, a 50’s period piece for which Brittney designed and built the set, recently won Best Sci-Fi and Best Picture at Comic Con. Brittney’s efforts as a production designer can be seen on the festival circuit, playing film festivals around the country. “Riley”, her feature debut as a production designer, premiered in 2023.

KEY CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Jake Holley (Dakota Riley)

Jake is an American actor from Columbia, South Carolina. Before moving to Los Angeles in 2018, Jake discovered his passion for performing in church productions and small music videos filmed in his hometown. Upon his relocation to Los Angeles, Jake quickly found success in front of the camera, landing lead roles in short films that have played Oscar-qualifying film festivals around the country. More recently, Jake can be seen alongside Tom Sizemore in the cult hit "Apocalypse of Ice," and in 2023's "Wake," starring Netflix's Fivel Stewart. In 2023, Jake made his big screen debut in "Riley", in which he plays the titular role.

Colin McCalla (Jaeden Galloway)

Colin was born in Queens, NY and grew up performing in local theater before going to Pomona College in California to study Applied Mathematics. Not soon after, he veered from the academic path to pursue acting professionally and after booking a few co-star roles, landed his first break on Tyler Perry's “Ruthless” as a series regular. Most recently he can be seen in his recurring roles on “All American” and “9-1-1”. Outside of acting, Colin is an avid singer, dancer, and musician.

FILM INFORMATION

Country:	USA
World Premiere:	2023 Calgary International Film Festival, Canada
Running Time:	93 minutes
Production Company:	Windsor Film Company in association with CHARTHOUSE Films
Format:	Digital
Filming Location:	San Diego, CA and El Cajon, CA
Website:	https://www.windsorfilmcompany.com/
Insta:	@windsorfilmco
FB:	facebook.com/windsorfilmco
Twitter:	@windsorfilmco