

Mystic Ball



Mystic Ball

Directed by Greg Hamilton

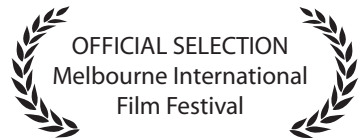
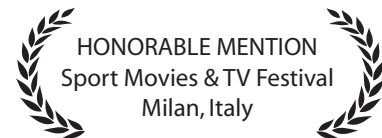
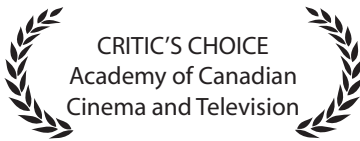
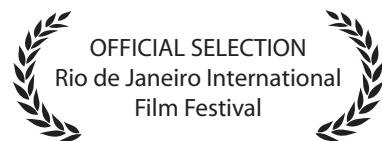
Produced by Matthew London and Greg Hamilton

Black Rice Productions

2007 - Canada/USA

83min, PAL DigiBeta, Color

www.mysticball-themovie.com



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Mystic BALL

“Beautiful, insightful - it reminded me how life can be mystical.”

“... captures a visceral feeling of love.”

“Absolutely amazing. I have never viewed anything quite as poetic as Chinlone.”

“... uplifting and mesmerizing viewing.”

“It seems that the only time the world media has focused its attention towards Myanmar (a.k.a. Burma) is to detail the on-going struggle between Aung San Suu Kyi and the ruling military junta, or to report on the latest developments in the country’s relationship with ASEAN. Rarely has focus been given to the country’s citizens or heritage, a major oversight which Canadian Greg Hamilton attempts to correct in his premiere film *Mystic Ball*.... Along the way he discovers a people and culture rich in beauty and spirituality, creating a moving pictorial of the secluded South-East Asian country.”

– *Sean Casey – Arts & Film*

“For Hamilton, what begins as a challenging physical activity becomes something more meditative as he comes to appreciate a deeper mysticism behind the hypnotic sport. The determined Hamilton is soon appreciated and welcomed with open arms by locals and top level Chinlone players, which then enables him to offer a unique insider perspective on this fascinating country. ... An intriguing look at a novel sport and the nation that follows it, *Mystic Ball* makes for uplifting and mesmerizing viewing.”

– *Melbourne International Film Festival*

“Chinlone is a beautiful, dance-like game of ball played in Myanmar (formerly called Burma) that is all about supporting each other towards more beauty rather than competing..... This is the kind of thing that just takes your breath away and that you can’t even imagine if you hadn’t seen it with your own eyes.”

– *Hannah Sung – The New Music Blog*

“...the lyrical cinematography is reminiscent of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*...the audience saw past the presentation of an unknown sport and shared in the beauty, passion and life lessons that can be found the Burmese sport of chinlone.”

– *Lisa Charleyboy – Excalibur Online*

Mystic Ball

“Therein lays the power of the game...it’s about HOW you perform and how you work with your fellow players to simply have fun and feel good. And isn’t that what sports should be about? ... There are so many great moments in “Mystic Ball”, from the Chinlone scenes to Greg learning the language and meeting interesting people in the process, and yet my favourite moment in the film is right at the end, where Greg is playing freestyle Chinlone with a group of locals. He is happy, full of energy and life. He is at peace.”

– Jason Whyte – *E Film Critic.com*

“A spiritual experience is what you take away from Mystic Ball. Watching the players, in particular Hamilton and the incredible acrobatics of seasoned chinlone players strive to perfect moves, while making the entire process beautiful and fluid is something to behold.... Mystic Ball focuses on how a simple non-competitive sport like chinlone, can take away all your earthy worries, connecting you to a deeper purpose.”

– Antoine Tedesco – *Scene & Heard*

“Although not competitive, it rivals the physical rigours of any mainstream sport, though its psychology is intimate, both in terms of space and solidarity. Veterans make play look easy, and while it isn’t, the paradox does much to generate appeal.... thrilling to witness.”

– Brandon Wee – *Senses of Cinema*

“Seeking out a physical activity with a ... holistic approach, he decides to pursue learning the sport of chinlone, which ultimately evolves into a journey of self-discovery and mystical enlightenment.”

– *Calgary International Film Festival*

Mystic Ball

- Log Line -

Mystic Ball is about filmmaker Greg Hamilton's physical and spiritual journey into the world of chinlone, an ancient sport from the country of Myanmar where beauty, rather than competition, is the focus of the game.

- Synopsis -

What would drive a man to devote his life to a sport that no one else plays? At least nowhere outside Myanmar, one of the most inaccessible and mysterious countries in Asia.

Mystic Ball follows Greg Hamilton, the filmmaker, deep into the culture of chinlone, Myanmar's traditional sport. But chinlone is more than just a sport, it is also a kind of dance and a meditation. Though it is very much a team sport, there is no competition, no winners and no losers. The game is astoundingly difficult, yet is played by almost all Burmese, from young children to people in their eighties.

With single minded devotion, Greg pursues his dream of becoming a real chinlone player. After many years of playing alone, he arrives in Myanmar where at first his awkward attempts are met with laughter. But eventually he becomes the first foreigner to play at the highest level of the game. In this story of self discovery and struggle, Greg finds a sense of oneness and even family, and the Burmese players who embrace him find an ambassador for their unknown art.

Eight years in the making, *Mystic Ball* will engage you in a beautiful story about the happiness and fulfillment that comes from following one's passion.

Mystic Ball

- About the Film -

Imagine passionately devoting two decades of your life to a sport no one else plays – at least not on your side of the planet. In the documentary film *Mystic Ball*, a chance encounter with a strange ball leads a Canadian man on a journey deep into the little known culture of Myanmar, and its traditional sport, chinlone.

Chinlone is a unique combination of sport and dance, a team sport with no opposing team. Over 1,500 years old, it is unknown to the world outside of Myanmar. In essence chinlone is non-competitive, yet it's as demanding as the most competitive ball games. The focus is not on winning, but how beautifully you play the game.

For Greg Hamilton, what begins as a physical exercise soon becomes a meditation and a dance with gravity. *Mystic Ball* follows Greg on his visits to Myanmar over a period of 20 years, as he evolves from an awkward beginner to a teammate capable of soloing with the greatest chinlone players in the country. En route, he juggles feelings of bliss and self-discovery with occasional bouts of self-doubt and inadequacy.

During numerous trips to Myanmar and the city of Mandalay, Greg is embraced by a community that shares his passion. He is now known as “Mr. Greg” to millions of Burmese who watched on TV as he became the only foreigner to ever play in one of the huge Buddhist festivals that celebrate chinlone. And in time, he comes to learn about its mystical nature.

We see the development of his friendship with the “Golden Princess” Su Su Hlaing, the greatest chinlone solo artist in the country. We see Greg blossom under the tutelage of Ko Maung Maung, a veteran top player whose son, Aung Soe Moe is considered to be the finest chinlone player alive. And we learn what chinlone means to a couple of elders who have been playing the game everyday for the last 70 years. The climax of *Mystic Ball* sees Greg get his chance to play with Ko Maung Maung on the best team in the country, the Dream Lovers.

Eight years in the making, *Mystic Ball* will introduce you to more than just a mesmerizing sport. It will also engage you in a beautiful story about the happiness and fulfillment that comes from following one's passion.

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- About Chinlone -

Chinlone is the traditional sport of Myanmar (Burma). Chinlone is a combination of sport and dance, a team sport with no opposing team. In essence chinlone is non-competitive, yet it's as demanding as the most competitive ball games. The focus is not on winning or losing, but how beautifully one plays the game.

A team of six players pass the ball back and forth with their feet and knees as they walk around a circle. One player goes into the center to solo, creating a dance of various moves strung together. The soloist is supported by the other players who try to pass the ball back with one kick. When the ball drops to the ground it's dead, and the play starts again.

Chinlone means "cane-ball" in Burmese. The ball is woven from rattan, and makes a distinctive clicking sound when kicked that is part of the aesthetic of the game. Players use six points of contact with the ball: the top of the toes, the inner and outer sides of the foot, the sole, the heel, and the knee. The game is played barefoot or in chinlone shoes that allow the players to feel the ball and the ground as directly as possible. The typical playing circle is 6.7 meters (22 feet) in diameter. The ideal playing surface is dry, hard packed dirt, but almost any flat surface will do.

Chinlone is over 1,500 years old and was once played for Myanmar royalty. Over the centuries, players have developed more than 200 different ways of kicking the ball. Many of the moves are similar to those of Myanmar dance and martial art. Some of the most difficult strokes are done behind the back without seeing the ball as it is kicked. Form is all important in chinlone, there is a correct way to position the hands, arms, torso, and head during the moves. A move is considered to have been done well only if the form is good.

Myanmar is a predominately Buddhist country, and chinlone games are a featured part of the many Buddhist festivals that take place during the year. The largest of these festivals goes on for more than a month with up to a thousand teams participating. An announcer calls out the names of the moves and entertains the audience with clever wordplay. Live music from a traditional orchestra inspires the players and shapes the style and rhythm of their play. The players play in time to the music and the musicians accent the kicks.

Mystic BALL

Both men and women play chinlone, often on the same team. Adults and children can play on the same team and it's not unusual to see elders in their 80's playing.

In addition to the team style of chinlone, which is called "wein kat" or circle kick, there is also a solo performance style called "tapandaing". This solo style is only performed by women.

To play chinlone well, the whole team must be absolutely in the moment – their minds cannot wander or the ball will drop. All serious players experience an intensely focused state of mind, similar to that achieved in Zen meditation, which they refer to as "jhana".

Chinlone is one of a family of football games played throughout the world. It is related to similar games in Southeast Asia known as *takraw* in Thailand, *sepak raga* in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, *sipa* in the Philippines, *kator* in Laos and *da cau* in Vietnam. A competitive variation of the game played over a net, called *sepak takraw* was developed in Malaysia in the 1940's. The origins of chinlone may be related to the ancient Chinese game of *cuju* or *tsu chu*, which is acknowledged by FIFA as being the oldest form of soccer. A similar game is also played in Japan where it is known as *kemari*. Chinlone is also related to the family of sports played by kicking a shuttlecock, know as *jianzi* in China and Taiwan, and *jegichagi* in Korea. And there is some evidence to suggest that a variation of these games traveled across the Bering Straits and influenced Native Americans, who also played a variety of games keeping a ball up with the feet. These games are thought to be the origin of footbag, also known as hacky sack.

However, nowhere in the world has the level of extraordinary foot skills and dexterity been combined with artistic expression and spirituality as in the Myanmar game of chinlone.

For more information about chinlone, please visit <http://www.chinlone.com>

Mystic BALL

- Director's Statement -

I made this film because I have a great desire, a need to share chinlone. I think the world needs a sport that is truly playful and happy. The urge to play is one of the most beautiful aspects of humans. But most sports are not playful, competition often creates an obsession with winning that takes much of the fun away. Almost everyday there seems to be a new way for humans to compete against each other. Whether it is competitive cooking, eating, dating, singing or dancing, there is a growing obsession to see who can beat who at almost anything. I don't think it is healthy.

Chinlone is a different paradigm, a different way of playing a game. The goal in chinlone is to create beauty and become one as a team. Though it is not competitive in the usual sense of "us against them", to play chinlone well is astoundingly difficult. Rather than creating more competition, chinlone celebrates the spirit of cooperation.

I hope this film will bring respect and recognition to this unknown art, and that viewers will admire the extraordinary skills and devotion of the chinlone players. I also hope that many people will be inspired to play chinlone.

Mystic Ball took about eight years to make. My original idea was to make a film about the world of chinlone. But when Matthew, my friend and fellow filmmaker and I tried to sell that idea, all the film people we spoke to said it wouldn't work because we had no story or drama. So that's why I ended up being in the film. It was a long and rather difficult process. First we tried putting in a small amount of my story, but the film somehow kept asking for more.

There is almost nothing written in English about chinlone. I did find a few chinlone books in Myanmar and had them translated into English, but the best source of information I found was the players. Over the years I've made interviews with the most experienced players, their stories and experiences brought to life a world that is not well known or respected even in Myanmar. I began to understand how deeply chinlone is woven into Burmese culture and my fascination and love for it became even deeper.

By following my intuition and living my passion, new worlds opened up for me. But I also opened myself up to extraordinary loneliness and longing. I was living on the other side of the planet from my chinlone teachers and friends. I felt isolated from the world I'd fallen in love with. But I don't think we ever get to choose who and what we fall in love with. We either follow where our heart and intuition lead, or make choices that are usually based on other people's values.

Mystic BALL

In chinlone I found something that I could do with total commitment, full intensity and without causing anyone else to suffer. I found a mixture of beauty - continuous challenge – improvisation - a way to be playful and frolic, even when playing alone. It gave me a way to connect deeply with others - a way of living totally in the moment - something pure that takes me beyond the usual concerns of winning, or doing things for ulterior motives.

After three or four years of playing everyday, I began to experience something like a trance. I use the word trance, but I really mean transcendent. I lose myself completely in the play, as I try to keep the ball up as long as possible with agility and flow. I am always playing on the edge of what is possible in terms of speed, balance, aim, timing and effort, always trying to refine and improve my skills with the ball. I often feel like I'm flying as I play, flying in the way birds do – darting, gliding, swooping, twisting and turning in the air. Chasing the ball, changing direction, adjusting the rhythm and timing of my movement to the ball...it's always exhilarating.

Chinlone has become a path and inspiration for me. It reminds me of what is important in my life. I want to be a good supporter of my friends, lover and family. I want to be playful. I want to share my best and help others to do the same. I want to be open and good hearted toward strangers. I want to feel that I am part of something larger than myself. I want to connect with other people, not defeat them or be the winner.

I believe that I'm doing a kind of magic when I play. I think it's incredible that I'm playing this ball on top of another ball that is spinning and orbiting around other balls in space. And the force that keeps all those balls in orbit is the same force that connects me to the chinlone ball.

At the premiere of Mystic Ball, a young boy asked me "Why is it mystic?" What a great question! I told him that for me, chinlone was like a shadow of something else, and that something else is still a mystery.

– What About Politics? –

Sometimes people ask me why I did not address politics in the film. There are a few reasons. This film is not about politics, it's about culture. Chinlone was around long before the current government in Myanmar and will last long after it is gone. The only time we hear about Myanmar in the news is for its politics. I think this is basically unfair and unfortunate. A country or culture should not be reduced to being seen through such a narrow perspective. The culture and people of Myanmar deserve a more balanced understanding.

Mystic Ball

**– Interview with Greg Hamilton, director –
– by Craig Moy - Hot Docs Daily –**

Twenty five years ago, Greg Hamilton was introduced to chinlone, a non-competitive sport where players pass a ball back and forth with their feet and knees by performing various dance-like moves. Chinlone is fast paced and visually striking, but Hamilton soon discovered that playing it can also be profoundly spiritual. Mystic Ball documents Hamilton's love affair with the beautiful game that, until now, was virtually unknown outside the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar (formerly Burma).

Craig Moy: For people who have yet to see your film, can you briefly explain what chinlone is and why it is so beloved in Myanmar?

Greg Hamilton: Chinlone is the traditional sport of Myanmar. It is very close to the hearts of Burmese people-it's been around for at least 1,500 years. The people love it because it is not competitive, aggressive or violent. It also creates friendship and generates an attitude of "loving-kindness."

CM: The first time you traveled to Myanmar to learn about Chinlone must have been daunting. How did you go about identifying and introducing yourself to so many of the country's top chinlone players?

GH: The very first time I traveled to Myanmar in 1986 it was very difficult. I went there on a mission to find a coach. I found one but didn't have enough control with the ball to really learn anything, plus the coach spoke no English and I spoke no Burmese. Then I went back in 1997. I looked up a master ball maker thinking that he would know all the players and that turned out to be a good way for me to meet players and learn more about chinlone.

CM: Can you tell us about your experience making the film?

GH: I decided to make the film in 1997 together with my best friend Matthew London [one of Mystic Ball's producers]. For about the first two years we were doing it part time, I also had an art festival in Yorkville at that time.

There were many challenges- the language, none of the players speak English. I had to use translators and it was difficult having someone in between the players and me. We must have gone through no less than 20 translators. Taking a film crew all the way to Myanmar and then how they interacted with the people there was challenging. Shooting chinlone was also an enormous challenge. It's an extremely fast game, much faster than it appears. The game is omni-directional, not like most games that are basically going back and forth from one end of the field to the other. In chinlone the ball is constantly changing direction and it is very hard to anticipate it.

Mystic Ball

Having myself in the film was super difficult. It basically happened because we couldn't sell the idea for the film based on just chinlone. We were told again and again that chinlone was not a story and to come back when we had a story. How much of my story to put in the film, how personal to get et cetera, were all things that were agonizingly hard to work out.

CM: In the film, you mention that you are trying to organize a chinlone world tour. How is that going?

GH: Yes, I am in the process of organizing a chinlone world tour. So far the response is excellent and there is much interest. I think that after the film has come out there will be even more interest. This is my dream and the dream of the top chinlone players in Myanmar, to have an opportunity to share and show their skills and hopefully get people interested enough to try playing in other countries.

CM: What do you believe are the first steps to making chinlone popular outside of Myanmar?

GH: The first step is the film *Mystic Ball* which I hope will excite and inspire people to learn more about chinlone and especially try playing it. I think that by explaining to people how spiritual it is and how much fun it is to play, they will become curious and give it a try.

CM: The game seems so closely linked to Buddhist culture and the particulars of Myanmar society. Do you think Westerners in general will be able to grasp the beauty of the game in the way that you have? Or might our seemingly ingrained notions about, for example, competition, or instant gratification, or our lack of a strong sense of community present barriers to the embracing of chinlone by Western culture?

GH: Yes, in many ways the game is closely linked to Buddhism and Myanmar society. But look at baseball or basketball, very North American games that are played all over now. I think that other Westerners will definitely grasp the beauty of the game like I have. I heard a program on CKLN 88.1 yesterday with Barbara Goslawski talking to someone about *Mystic Ball*. She gets it deeply. I'm really impressed and I find it very interesting to hear a woman talking about a "sports" documentary with so much feeling. Check it out. It's the best answer to your question.

(Audio recording available online at: <http://mysticball-themovie.com/press.html>)

As to the rest of your question, yes, for sure some people will not get it, won't find it interesting, may be limited by their "seemingly ingrained notions of sport," et cetera. But I think many people will be open to the meaning of chinlone. Lots of people are feeling uneasy nowadays about how rampant competition has become, how obsessive-the aggression and violence that accompanies so many sports is becoming less and less attractive, at least that is what I feel.

Mystic BALL

CM: As shown in the film, when you returned to play chinlone at the Buddhist festival, it received television coverage for the first time. You were also given an award of recognition, and now, you're organizing a chinlone tour. Have you ever felt any misgivings about your entry into the game-that perhaps people might think that you were just another Westerner appropriating someone else's culture?

GH: Yes, of course I have had thoughts like that. It is one of the reasons that I am rather low key in the film. But the answer to your question is no, I don't think that Burmese people will be feeling this (if Westerners think that, I don't really care). I see myself as a bridge or an ambassador to help in spreading the game.

CM: Do you still spend most of your time in Toronto, or have you been able to travel and stay in Myanmar more often these days?

GH: I haven't actually spent most of my time in Toronto for a long time now. For the last couple of years I've been either in New York, where we did the post-production for the film, or Myanmar or Thailand. I prefer to live in Southeast Asia rather than Canada and I plan to move to Thailand soon so that I can be close to Myanmar. Right now if I go to Myanmar from North America it's a very long flight, not good. For example, I was in Myanmar five times last year and I just returned about three weeks ago after staying there for four months.

CM: Outside of traveling to Myanmar, where can one get a chinlone ball?

GH: Sorry, but as far as I know chinlone balls are not available outside Myanmar. I have many-too many. My apartment is bursting at the seams with chinlone balls and other kinds of balls. The good news is that in the very near future I will be arranging balls to sell. How can I hope to spread chinlone unless people can find balls to play with?

Mystic Ball

- Director's Bio -

A lifelong student of Asian culture, Greg Hamilton is the leading foreign authority on chinlone, the national sport of Myanmar, and the first foreigner to play the game at the highest level. Greg has practiced and taught martial arts, and created games and workshops to enhance balance, awareness, and agility. Greg has designed jewelry, textiles, and ran a very popular annual art festival in Toronto. He is also a gifted musician, who arranged and produced the original music for *Mystic Ball*.

Originally from Canada, he has traveled extensively, and has lived, worked, studied, and performed in Indonesia, Thailand, Sudan, Japan, and Myanmar. Greg has made 18 trips to Myanmar. He is in the process of organizing the first ever chinlone world tour.

Mystic Ball is his first film.

- Producer's Bio -

Matthew London has been working in the visual arts much of his life. Among his creations is the award-winning interactive multimedia CD-ROM - American Visions: 20th Century Art from the Roy R. Neuberger Collection.

From the US, Matthew has been interested in Asian culture since he was 10, and has lived in Japan, Indonesia and Thailand and traveled extensively in the region. Matthew studied photography at the San Francisco Art Institute and documentary filmmaking at the International Film and Television Workshops in Rockport, Maine.

In 1986, he was introduced to chinlone by his friend, director Greg Hamilton. He has made eight trips to Myanmar.

Mystic Ball is his first film.

Mystic BALL

– Key Credits –

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Director | Greg Hamilton |
| Producers | Matthew London & Greg Hamilton |
| Narration | Greg Hamilton |
| Editor | Mary Manhardt (Academy Award Nominee) |
| Cinematographers | Jeremy Pollard (BAFTA Award Nominee) Alex Morrison Matthew London Aung Ko Latt Wolfgang Held Dyanna Taylor Emiko Omori John Marsonet |
| Sound Engineer | Sean O'Neil |
| Sound Editor | Paul Hsu |
| Composer | Ismet Ruchimat and Others |
| Motion Graphics | Zachary Bennett |
| Production Manager | Suzan Mah |