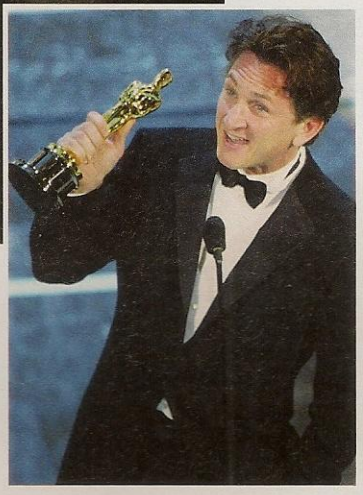
Even the Odds

Percentage players, take heed: You might want to lay your Oscar money on the names picked during tonight's Critics' Choice Awards



DOUBLY GOOD
Sean Penn, above, takes home a Critics' Choice Award for best actor in "Mystic River" in 2004 — and does it all over again at the Oscars, inset, a few weeks later.

By Todd Longwell

Media pundits have long asserted that the Golden Globes are the proper barometer of who and what will take home Academy Awards, but that might be changing: Statistics show that the Critics' Choice nods might well be award-dom's best Oscar prognosticator.

"They have a great crystal ball," Lions Gate Films Releasing president Tom Ortenberg says. "They've got as good a track record as anybody in predicting the Oscar nominations."

Adds Broadcast Film Critics Assn. president Joey Berlin, "I don't think there is any other awards show (with) such a parallel between the opinions of voters and the opinions of Academy members."

BFCA board member Mark Ramsey has crunched numbers from the past four years and found that Critics' Choice nominations match corresponding Oscar picks 69% of the time in the top six categories (best picture, director, actor, actress, supporting actor and supporting actress), compared with the Globes' 53% match rate. The Critics' Choice nods and Golden Globes are even at 63% in predicting Oscar winners, but the Globes enjoy the advantage of awarding prizes for best picture, actor and actress in separate drama and comedy/musical categories.

More-precise statistical comparisons are difficult because the Oscars, Golden Globes and Critics' Choice Awards differ in number and nature. For example, the Globes and the Oscars have about the same number of categories — 24 and 25, respectively, not counting technical and honorary awards — but nearly half of the Globes are dedicated to television categories. All but one of the BFCA's 16 awards honor achievement in feature film, but several of its categories (e.g. best family film and best young actor/actress) have no Oscar or Globe equivalent. The Oscars also honor crafts that the other two ceremonies ignore.

Nonetheless, it is impressive that the Critics' Choice nods matched the Oscars award-for-award in the top six categories last year and that the groups have named the same films as best picture for five years running. Ramsey believes that the secret lies largely in the size of the BFCA, which boasts 195 members compared with 93 in the Hollywood Foreign Press Assn., the organization that awards the Golden Globes. (Voting membership of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences hovers at about 5,000.)

"In the Broadcast Film Critics (Assn.), we have a cross-section of people that are involved in different levels of the industry, which makes it amazingly like the Oscar (voting) population in microcosm," says Ramsey, founder of and writer for MovieJuice.com.

Adds BFCA member Jackie K. Cooper, film critic at WMGT, an NBC affiliate in Macon, Ga.: "I think we take a more Everyman approach. The broadcast film critics are all over the country; we have representatives from smaller cities, and I think that gives a balance."

Like the BFCA, Oscar voters traditionally honor fare that is more mainstream than that touted by such major print groups as the New York Film Critics Circle, the Los Angeles Film Critics Assn. and the Chicago Film Critics Assn., which tend to favor esoteric nonstudio fare.

"Over the years, the Academy has shown themselves to have an appetite for quality populist motion pictures," Ortenberg says. "They embrace some pictures that critics in New York and Los Angeles shun but Middle America adores."

Berlin suggests that because the Critics' Choice Awards are presented before the Academy chooses its nominees, the BCFA might influence the Oscars. Others aren't so sure.

"It doesn't hurt to be nominated by these groups, but does it influence me? No," one AMPAS member says. "Does it have me look at something that wasn't on my radar? Yes. Does it have me look twice at something I may have seen and not loved? Sometimes, but rarely."

Berlin believes that the BFCA plays an important role in helping busy Oscar voters prioritize their awards-season viewing schedules but admits, "It's not really our place to claim to be influential."

Nonetheless, he adds: "We're the people who watch movies all year long, whereas the Academy members are making movies. Their job isn't to watch 200-250 movies a year and judge them — that is our job." ■