

Year 12 Documentary study: *Murderball*

An edited version of a review of Murderball by Ed Hooper, a 13-year veteran of quad rugby. Hooper coaches the Hoveround Lightning team from Sarasota, Florida, which is ranked third in the the U. S. Quad Rugby Association. This review was posted Feb. 9, 2005

Murderball won both the Sundance Audience Choice Award and the Special Jury Award for editing. But the critics got one thing wrong: *Murderball* doesn't dispel myths and stereotypes. It takes big fat bites out of those sugary sweet, pathetic images and stereotypes, chews 'em up and spits 'em out. It's not a magic pill that will make pity and stereotypes go away, but it is quite simply the best film ever made on disability.

It amazes me that these filmmakers were able to render such an honest portrayal of living life from the seat of a wheelchair. Somehow, either by the sheer exposure to the people or by some innate understanding, directors Henry Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro "got it," and this film is a joy to watch.

This movie is funny. It is sad. It is fiery, fast, frank, explosive, sexy, tender, loving, and the action is bone-jarring, just like quad rugby, aka *Murderball*.

The music is perfect. The editing superb. What more could you ask for? How about an obsessive villain, Joe Soares, and a scary-looking good guy, Mark Zupan, who looks like he just jumped out of the X-Games, tattoos and all. Soares left Team USA when he wasn't chosen to be on the 2000 Paralympic team; out of revenge he became the coach of Team Canada. This prompted some Team USA members to call Soares a traitor. Zupan said, "I wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire." That's the underlying conflict that drives *Murderball* to its conclusion: USA vs. Canada, Soares vs. Zupan and every member of Team USA.

But there's a much higher message coming out of this movie, because the filmmakers focused on the people. Even Soares is softened in the end, thank God.

Zupan, Andy Cohen and Scott Hogsett are in reality articulate, good-natured guys, quite different from their rugby personas. They have wry, sarcastic senses of humor, and they want gold, not hugs. They want women, not mommies. And they succeed. Anyway, those "rugby faces" on Zupan, Cohen, and Hogsett we see at tournaments don't seem to be who those guys are at all. So that insight is refreshing.



Mark Zupan.

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Then there's Bobby Lujano. His scenes are poignant, powerful, thought-provoking. When his father hugs him after the USA loses to Canada in Athens, the love leaps off of the screen and into your heart.

Murderball also follows a newly injured guy, Keith Cavill. His portrayal had me flashing back on my early days of rehab. Watching his ride home from rehab, with his quad hand stuck out the window feeling the scary air of freedom, was emotional. We'd all had that same feeling: "Ok, I'm out, but now what? I'm screwed." It's painful to watch him go through what every new spinal cord injury goes through, but that's what shapes us. That's what makes us strong or breaks us.

In a scene later in the film, Zupan visits the rehab center and puts Cavill into his rugby chair. Cavill lights up for the first time since his injury. He spins around and gets the feel. He wants to hit something. He feels free. He feels hope. All the while, a physical therapist is telling him to be careful; he's too fragile. (Quads in the movie theater watching this scene just laughed.) Zupan comes up to him; Cavill inches forward, then lightly bumps Zupan's everyday chair. You can tell he wants to give Zupan a good solid whack. A quad rugby player is born.



Soares argues a play.

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Finally, there is Chris Igoe, whom I met at the screening and liked instantly. Zupan and Igoe were best friends. After the drunken accident that broke Zupan's neck, Igoe blamed himself. The two became estranged, Igoe nearly suicidal with guilt. Igoe has finally forgiven himself, he told me. And Zupan feels that getting injured was the best thing that's happened to him (His reaction is not uncommon among quads who have survived and carved out a life for themselves.). Their reconciliation on-screen is quite moving.

Murderball is about winning and losing. It's about driven athletes. But it's mostly about survival and moving forward after one is injured. It's about people, people who succeed and people who fail. Sound familiar? It's about life.

In real life, it doesn't have to be quad rugby -- you can find your passion and pursue your dreams with any sport or work or art. It's whatever motivates you. You can move past the devastation of being severely injured and live a happy, fulfilling life.

If you able-bodied folks want to get some inkling of what living with a disability is like, go see *Murderball*. You'll learn more in 85 minutes than you could in a lifetime of politically correct "education." This movie is that good.