Murderball

The men are hung over, and one senses this may not be an unusual state. "Last night, I was drunk to the point where I couldn't sleep," says Henry-Alex Rubin, co-director of the hit documentary *Murderball*, to Mark Zupan, the film's newly minted star.

"Very irresponsible," laughs Zupan. Rubin has popped his head into a temporary press room set up in a downtown Toronto club just to say hi between interviews. Rubin leaves groaning and sucking a small canister of portable oxygen, a freebie from his hotel. Zupan kept Rubin company last night until the wee hours, but he looks much less green. Next to him is his short, sleek black wheelchair. Zupan sits in an overstuffed lounger, crossing and uncrossing his tattooed left leg with his hands, which happen to be attached to hugely muscular, equally tattooed arms. He never stops moving, and he is a quadriplegic.

Last night's binge doesn't bother him. "I don't sleep a whole lot ever," he says. "Three or four hours a night."

Zupan is captain of the U.S. quad rugby team. The full-contact sport, otherwise known as "murderball," is a brutal, athletic version of rugby played in armoured wheelchairs. There's something vaguely futuristic about the game; maybe it's the souped-up vehicles or the apocalypse-survivor fierceness of its competitors. Dana Adam Shapiro, who co-directed *Murderball* with Rubin, is able-bodied but played a couple of times after being goaded into it by Team U.S.A. "Let's just say it's a good thing they can't feel everything," says Shapiro. "They call it bumper cars, but bumper cars have bumpers. The chairs don't. Imagine being in a shopping cart and smashing into a wall."

Murderball upends every expectation we have about the handicapped, starting with the notion that they're fragile. Rubin and Shapiro follow the team for two-and-a-half years as they prepare for the 2004 Paralympics in Athens and a showdown against archrivals Team Canada. Every single athlete in the film has a riveting how-I-got-here narrative, but this is not, as Zupan puts it, "a woe-is-me gimp movie."

"These guys are rowdy and full of life and smoke and drink and throw each other out of their wheelchairs and train really hard," says Rubin. "They're also extremely introspective because they've gone through hell and back. They're like the cast of *Jackass* if they broke their necks and became philosophy majors."

Murderball's rave reviews and festival accolades have turned the 32-year-old Zupan into this summer's surprise celebrity. His bunny-tail goatee currently graces a massive billboard in New York's Union Square for a Reebok campaign, and new Zupan spreads in American glossies seem to appear every day. (He's modelling a $1,000 pair of jeans in this week's New York Times Magazine.)

"It's crazy, strange, weird. My friends are like, 'Zupan, I'm sick of seeing your face everywhere,'" he says. But when he goes back to Austin, Texas, where he lives with his girlfriend, Zupan's life is fairly quiet. He works as a civil engineer, albeit one who tops off his 10-hour work days with two-hour lifting sessions and "pushing" (think: running in a wheelchair) until 11:30 p.m.

Collision course: Zupan in the heat of battle. Courtesy THINKFilm.

Zupan, always hyper-competitive, was an 18-year-old college student on a soccer scholarship when he had his accident. One night, he passed out drunk in the back of a friend's pickup truck. The friend, Chris Igoe, drunk himself, climbed in, started driving and spun out of control on a Florida highway. Zupan was flung out of the truck into a canal where he clung to a branch — and his life — for 14 hours with red ants covering him from the tops of his fingers to the tips of his toes. No one knew he was missing. He was discovered the next day by a guy eating his lunch. Soon after awakening in the hospital, doctors told Zupan his neck had been broken and that he would never walk again.

"I do wonder if there's a reason why I'm alive," Zupan says. "I still wonder sometimes, how the hell did you hang on for 14 hours? I don't remember. I wish I could. I think my body has pushed it away, some kind of defense mechanism. But I'm curious as to what I thought about — what, when, how, why."

When Rubin and Shapiro were making the film, they asked the athletes if any of them would "take back their accidents." About 50 per cent said yes, 50 per cent said no. Zupan said no. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't have done the stuff I've done. There's no way in hell I'd have been an Olympic soccer player. I wouldn't have met half the people I've met. I've been to New Zealand three times. I didn't know where New Zealand was when I was able bodied."

Before his accident, Zupan had zero interaction with the handicapped world. "I really didn't think about wheelchairs. I thought when you broke your neck, you died." In fact, quadriplegia means impairment in all four limbs, but not necessarily

immobility. While the filmmakers are adamant that they didn't make a movie about the quad community — "Please don't make us sound earnest," pleads Rubin — they manage to refute a few major stereotypes. They do so without the documentary mainstays of talking heads or experts, but simply by showing these men flipping in and out of their chairs, drinking Jägermeister, hitting on women (and getting hit on) and generally behaving like jerks and gentlemen.

"These guys want people to know that not all quads are Christopher Reeve drinking from a straw," says Rubin. "They want to be regarded as athletes. They want people to know they can get erections, and that means they can satisfy their girlfriends. Most of these guys will tell you they became more concerned with pleasuring their partners after their injuries, which they were not necessarily before."

Before, most of the men were risk-takers and jocks and they remain risk takers and jocks, despite the wheelchairs. "These guys didn't break their necks in the library," says Shapiro. "They were the guys who did stupid shit. Most quads are young men because those are the people that drive a little faster, play a little harder. It's a teenage male affliction and the type of person it tends to afflict is very physical. So the story was about loss, and the most profound loss, because their physicality is who these people were."

But if *Murderball* suggests a kind of fixed identity — these guys are who they are, injured or not — it also shows that among the handicapped, personality and opinion, as well as bodies, are distinct. Months ago, Zupan saw *Million Dollar Baby*, a film that many handicapped advocates opposed bitterly because the central character, a boxer, asks to be euthanized upon becoming a quad.

"Excellent movie. Didn't offend me at all," says Zupan. "People get so bent out of shape. They weren't pigeonholing people in chairs, saying they all just want to die. There are so many stories out there. That's what's cool about *Murderball*. It doesn't say, 'Feel bad for me, I'm in a chair.' F--- that. Don't feel bad for me. I have a great life. It's been fun."