

## Murderball – A Review

The personal stories of athletes are usually what networks show between Olympic events. More often than not, those athletes focused on have overcome some major obstacles ranging from poverty to physical defects, injury and even war. The Olympians' stories cover the gamut when it comes to misery, which is one of the reasons they can be so exciting to watch competing. Most of the athletes find a way to channel those shortcomings into a competitive fuel. In the case of Murderball, the sport and the adversity are inter-related – one cannot exist without the other – and the competitive element is unparalleled in traditional sports. Needless to say, their passion makes for a rich documentary subject.

The subject of **Murderball** is a sport formally known as Wheelchair Rugby, but called Murderball by the players due to its violent full-contact nature. The wheelchairs are customised, or armoured as the case may be, so that they serve as mobile battering rams. The object of the game, like regular rugby, is to get the ball into the goal without being hammered by the opponent. The team consists of participants, mostly quadriplegics of varying extremes, who work together through passing and blocking to wheel across the goal line. The opposing team tries to halt their progress by smashing into them, sometimes knocking them over.

Like any other sport, Murderball has its winners, its losers, and its bitter rivalries. The focus of the movie is an international rivalry between Team USA and Team Canada. Team USA has been undefeated for eleven years in international play, but are threatened when one of their own star players changes sides. Joe Soares was among the top players during the early years of the sport, leading them to a Gold Medal in the 1996 Paralympics. Just barely past his prime, he was cut from the 2000 team in favour of younger players, which didn't go over well with him. After doing what he could to get back at them, including filing a lawsuit, he decides to beat Team USA at their own game. He heads north to coach Team Canada, the #5 seed in the world at the time, with the sole intent of destroying his former team.

The rivalry and the sport are interesting enough, but the personal stories are what make this film stand out. One of the top players for Team USA, Mark Zupan, for instance, was injured while asleep in the backseat of his best friend's truck. His friend, drunk at the time, took the wheel of the car without knowing Mark was there. The end result

was Zupan flying out the truck into a canal and going undiscovered for 14 hours. Now in his late twenties, he is among the top Quad Rugby players in the world. These people are fighters. They don't want pity for their condition; they want respect for their passion and athleticism.

As a sports documentary itself, **Murderball** is a fast-paced, entertaining ride, but it's so much more than that. Even though the players themselves want to be thought of as independent, we can't help but see them for what they are, and what they have endured. The fact that they have such tenacity, a strong will to live and to compete, is inspiring to all of us. It touches us on a profound emotional level. The filmmakers emphasize the severity of the disability and the accomplishments of the Quad Rugby team by contrasting someone who had become disabled more recently. They follow his progression through rehab and back into his world, showing the pain, the disappointment, and the feeling that the best years of his life have passed. Although it's a moving story in its own right, it enriches the entire movie, by reminding us that the rugby players at one time were in the same place. The most provocative scene in the movie comes when Mark Zupan meets this person and explains the sport to him. The kid's excitement is impossible to contain. We begin to see the competitive gleam in his eyes; the same ones we've been seeing for 90 minutes among the other quadriplegics.

**Murderball** is such an appealing documentary because it shows a side of humanity that most people don't see, but everyone fears. It gives us hope, knowing that if the worst happens to anyone, their lives are not over. They can still love. They can still play. They can find enjoyment in their lives. Yes, they can still even have sex. Even despite the player's injuries, **Murderball** is the best sports documentary to come along in a long while, perhaps since **Hoop Dreams**.