

## *Murderball*

When I first read the tagline for *Murderball*, I thought it would be a sentimental, touching story about challenged athletes overcoming obstacles to succeed, kind of a real life “Radio” (only, thankfully, without Cuba Gooding, Jr.). The film’s opening, which depicts Mark Zupan of Team U.S.A. dressing himself while in his wheelchair, quickly shattered my preconceptions.

Zupan is a covered in tattoos, a muscular monster with a buzz cut, bushy goatee, long chops and a stevedore’s mouthy violence who looks like he’s searching for an excuse to rip someone’s head off. Later, one of the athletes concludes, after telling a story about someone confusing his participation in the Paralympics with the Special Olympics, “We’re not going for a hug. We’re going for a fucking gold medal!”

Feeling certain that Radio would never use such language (nor play Ministry on the soundtrack), I put aside my quaint expectations about watching “handicapped athletes” (as well as my concerns about Cuba Gooding) and sat down for one of the most fascinating and touching documentaries I’ve seen in a long time.

*Murderball* tracks the little known sport of quadriplegic rugby. If that right there doesn’t get you interested, it’s time to call for a defibrillator. These athletes play with the same eye-bulging intensity as able-bodied athletes: trash-talking, knocking each other out of their chairs, and generally attempting to inflict as big a beating as possible en route to victory. International competitions include World Championships as well as Paralympics. This is serious international sport played by serious athletes who have overcome serious disabilities.

Being a quadriplegic, contrary to common misconceptions, means having limited functioning in all four limbs. All of the athletes followed are wheel-chair bound, whether due to car accidents, fist fights, bacteria or from birth. Those who have arms and hands have limited use to various degrees. Their mental functioning is normal; it’s just their bodies that are handicapped.

Quad rugby (its unofficial title is “Murderball”) is played on a regulation basketball court and follows the general thrust of standard rugby. Players participate in modified wheelchairs which look like something out of Mad Max or Gladiator, and whip about the court for four eight-minute quarters. Players are assigned a ranking from 0.5 to 3.5 based upon their degree of upper body mobility (with 0.5 being the least level of mobility and 3.5 being the greatest); each team cannot exceed a mobility total of 8.

For the most part, *Murderball* follows the story of the Team U.S.A. quad rugby squad from their loss to Canada at the 2002 World Championships through their participation in the 2004 Athens Paralympics. Several players’ stories are told

in all their harsh and despairing detail. Of particular poignancy is the story of Zuppan, who is one of the most intense and intimidating competitors shown. Several scenes depict him angrily taunting opposing players and coaches with phrases like, “Fucking hit me – I’ll hit you back!”

Zuppan was injured in high-school after being thrown from the back of a pick-up truck that his best friend, Chris Igoe, was driving drunk. Igoe, guilt-ridden and ashamed, has had a tense and fluctuating relationship with Zuppan, neither of them seemingly capable of overcoming their stern exteriors to achieve the catharsis needed. As the film progresses, we watch as the two draw closer together, culminating in Igoe traveling to Athens to support Zuppan in the 2004 Paralympics.

Much of the film’s story resides in the conflict between the members of Team U.S.A. and their disgruntled former star, Joe Soares. Soares bears an uncanny physical resemblance to the character of Elliott from *Just Shoot Me*; his personality, however, more closely resembles an active volcano. In 2000 Joe was cut from Team U.S.A.; hoping to stick with the sport he went north and became the coach of Team Canada, Team U.S.A.’s most consistently challenging competition. Soares, who has been handicapped since a child with polio, is an intense, demanding and high-strung competitor and coach. As we are ushered further into his life, we see the strain these same qualities have on his son, Robert, an awkward, viola-playing adolescent lacking both in athletic skills and fatherly attention.

All of the athletes competing have already spent many years dealing with and overcoming their bodily restrictions. To capture the challenges inherent in a recent injury (what one of the athletes terms a “mindfuck” that entails overcoming unimaginable mental obstacles), the filmmakers follow the story of Keith, a young, handsome motocross driver who has been recently injured, as he slogs through his new life as a quadriplegic. As Keith discharges from rehab and returns home to see the life he formerly led, his simple words betray an overwhelming pain and loss, “I’m in a wheelchair. It sucks.”

*Murderball* grew out of a 2002 Maxim article by Dana Shapiro, and the film was undertaken by Shapiro, Jeffery Mandel and Henry Rubin. The film’s pace occasionally feels like standard jock flick: heavy metal blaring, fast, choppy cuts, wild, all-out crashes. Yet the filmmakers’ love of their subject is unmistakable, and allows them to delve beyond the external and truly enter into the lives of these athletes. Most of the filming was done from a wheelchair, or at least from wheelchair height, and this reduces the exteriority of the camera and lends the film an intimate, close-up feel. This film gains access to a world of human pain, longing and suffering, a world which is transformed, through fortitude and perseverance, into one of success and triumph.

This is not only an uplifting story about overcoming life's challenges. This is an intimate and revealing portrait of the beautiful things that can be made out of the ugliest hardships.