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Murderball

By Richard Leader

Murderball is a documentary about quadriplegic rugby, played in wheelchairs on regulation basketball courts. The film can be divided into three components: footage of the personalities involved, general information on quads (dispelling misconceptions about the condition and how it does or does not impair movement and sexual activity), with only minimal time spent on coverage of the sport itself, beyond momentary flashes of fast-breaks and hard hits. Characterization follows the same ternary model. It focuses first on Mark Zupan, the most audacious and outspoken member of the American national team, who has become the public face of both the sport and the movie. The parallel stories of Joe Soares and Keith Cavill work as bookends to round out the film. Soares is a former US Olympian in quadriplegic rugby who, having failed to win a spot on the US roster, turned to coaching the rival Canadian squad; the competition between the teams binds the narrative across the two year period between the World Championship and the 2004 Paralympics. At the other end of the spectrum is Cavill, a young man undergoing rehabilitation after a devastating motocross accident. Although he is introduced early on in the documentary and is regularly summoned to the screen for scenes presented for educational purposes, only towards its conclusion is his attendance at a seminar on the sport hosted by Zupan revealed.

Murderball is energetic and seductive. Any flaws in its construction are paved over by a booming soundtrack: it is, after all, an MTV production. It is also one of the best reviewed movies in modern history. Of the 120 reviews collated by Rotten Tomatoes.com, a website that tallies the scores of major and not-so-major critics, only three are negative. Jeffrey M.

Anderson's single paragraph take on it at Combustible Celluloid.com is hardly compelling in its objection to *Murderball's* "touchy-feely" tendencies. A similar complaint by Bill White for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* is rendered petty provided his incongruous admission that he would have rather the film given over more time to other sports at the Paralympics. If one's argument is that there is hardly enough murderball being played in *Murderball* as it is, asking for even less is not quite on the level.

The sole holdout comes from Daniel Fienberg of Zap2it.com. He takes issue with its craft, accusing the movie's creators of being unworthy of the great footage they collected ("It's an achievement of access, rather than filmic storytelling."), pointing out their unwillingness to actually treat it like a documentary and not some sort of marketable cultural experience, a fair criticism given director Henry-Alex Rubin's own self-distancing from the genre. Fienberg also singles out the *Maxim* roots of *Murderball*, writer and co-director Dana Adam Shapiro's expedition to Sweden to first watch the US team play at the World Championship was funded by the magazine (his article published in November of 2002), something that might have influenced the amount of sexual content included in the film. Fienberg writes, "The point that these guys are like Spuds MacKenzie and Michael Jordan rolled (pun probably intended) into one in a wheelchair isn't a bad one, but it could have been delivered without so much leer-ing."

The other 117 reviews are uniform in their praise. Most rely on the film's conceit that it is the first—or loudest and most violent anyway—to treat the disabled without pity and as authentic human beings. Indeed, the DVD release of the documentary contains many additional scenes, some filmed with Larry King, of the cast arguing that landing in a wheelchair was the best thing that ever happened to them and that they might not rush to avail themselves of a cure for their condition if one were developed. They all might certainly believe



that, and it is a respectable enough claim, but it is by no means a given that they truly convinced audiences to believe likewise: a tragic accident or childhood disease remains tragic, even if the tale is told with a lot of cusswords and a heavy metal soundtrack.

Critics in their reviews acted convinced of this conceit, rewarding *Murderball* for it, although their acclaim is in some respects disingenuous. If treating quads as utterly normal, unremarkable people is the proper thing, focusing on what they do and not what textbooks or mythologies say they are, one must wonder if critics across the political spectrum would be so kind to a film celebrating unrepentant masculinity in able-bodied men. When the producers of *Murderball* and its fawning critics agree that they do not pity the cast, it seems to be a case of protesting too much; the endless admissions are too self-conscious and congratulatory to be taken as legitimate. That is not to say that the film is exploitive in the same way that the documentary accuses other movies of being, of using the disabled as a feel-good parable of some sort, but its dishonesty about how it regards its subjects opens up other avenues for abuse.

Behaviors that might seem questionable when acted out by able-bodied men in a nonfiction production are portrayed as healthy in disabled men, their ability to perpetrate sexism serving as decisive proof that they have successfully overcome the hand that life has dealt them. While women are certainly harmed by this, as I will argue below, the able-bodied producers of the film are also exploiting the cast in order to writ large their own misogynistic fantasies, audience sympathy for the men's condition serving as a buffer against complaints. All of this is covered up by the constant refrain of "no pity." This should not be surprising given the Maxim and MTV origins of *Murderball*.

Critics were handed several red herrings when it came to gender. First, there was the title itself to focus on, the fact that the original name of the sport had to be changed to a more pedestrian one in order to retain financial sponsors is nearly always mentioned; some go on to point out that the exact opposite has transpired for its filmic incarnation, migrating away from quadriplegic rugby in order to attract viewers with the promise of sensational violence. One of the most frequently described thematic points of the movie concerns Joe Soares son, Robert, who has little interest in athletics and is shown to be a disappointment to his father—who regards his new Canadian team as his real family, his "boys"—until a heart attack forces Joe to reexamine his own priorities. He eventually allows Robert's academic trophies to share the "Wall of Fame" with his own. This seemed to satisfy most reviewers on the question of masculinity, nearly all of whom cited this pivotal moment in their own text: if aggressive and sedate forms of manhood can coexist peacefully, even if one side is subordinate, manhood itself remains inviolate.

If *Murderball* communicates anything, it is that being a man is superior to being a person; becoming a quadriplegic is to suffer not just in empirical terms but also the fictive-reality of emasculation. The veiled implication of this is that no woman can ever suffer as badly as a man. Coaching at the 2002

World Championships, Joe Soares prematurely takes a position on the sideline while the American and Australian teams are shaking hands after their match: a female official approaches him and asks if he can wait until they are done before cutting across the gymnasium floor. He complains unconvincingly that someone else had done the same thing during one of Canada's games and, as she walks away, uninterested in a debate, he says, "Fuck you, bitch." These are the first words of Soares that the editors choose to present the viewer. While they work well enough to paint him as a hot-head, framing him for the rest of the film, the exact slight he believed he had suffered is more subtle and it seems unlikely that most audience members would pick up on its specifics, at least in a single viewing. Beyond just the asserting of her own authority, the fact that a woman had the option of choosing to not deal with him without suffering any consequences for her choice was even more intolerable, necessitating the gendered insult toward her—for the nonexistent yet seemingly real one he suffered from her.

Women exist all over the periphery of *Murderball*. They lug tables with trophies around, pump gas, tie shoelaces, cheer and gasp from the sidelines, and they are the target of inventive practical jokes. They are patient nurses, nagging mothers, smiling girlfriends, and panicked wives. They are not, however, players. No mention of a women's league is ever made, though injured female veterans of the Iraq war are included in an introductory lesson led by American national team: their military affiliation having given them the barest of protections against sexism in this case. This might be excusable given the narrow focus on the exploits of a single team (with Soares and Cavill representing the past and potential future of it) if it were not for the treatment of the marginal female figures who are afforded screen time.

No matter how dependent upon women—fulfilling their roles as caregivers, physically, emotionally, and sexually—the men of *Murderball* might be, and time is certainly given

over to depicting imagery of care giving, that dependency is seen as something that must be overcome: not through independence from women but through the domination of women. Thus sexism is glibly inverted: in a discussion ostensibly to quell misconceptions about the sex lives of quadriplegics, Scott Hogsett, a member of the American national team, states that the more pitiful that he is, the more the women like him, reminding a questioner that “a lot of girls like being on top.” The mirthful comments by the men about women finding them non-threatening, and how this works to their own advantage sexually, have a touch of the surreal when contrasted by their ardent desire to have men find them threatening—and the great lengths to which they go in order to ensure that they do, several of them bragging of victorious fist fights. Heterosexual activity, in a way, serves the same function for them with women, given the ethic of patriarchy that surrounds all of us, regardless of our individual intentions and aspirations.

The men of *Murderball* have MTV enforcing that vision of patriarchy on them at all times. While the documentary was largely unsuccessful when it came to drawing crowds to theaters, despite it being one of the “best-reviewed films of the year, if not the decade” according to its co-director, David Allan Shapiro, it was a cross-promotional powerhouse. Mark Zupan was center stage in this, finding his way onto numerous other Viacom owned properties. While his guest appearances on Comedy Central’s *Too Late with Adam Carolla* (Carolla formerly of *The Man Show*) and the *Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* on CBS were hardly out of the ordinary—compared to his being tattooed on A&E’s *Miami Ink*, the Disney/Hearst/GE owned network that also backed *Murderball*—Viacom’s MTV found the best use for the cast, teaming them up with the stars of its *Jackass* for an episode that played on the network to advertise the film before its eventual inclusion on the DVD.



The *Jackass Presents* feature (“presents” as the show *Jackass* itself is defunct, both its headliners and the network have moved onto other projects) assembles MTV alums Johnny Knoxville, Steve-O, Chris Pontius, and Jason Acuna. The 20 minute production depicts them watching the movie, with reaction shots, between more traditional clips of *Murderball*. A variety of stunts were filmed—Zupan and Steve-O give each other black eyes—and a substantial revisitation of the sex-ed material of *Murderball* is developed.

While it might seem unorthodox to judge a movie using outside material, this context is important: it seems to more accurately depict the original vision that Shapiro and Rubin had for *Murderball* than the film itself managed; they are seemingly unconstrained to go in many of the directions they smirkingly hinted at in their documentary, knowing they will be judged by teenagers and not Sundance. They provided the setup knowing their culture would fill in the blanks to their liking. As the cast of *Jackass* joins a number of the rugby players in a bar for drinks, the discussion turns towards the impending fame of the players given the release of the picture.

Andy Cohn, winner of the league's Athlete of the Year award in 2002, asks, "I know you guys got the power to make, like, girls kiss *you*... do you guys have the power to just make girls kiss each other?" Under prompting from Steve-O, two women in the crowded bar begin kissing and Cohn concludes, "That's how I know I've made it!" Later, Zupan assists Steve-O in pulling down a woman's shirt in order that the latter can sign her breasts. Such antics continue as the players are goaded into further acts and admissions, Steve-O proclaiming to their smiles during one interview, "Every single one of these guys [Zupan, Hogsett, and Cohn] had sexual intercourse with one of the nurses that worked in the rehab They want you to know that everything is going to be ok, and the second thing that they want you to know—is that you're getting laid!"

A further DVD extra, a deleted scene of Keith Cavill relearning how to use various kitchen implements, opens with an interview with Andy Cohn who speaks happily of his first sexual experience after his accident, stating that more than just the physical act, the fact that he could still "go out one night, meet a girl, and get lucky" brought about a great feeling of normalcy; a story that contradicts the *Jackass Presents* version of reality. Cohn continues on to say another sentence, that one can go on to do things "that you don't think are possible anymore." While it is in some ways a good opening to Cavill's struggle to bake cookies, the sexual framing of it is fairly rude given the immediate cut to footage of Cavill being lifted out of bed by his therapist. These additional elements make it fairly clear that the theme of *Murderball*, even absent the extras, is that recovery and normalcy equals male supremacy. It should come as no surprise that the rapper Eminem has taken interest in playing Zupan in a still-hypothetical movie about his life, though he admits Cohn would be less of a physical stretch.

Normalcy also equals white supremacy. While the players of the sport at the national and international levels are uniformly white, save for the presence of a team fielded by Japan, the producers of *Murderball* go out of their way to film black

men in a specific light. One, his affiliation with the sport never made clear, speaks of how women feel safe to approach men in wheel chairs, only to launch into a monologue about how he does a "modified doggy-style" in the bedroom. Another man is in rehabilitation with Cavill and seems dubious of rugby and Zupan's introduction of it to their class. Finally, in a deleted scene, entitled "Blue Doo Wop," an African American hospital patient wheels down a hallway at night, exclaiming, "I'm gonna find me some bitches." He convinces two black nurses, both female, to dance for him as he keeps the rhythm.

White men have long exploited black men in the media to perpetuate both white power and male domination of women. In *Murderball*, it seems that the same thing is occurring with disabled men, public sympathy rather than racism working to insulate the true instigators from responsibility for their speech: Mark Zupan and the rest of the team might have provided Henry-Alex Rubin and Dana Adam Shapiro with the material, but its dissemination required them to live up to a role demanded by men with far more power and influence than themselves. This is not to say that the rugby players are blameless; though they all come off as quite normal and decent men, normal and decent are often not enough given the seduction of patriarchy that can both compel and excuse depraved and indecent acts.

Murderball is a fine story and is one well worth watching. It is also necessary to acknowledge that the story is only being told, to the exclusion of myriad others, because the stars are white, male, and of a certain background. (Almost all of the players became quadriplegics as adults and as the result of accidents: I have been informed that people born with disabilities are far less likely to have received insurance or legal settlements that allow them the financial freedom participate in such activities.) Still, even with a jaundiced eye, it is difficult not to be sucked into their lives. It features exciting, vibrant people—people who would prefer to be men, more than anything else. That is, after all, our cultural preference.