

DVD Select: If you deserve it, football will save your soul

by Robert J. Hawkins

Football will save your sorry soul. It will save you from yourself. It will save you from the bad intentions of others. It will lift you up. It will show you a better place than the one you have accepted for yourself. It will show you your fears and a way to conquer them. It will reveal the better you that is buried under that mound of low self-esteem and personal disrespect that you call a personality.

Football will save your sorry soul.

'GRIDIRON GANG' - Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, center, stars in Columbia Pictures' drama 'Gridiron Gang.' CNS Photo courtesy of John Bramley. But first, you must strap on those cleats and embrace the pain and disappointment and fatigue and bitterness and fear. You must confront fierce rivals who will do you harm. You must subdue them. And you must give it everything you have.

Because football will save your sorry soul - but first you must show that you deserve to be saved.

Enough already.

As if bowl games and playoffs were not enough, I have spent hours watching several new football films on DVD and have tried mightily to absorb their lessons. And the lessons - as varied as they may be - all come down to one: Football will save your sorry soul.

In the first movie, available this week, the gripping, fact-based "Gridiron Gang" (Sony, 3.3 stars), football turns a whole California youth detention camp of losers into human beings with a decent chance of living to see their adult years alive and free from prison.

In another fact-inspired story, "Invincible" (Disney, 3 stars), an out-of-work substitute teacher and bartender tries out for the Philadelphia Eagles and makes the team.

And in the final film, a Christian-based work of fiction called "Facing the Giants" (Sony, 1 star), nothing goes right until the whole team gives it up for Jesus. Then they go on to win a state championship. Amazing.

"Gridiron Gang" starts with some sobering data: 120,000 kids are in detention centers across this country. About 75 percent will either return to prison or die in the streets.

"My god, what are we doing here?" asks an exasperated prison counselor Sean Porter (a most able performance by The Rock). "Like goddamned cheap burgers: Fatten 'em up. Put 'em back on the street where they get slaughtered."

In desperation, Porter turns to the one stability he possessed in his own troubled life, next to a remarkable and loving mother: football. He convinces his bosses to spring for enough gear to get a team going at Camp Kilpatrick, just north of Los Angeles, and then recruits an assorted lot of gang bangers, crack dealers, killers and car thieves to learn the game.

"You are no longer a Blood, no longer a Crip," he tells them. "Out here you are a Mustang."

It's not that easy. Most of these kids can't even spell "Mustang." And the ways of the street aren't easily forgotten. But with hard work and a few humiliating defeats, the boys begin to learn to give it up for the team, for each other.

The Mustangs learn in five weeks to play a game most of their opponents - a private Christian school league - have absorbed over five years. In time, they catch on and become real contenders. More importantly, they learn that they are not losers, unless they choose to be.

In real life, only five of Porter's original 32 players end up back in jail - a remarkable success story. One is gunned down in the streets in a drive-by shooting.

"Gridiron Gang" isn't a saccharine success tale. These are tough kids. And scared kids. And bewildered kids. They mostly know only one way, and that's been drilled into them by the code of the streets. You are taught to hate the kid three blocks over and to kill or be killed. Life is cheap. Your life is cheap.

Porter and his football team gives these kids an entirely new message. All their lives, they've been expected to fail. Then along comes this guy who fully expects them to succeed.

"They're Mustangs, coach," says one team member. "They've accepted the challenge."

In "Invincible," it is the lifelong Philadelphia working-class neighborhood pals of Vince Papale (Mark Wahlberg) who encourage him to accept the challenge. It is the 1970s, and Papale and his beloved Eagles are both on serious losing streaks. The NFL team can't put together a winning season. Papale has lost his substitute teaching job and his wife has left him with only a vicious note detailing just how big a loser he is. He's bartending a few nights a week for rent money.

New Eagles head coach Dick Vermeil (Greg Kinnear), in an attempt to shake up the team, holds an open tryout. He draws the expected losers, dreamers, might-have-beens, has-beens and never-weres. He also gets Papale, who up to this point has played a brutal form of sandlot bar-league football with a lot of guys with pent-up anger and frustration.

Papale, at age 30, having never played college ball (not mentioned in the movie is that he did two years with the World Football League before it folded), makes the team in 1976. True story. Only somewhat exaggerated, of course, because Disney never lets the truth get in the way of a good tale.

Just the same, "Invincible" is inspirational and entertaining. And Papale really did beat the odds, ending up with a real, albeit brief, pro career in the NFL.

Fiction gets stranger than truth in "Facing the Giants," a movie actually made by a fundamentalist Christian church in Georgia. It is a message movie. And the message is hammered home.

Compared to their peers in Camp Kilpatrick, the students at Shiloh Christian Academy haven't much to kick about. Their biggest crisis is going six years without a winning football season. And other teams keep stealing their best players.

The coach's job is on the line. He's got other problems: his house has a bad smell, his car breaks down, his stove breaks down, he's losing his hair and he only makes \$24,000 a year. (Vince Papale or Sean Porter would love to have these problems ...)

Oh, and he's got a low sperm count.

The coach, in a moment of crisis, puts it all in God's lap and, eventually, so does the team. Don't play to win games, play for God, he tells his boys.

God apparently prefers the Shiloh Eagles over all other teams in Georgia because from that point on, they never lose. God works through the coach's checklist of woes, too, and pretty soon he's got it all. (Except for the hair-loss thing.)

Even for a simple Christian such as I, this story is way over the top. Well, the acting is earnest - but amateurish, too. Fundamentalist Christians will love this movie. It is affirming in every way, and there is nothing wrong with that. Others might take issue with the simplicity of it all.

Still others might take issue with the enrollment policies at the fictional Shiloh Christian Academy. For one, the only person of color is an assistant football coach. The entire school population and its football team are milky white - in Georgia, mind you. If I were that coach, I would have prayed for some speedy black wide receivers and a few big Samoan linemen.

I can't believe that the racial makeup of this school represents the realities of modern-day Georgia. It is a troubling image, even in a fictional movie.

I'm all for movies with positive messages (like the previous two mentioned here). But being Christian doesn't give a filmmaker a free pass to use an amateurish story, amateur actors and modest filmmaking techniques and pass it off as the equal of all the other film fare out there.

Moviegoers - Christian and non-Christian alike - deserve better than this.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Employee of the Month" (Lionsgate, 1 star) Vince (Dax Shepard) is shooting for a company-record 11th consecutive plaque as employee of the month at the big-box Super Club store. Zack (Dane Cook) is still trying to do as little as possible between the time he clocks in and clocks out at the same store. Between them comes the hot new cashier Amy (Jessica Simpson). And the word is, she has the hots for any guy who makes employee of the month. Let the hilarity begin. ... Hey, where's the hilarity? Hello? Hilarity?

"The Protector" (Genius, 2 stars) Adrenaline-infused martial arts action film in which Tony Jaa defies gravity and all logic in performing his own stunts as Kham, a young Thai who must go to Australia to recover the family's prized elephant from the thugs who stole it.

"Seven Swords" (Genius, 1.5 stars) Set in the 1600s, seven highly skilled swordsmen band together to prevent the slaughter of innocent villagers by a band of Manchurian henchmen. But there is an infiltrator among their band who must be ferreted out before he brings about the destruction of the people and their protectors.

"The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning" (New Line, 1 star) Hey, don't blame me. You're the idiot who keeps buying this stuff. It only encourages them, dude.

IT CAME FROM TV

"My Hero: Season One" (BBC) George Sunday is the unexceptional owner of a health store, until it is time to save the planet from imminent destruction - when he suddenly becomes the superhero Thermoman. Unless, of course, live-in girlfriend Janet has tossed his superhero costume into the wash. A different, and very British, superhero sitcom.

ALSO THIS WEEK: Season 3 of "I Dream of Jeannie"; season 2 of the resurrected "Dr. Who"; season seven of "The King of Queens"; season one of "The Street." Also, stars from three Disney teen movies come together in the mash-up movie "That's So Suite Life of Hannah Montana."

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Animation Show" (Paramount / MTV, 2003) Fans of animation will adore this two-disc gift from Mike Judge and Don Hertzfeld, who gather about 20 of their favorite short films together, including some Academy Award nominees.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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