

ABOUT THE FILM

Featuring fierce rivalry, stopwatch suspense, and larger-than-life personalities, MURDERBALL, winner of the Documentary Audience Award and a Special Jury Prize for Editing at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, is a film about tough, highly competitive rugby players. Quadriplegic rugby players. Whether by car wreck, fist fight, gun shot, or rogue bacteria, these men have been forced to live life sitting down. In their own version of the full-contact sport, they battle each other in custom-made gladiator-like wheelchairs, pursuing gold medals and proving to themselves and to anyone who sees them in action that there is life after disability.

From the gyms of middle America to the Olympic arena in Athens, Greece, MURDERBALL tells the story of a group of indomitable, world-class athletes unlike any ever shown on screen. It will smash every stereotype you ever had about “gimps” and “cripples.” It is a film about family, revenge, honor, and the triumph of love over loss. But most of all, it is a film about standing up, even after your spirit, and your spine, have been crushed.

Based on the article by Dana Adam Shapiro, MURDERBALL was co-directed by Henry-Alex Rubin and Shapiro, and produced by Jeffrey Mandel and Shapiro. During their long and intense collaboration, the three filmmakers drew on their individual skills to form a tight, proficient team.

In the simplest terms, all three shaped the story by bringing distinct talents to the project. Shapiro, a former magazine editor, dealt directly with the characters and coordinated the music. Mandel handled many of the business logistics, including rights acquisition and planning the shooting schedule. And Rubin, who had extensive film school and filmmaking experience, shot the film and oversaw the technical aspects. “But we all did a little bit of everything,” says Shapiro, “which is why it is a film by the three of us. Rubin did interviews. Mandel helped with music. And I shot when we needed two cameras.” In fact, their creativity and ingenuity knew no boundaries, as the determined filmmakers labored to make their dream of MURDERBALL a reality.

MURDERBALL addresses the common misconceptions many people have about quadriplegics. It is important, for example, to establish that a “quad” is a person who has partial impairment of all four limbs – a quad does not have to be an invalid. As the film shows, with therapy and the help of wheelchairs, quads can lead independent lives. They can drive, cook, have sex, and as the opening scene of the film illustrates, put on their pants one leg at a time, just like everyone else. But the quads who had been athletes, adventurers, or risk-takers -- or those who dreamed of this kind of life – despaired that they would never experience extreme physical activity and the rush that accompanies it, until they learned about Quad rugby. Hearing about Quad rugby gave these young men hope: actually playing the game gave them a renewed sense of purpose in their lives.

The subject of MURDERBALL, disabled men finding meaning through their involvement in a sport, could easily have been the basis for a film that was soft and inspirational instead of

hard-hitting and dramatic. But filmmakers Shapiro, Rubin, and Mandel were determined to avoid the sentimental stereotypes that generally surface in stories about the handicapped. “I hate inspiring disability movies,” says Rubin. “If I were to see a film about disabilities on television I’d probably switch the channel.” Adds Shapiro, “We never wanted to make one of those up-with people, pat-on-the-back, good-for-you films. You know, ‘Look at the inspiring cripples.’ A lot of stories about people overcoming obstacles are unintentionally condescending.” Their objective was to make the audience focus on the men, not their handicaps or their wheelchairs. “I’d like to imagine that people watching the film are thinking, ‘that guy is so cool,’ or, ‘he’s a jerk,’ just the way they’d react to any on-screen personality, instead of ‘I’m so proud of him,’” Mandel explains.

To achieve this goal, the filmmakers made a documentary that followed the rules of fiction. “During the shooting, we discussed fiction films, not docs,” recalls Rubin. “We talked about movies such as *THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES*, *THE GREAT SANTINI*, and *ROCKY*. We tried hard to follow an old screenwriting rule: show, not tell. Instead of bombarding the audience with statistics of how many people become quadriplegics every year, we tried to capture the expression on newly-injured quad’s face as he was wheeled into the therapy gym.” By emphasizing the universal elements in the story – sports rivalry and patriotism, relationships among fathers, sons, best friends, and lovers, the ecstasy of winning and the agony of losing – the film enables viewers to identify with the “characters” and their situations. As the people emerge, the wheelchairs recede. “The wheelchairs are supposed to become seamless parts of the characters, like a signature piece of clothing – not the story itself,” Mandel observes.

The selection of these characters was crucial to the success of *MURDERBALL*. The filmmakers faced the challenge of finding quadriplegic athletes who could carry the drama, as well as bring the sport to life. Contrary to their expectations, the hardest part of “casting” was that there were so many interesting candidates with compelling stories for the project. They had to whittle down the amazing selection of people and anecdotes into a manageable narrative. As Mandel points out, “The great thing about the milieu of quad rugby is that it attracts people with strong and distinctive personalities.”

In the earliest stages of *MURDERBALL*, Rubin and Shapiro packed up their cameras and traveled to the World Quad Rugby Championships in Sweden to review candidates for their “cast.” Joe Soares, a former member of Team USA and the captain of Team Canada, was an obvious choice. Soares, who was stricken with polio as a child, grew up to be one of the greatest Quad Rugby players of all time. He played for Team USA until he was cut – unfairly, according to him – at which point he accepted the job of coaching the rival Canadian team. Joe’s personal life, including a troubled childhood, an overbearing father, and a strained relationship with his own viola-playing, thirteen-year-old son, was fraught with drama. “Joe was camera ready,” says Rubin. “When we showed up, it was as if he’d been expecting us his whole life. Joe was passionate and charming, wily and infuriating. In fact, he bore an uncanny resemblance to young Robert Duvall in *THE GREAT SANTINI*.”

Soares led the Canadian team to victory during the championships, an unprecedented win that made Team USA more determined than ever to reclaim first place. Many American

players considered Soares a traitor for coaching the Canadians. Mark Zupan was one of them. The filmmakers instantly realized the outspoken athlete would be a dynamic addition to their line-up. “Zupan looked as if he were straight out of a Mad Max film,” recalls Rubin. “He was covered with tattoos and sported a buzz cut and a prison goatee. Every sports story needs a rivalry, and Zupan made it clear he hated Joe Soares. It was Frasier vs. Ali.”

Rubin called Zupan’s story “jaw dropping.” When he was a teenager, Zupan fell asleep in the back of his friend Christopher Igoe’s pick-up truck. Unbeknownst to Igoe, who was intoxicated at the time, Zupan was thrown from the truck when it was making a sharp turn. He landed in a ditch and saved himself from drowning by hanging from a branch for thirteen and a half hours. Zupan survived his ordeal, but was left a quadriplegic. During the years following his accident, Zupan developed a will of steel and muscles to match, and immersed himself in the sport of “murderball,” becoming the best player on Team USA, as well as its captain and official spokesman. Zupan made a new life for himself, but he and Igoe never confronted each other or their feelings about the accident.

The rivalry between Zupan and Soares, and Team USA and Team Canada as they headed into the 2004 Paralympics in Athens, and the ongoing dramas in the players’ personal lives construct a story that is rich in incident, emotion, and suspense. The Quad Rugby players, including Andy Cohn and Scott Hogsett, appear strong, capable, and charismatic, so much so that, early on in the production, the filmmakers began to worry that MURDERBALL was making quadriplegia “too sexy.” “We realized we were missing the most dramatic part of the story – the transition from able-body to quad,” explains Shapiro. “All the guys spoke of this two-year dark period, but looking at them now you’d never know it – it seems like they were born in their chairs. “As we watched footage of our Team USA players telling their stories, it dawned on us that many of their most emotional moments had happened years ago,” recalls Rubin. “Right after their accidents, doing everyday normal things like maneuvering a fork, going to the bathroom, and talking to a girl could suddenly become painful, earth-shattering moments. We figured if we could show just a hint of what it is like for someone else, it might give the audience insight into the monumental willpower it took for our players to go from sipping their food in rehab to competing at the Paralympics in Greece. So, we set out to find a newly-injured individual to show that transition.”

At the Kessler Rehabilitation Center in New Jersey, the filmmakers found Keith Cavill, a young man who was injured in a motorcycle accident. “He was supposed to be a kind of ‘every quad,’” says Shapiro. “He anchors the film – narratively and emotionally – because without him, you don’t see what these guys lost.” Seeing Keith’s experiences would enable the audience to understand what Zupan may have been like in the months after his accident, when he had lost muscle mass and was depressed and struggling to adjust.

Like their audience, the filmmakers knew very little about the world quads occupied when they began their project. But their curiosity is what drew them to the subject matter in the first place. Making the film was a process of enlightenment. The more the filmmakers were exposed to the men they had chosen to profile, the more impressed they were by their capabilities. “Prior to MURDERBALL, I’d never known anyone who’d been through a physical trauma along the lines of what these guys had,” observes Mandel. “I felt awkward

because I was probably thinking, ‘these guys must have able-body envy. And then you eventually learn that, no, they really don’t.’” Rubin was equally amazed by Zupan, Soares, and the other players. “The guys we got to know get up earlier, exercise longer, eat healthier, travel more, get hotter girlfriends, and most of them can kick our asses,” he admits.

Many of the moments in MURDERBALL that illustrate these differences are intensely personal and powerfully emotional. To capture them on screen, the filmmakers had to achieve and maintain a sense of trust and intimacy with their subjects. Fortunately, Zupan, Soares, and the other players were amazingly open and totally un-self-conscious in front of the camera. Shapiro attributes their openness to their years of treatment. “They’ve been so stripped down in rehab, so naked, poked and prodded. So they’re not like, ‘Oh, I have a pimple today, come back later.’” Still, the filmmakers worked long and hard to establish a bond with the players and their families. “For every hour we shot on film, there were countless hours of hanging out with our subjects before and afterwards,” Rubin explains. “The intimacy took a while to achieve. If you film enough, people forget about the camera. But we discovered that the more you care about those you are filming, the more you love them, the more likely you’ll be to capture those rare fleeting moments of unguarded intimacy. It was because we’d genuinely grown to love Keith that his family let us near him during extremely painful moments like him wheeling into his bedroom for the first time, or staring at his broken motorbike.”

Looking back to the earliest stages of MURDERBALL, the filmmakers find it remarkable that the players’ families took them seriously. “We came from New York with these really small cameras and we told everyone we were making a movie that was going to Sundance. I guess it sounded pretty ridiculous,” recalls Shapiro. Despite some initial suspicion, the families were unfailingly generous and, for the most part, accepted Shapiro, Rubin, and Mandel with open arms. “There were a few touchy moments, like after Team USA’s loss in Athens, where the families weren’t so happy to notice us shooting them,” says Rubin. “I spent my birthday in the hospital with Keith when he had to undergo surgery on his throat. His family got me a little hostess cupcake with yellow frosting from the hospital vending machine. That choked me up.”

In addition to selecting the characters and sculpting the storyline of MURDERBALL, the filmmakers had to determine a look, shooting style, pace, and sound for the documentary. They wanted every aesthetic element, from the framing and editing to the score, to reflect the players’ unsentimental, no pity attitudes about life. “These guys watch ‘Jackass’ and listen to speed metal,” points out Rubin. “Basically, they behave like any normal rugby team.” Mandel adds, “Zupan and Brahm don’t really work together. Our composer Jamie Saft and our incredible post-production team really brought this aesthetic to life.”

When the filmmakers first met Zupan, he joked that he loved his “ass level view” of the world. Rubin and Shapiro used this “ass level view” as the film’s signature visual perspective. “Whenever possible, we shot the film while sitting in a wheelchair or from wheelchair height,” Rubin explains. “We used wheelchairs the way other crews use dollies, pushing and rolling our way all over the world. While shooting from two wheels, we learned first-hand the obstacles one faces in a world of two legs – overgrown tree roots,

narrow doorways, confused bus drivers, bonehead bouncers. The only drawback to the ‘wheelchair shot’ were the bystanders who kept stopping to ask how I injured myself.”

The filmmakers were also committed to telling the story from the character’s perspective, a decision that informed the film’s shooting style. “A lot of documentaries are shot and told in wide angle, meaning they are overviews of curious subjects shot from the fly-on-the-wall’s perspective,” observes Shapiro. “Stylistically, we wanted it to feel like a feature film, so we’d shoot close-ups of the characters’ eyes, then cut to what they’re looking at. The look and feel and sound of this documentary is very much the result of us not wanting it to look and feel and sound like a documentary.”

If the quads in MURDERBALL impress and inspire us – and they do – it is not only because they have overcome insurmountable odds. Judged by any standards, Mark Zupan, Joe Soares, and the other Quad Rugby players profiled in the film, are remarkable athletes and even more remarkable men. MURDERBALL – a compelling, enlightening, and even exhilarating film – is, first and foremost, their story.