As a pre-teen in Central Ohio, and the son of parents that grew up 30 miles from Huntington, WV, Mitch remembers well the plane crash on November 14, 1970 that wiped out an entire football team, and sent shockwaves through an entire region. 36 years later, Mitch reviews "We Are Marshall", the story of this plane crash for us here on The Blurbs. Mitch has a strong opinion on this film, and as usual, delivers a phenomenal review for us.

As a pre-teen in Central Ohio, and the son of parents that grew up 30 miles from Huntington, WV, I remember well the plane crash on November 14, 1970. I remember the shock and grief as they stayed glued to the television for details about the tragedy that wiped out an entire football team, and sent shockwaves through an entire region.

Now, of course, Marshall University is a football program of esteem, having sent numerous stars to the NFL such as Chad Pennington and Randy Moss. Granted, thirty-six years is a long time, but the question would still remain on how a program survives such devastation to reach later glory. “We Are Marshall” tells the story of the rebirth, while giving ample tribute to those that were lost on that terrible day.

The film spends less than twenty minutes in the time leading up to the crash, which seemed to be just about right; too much more would have been maudlin, too much less would have been disrespectful. The team suffers a close loss to the East Carolina Pirates, a game seen predominately through the eyes of those that were not on the fated flight; assistant coach Red Dawson, injured starter Nate Ruffin, freshman Reggie Oliver, and town leader/Marshall board of directors member Paul Griffen, who has a son on the team. Director McG tastefully chooses not to show the crash or the moments leading up to it. After a brief pep talk from head coach Tolley (an uncredited Robert Patrick), a sound is heard and the screen goes black, making you almost think the projector had broken.

Several seconds later, the news has hit the town, and as many people as possible rush to the scene, including the four members of the varsity squad that did not make the trip. This was indeed the most emotional part of a movie filled with emotion; the reactions of those suffering unparalleled grief. Thirty-seven players, eight coaches, twenty-five members of the community, and five members of the flight crew had been lost just miles away from the runway in the Appalachians.

To Paul Griffen (Ian McShane), the choice to shut down the football program indefinitely is a simple one. But to the players and students, particularly Nate Ruffin, restarting the program is the only way to start the healing process. In a heart wrenching scene, Ruffin organizes hundreds of students to show up outside of a board of directors meeting in a display of support, all of them chanting the title phrase of “we are Marshall”. University president Donald Dedmon (David Strathairn) reluctantly agrees, and from that point the film follows the Herculean effort required to put together a team from the ashes.

The focus is predominately on two men; Matthew McConaughey as Jack Lengyel, and Matthew Fox as Red Dawson. Lengyel’s Northern Ohio roots were deep; he was a graduate of the University of Akron who was then an assistant coach at Heidelberg College before becoming the head coach at the College of Wooster. A born salesman with unbounded optimism, he seemed almost out of place with his sunny disposition in a town still shrouded in black. Dawson was his polar opposite. He had turned down the head coaching position, still racked with guilt due to the fact that he drove back home after the East Carolina game in order to make some recruiting stops.

Fox is the heart and soul of this movie, and as good of a job as he does acting on ABC’s surrealistic series “Lost”, he far exceeds that in this movie. Dawson is a man nearly decimated with internal turmoil and Survivor’s Guilt, but he still puts that aside to help recruit and teach freshmen, walk-ons, and athletes taken from basketball, baseball, and soccer teams to restock the roster. McConaughey, on the other hand, was a bit disconcerting as Lengyel; but perhaps that was just an accurate capturing of the essence of the man assigned a task that would break anyone not possessing that type of an upbeat personality.

Non sports fans may also not truly understand why so much emphasis was placed on the new football team and its games instead of on the community as a whole. I would hope that readers here, at this web site dedicated to sports, would understand. It was important for Marshall to put another team on the field; for the University, for the town of Huntington, and for the memory

of the players. There were football players that died, and I feel that focusing on the new players DID honor them in the best possible way; by showing what it took to play the game they loved.

If you've read any of my previous reviews/commentaries about sports movies, you know the one thing I don't like about football movies are their reliance upon everything leading up to the Big Game, and the Big Play. And in that regard, "We Are Marshall" also seems to stoop to this cliché…but not really. If you watch the movie, and then do a little research into the actual events, you will know that in this case, they were totally justified in filming it in this manner.

The film gets almost everything right, and when it does miss, you can at least understand it. I don't like the introduction of fictional characters into a dramatization of a real event; and the movie goes in that direction with McShane's character, who was not real, but instead represents a composite of business leaders and grieving parents. However, McShane gives a truly touching performance, as does Strathairn in the role of the distraught and conflicted university president.

In all, this is one of the most stirring pictures I have seen in the past few years; one that I highly recommend to sports fans. Non sports fans (like those critics who have panned it) may not understand the emphasis on the game of football, but will undoubtedly be moved by the events that caused such incredible grief, and what it took to move forward.

Make sure you don't leave as soon as the credits start, as there is one last tear-inducing moment when you see pictures of the actors next to the characters they played, in addition to actual pictures from the 1970 team and the memorials around the university.

My rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).