What a freaking episode of The Sopranos this past Sunday. And the stage has been set for a final episode as anticipated as any I can remember in recent television history. Bobby and Sil have been put out of commission. And the war between Tony and Phil and their New Jersey and New York crime families is set to ensue. Mitch recaps last weeks episode ... and looks ahead to the series finale.

In many of my columns, I spend a great deal of time poking fun of situations and ridiculing obvious flaws in the script or performance. You will see very little of that in this column, as it's hard to criticize what should go down as one of the top five Sopranos episodes ever.

Almost every season, the penultimate episode is the most intense one of the entire year, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that this one was so packed with great scenes and gripping drama.

Recap

Silvio greets Bert Gervasi in front of his house for an unexpected early Sunday morning meeting. Opening up the show with Bert isn't exactly normal, so there has to be something up, and Sil's attitude pretty much gives it away. Seems that Bert has been playing both sides of the fence with Phil, and was pushing Sil to go along. Sil's response was to garrote Bert right in front of his punt-dog. Once again, Sil wears no gloves, and doesn't seem to clean things up, even after he cuts his hand while struggling with Bert. On the other hand, as we've seen details of the aftermath before (most notably Ralph Ciferretto), I'm sure he called in some goons to take care of the mess.

Phil has made up his mind...he wants the entire management of the Sopranos crew eliminated. He goes on and on about how little attention they pay to traditions, although I was slightly confused about his claims on how guys being "made" didn't have to prick their finger or anything. I'm pretty sure I remember Christopher having to do so back in season two...but I'm lacking the DVDs from those seasons to verify it. Honey...if you are reading this...you now have a good idea for a gift for our upcoming anniversary. Phil's consigliere disagrees with the idea of whacking Tony, Sil, and Bobby, but will go along with his boss's orders to take out the top three, and then "absorb" all that remain.

AJ is in his last week at the hospital, which is a good thing since Tony is busy bitching about the bill being over two thousand dollars per day. AJ does meet up in the hospital with a familiar face, Rhiannon, who used to date his friend Hernan. She's in there for a "food issue", and to be a perfect enabler for AJ, I'm sure. The next time we see AJ, he's at home, still sleeping a lot and still obsessed with doom and gloom television. Carmela has hidden his belts from him, and Meadow is still worried.

Speaking of worried, Agent Harris is at the Pork Store (sans Agent Goddard), and he's seemingly a bit out of the norm. Tony talks to him a bit, trying to pry more information out of him regarding the Arabs, which Harris won't divulge ("even if he knew"...yeah, right). Harris does make an interesting comment that I'm sure David Chase slipped in slyly. Looking outside, he comments to Tony about the weather, making a reference to "end times. The Rapture." Quite the prophet is Agent Harris. But Tony is pissed that Harris won't talk, and storms out. Harris hesitates, and then goes after him, letting him know that he's learned from a confidential informant about Phil's plans to hit Tony and some of his crew. Tony loses his appetite and tosses his non-Jared approved heartburn sub into the trash.

Plans and counter plans are being made. Silvio doesn't seem surprised at the news from Harris, informing Tony about "measures taken" regarding Bert's betrayal. Tony tells Sil they have to hit Phil first. Cute touch on how the he and Sil start clowning around in the restaurant when they hear music from

"Raging Bull" playing in the background, pantomiming slow motion punches as Bobby looks on as if they were nuts. But the big man does have a plan; he wants to call in some "cousins" from Italy to hit Phil. Tony tells Bobby to put Paulie in charge of it (first mistake). Paulie then taps Patsy to handle the details (second mistake), who then uses druggie Corky as the contact man for the Italians (biggest mistake).

A quick Andy Rooney moment. Did you ever notice that while Tony and the boys have their "office" in the back room of a strip club, Phil's crew meets at the "Flatbush Bikini Waxing & Beauty Shoppe"?

And we thought gangsters were ruthless. Welcome to the nastiest dinner party ever, a table full of psychiatrists acting like it's a sorority social. One of the guests ‘happens' to bring up the sociopath study that Eliot had earlier mentioned to Melfi, and Jennifer is not at all happy, smelling a rat. Come to think of it, Eliot does look a bit like a rat, and his denial is as phony as the average mammary glands for girls at The Bing. Eliot also violates several AMA codes by telling everyone about Melfi treating Tony...using the codeword "Leadbelly", and then telling everyone that he can't SAY who it is...but the hint is "a female opera singer and a gangster". Cute.

At home that evening, however, Melfi does finally read through the aforementioned study. I'm not sure why they are acting like it's such a revelation...the study is a real one, and it was published back in the 80s. In any case, she evidently sees that it hits a lot closer to home than what she wanted to believe. Consequently, when Tony shows up for his next appointment, you can tell by the body language that this is not going to end up well. Tony is bothered by both Meadow's decision to abandon medical school, and AJ's continued problems. When he tears up slightly, Melfi's back stiffens, and you can tell she's even more pissed, positive that he's using her. She eggs him on by responding to a complaint about AJ with a snide "are you a shining example for the collection of wingtips and loafers that must be lodged up your lower bowels?" Damn, that's harsh. She also uses the fact that he ripped a recipe out of a magazine in her waiting room as an excuse to attack him. Rebuking any protests from Tony, she announces that she can go no further with him,

recommends a different type of therapy that is more drug reliant, and offers to give him references to other doctors. Tony is completely shocked and angry, telling Melfi "as a doctor, I think what you are doing is immoral". Good point. In watching Tony's interactions with Melfi throughout the years, it is obvious to me that he was not using her at all. At one point, he might have been trying to manipulate his way into her pants, but she saw through that in a heartbeat, and it had been strictly professional ever since. It was a great scene in what will probably be the last prolonged look we get at Melfi.

Tony's "cousins" have been staking out a house in Queens that belongs to Phil's goomar/housekeeper. They see a car pull in, and a gray haired man enter the house. Checking the picture, one of them goes to the door, pretends to be a delivery person...and then blows away the wrong guy. It was Yaryna's father, not Phil, and they kill her as well. Thinking they got the right guy, they call Corky and head back to Italy, but they do tell him that they were surprised that he spoke Ukrainian.

Damn...it's another Artie sighting. And this time we have to deal with his wife Charmaine as well. You could have made a telephone pole out of Pinocchio's nose had he told as many lies as Tony and Carmela did while at the restaurant. About Tony "quitting" therapy. About being happy that Meadow was not going to medical school. About her studying "constitutional law". About how AJ was doing ‘great'. It was almost like the old saying about politicians...how can you tell one is lying? His lips are moving. This farewell to Artie also gives an opportunity for a gratuitous cameo by Jets Coach Eric Mangini, which then gives Carmela one last chance to lie to Charmaine about her being OK with Meadow dating Patrick Parisi.

Major symbolism time. The next scene shows Tony emptying out the swimming pool. That's about as subtle as a 2 by 4 to the head, Chase. Janice shows up during that time, first passing her two year old daughter off to Carmela with the sage advise of "good girls don't cry...babies cry". Good luck in your first joint therapy session once you find out your daughter is blowing the entire fifth grade basketball team when she's eight, mommy-weirdest. Of course, Janice is only there when she wants something; this time it's money for Junior as he is now

completely broke and will have to move to a state facility if they can't come up with the cash. Tony is beside himself with anger thinking that she'd have the nerve to ask him to pony up money to support the man that almost killed him...but he does offer her five bucks; a great bit. When he finds out that Bobby has been kicking in money to support him, he really goes off, feeling that he's once again been betrayed. I'd say he's thinking about changing his management team, but it looks like someone else is ahead of him in that regard, as Sil comes in as Janice leaves, telling Tony about the mistaken identity. Tony gives orders for Sil to tell everyone to watch their back, change routines, and alter their collections.

Switch scenes to Bobby going into a hobby shop, the phone that he left sitting in the car ringing ominously and futilely...and I don't think anyone watching didn't know what was coming next. He goes in to look once again at a vintage toy train, deciding to finally indulge and spend the $8,000 for the "Blue Comet" set. What follows is simply one of the best scenes this show has had. You see through the security concave mirrors two men striding up an aisle, knowing what they are there for. Switch to close ups on a toy train hurtling down the tracks, whistle blowing, engine chugging loudly, images of an impending disaster, including a small figurine pictured holding her hand over her mouth in shock. And then it happens. Bobby turns and the two gunmen open fire on him. He's hit at least eighteen times and falls back into a display, derailing the toy train, in a scene that reminded me so much of Sonny Corleone at the toll booth in "The Godfather".

At the Bing, Patsy and Silvio are quickly getting things loaded into a car to get the hell out of Dodge. I don't know if they've heard the news about Bobby or not, but they are in a hurry. As they try to leave the parking lot, they are hemmed in, and two of Phil's guys open fire, hitting Sil multiple times. Patsy doesn't get hit, and gets off several useless shots before running off into the woods. I had wondered if Patsy might have been in on it...but given the fact that they goons were still shooting at him as he was running, and cursing when they ran out of bullets, I doubt it. As the goons pull out, we get another shock, as they cause a motorcyclist to wipe out, and then we get to see him get ran over by a trailing car.

Tony's Escalade flies into the driveway, and Tony quickly gets Carmela away from

her Paris reminiscing chat fest with Rho to tell her about Bobby and Sil. He wants her to get herself and the kids out of the house as quickly as possible, but assures her that she they aren't targets, as mobs don't go after family (and did I just see the Foreshadowing Fairy's head in a window in the background?). She tells him that Meadow is with Patrick, but wonders if AJ will agree to go. Tony tell her he'll go, even if it's strapped to plywood, and then goes up to finally apply the well need boot up AJ's ass, as he of course freaks out, cries, and refuses to go until Tony drags him out of his bed. About damn time.

The gang (or what's left of it), pack up supplies and heads towards a safe house after hearing the news that while Silvio is still alive, he's not expected to regain consciousness. I had originally thought that they were at either Junior's old house, or Livia's, but I don't think that was the case. Both would be known to Phil and therefore wouldn't be safe. Besides, both had probably been sold to pay off debts...certainly Junior's would have been. Tony's driver, Walden, Carlo, and Paulie set up shop downstairs while Tony goes upstairs to get some sleep. He pulls out the AR-10 machine gun Bobby gave him for his birthday, flashes back to the conversation they had on the boat regarding "not hearing it [bullets] coming", and he lays on the bed for a fitful night of "rest" before working on the next (last) plan.

Final Thoughts

With one episode left, I think the Whacking Odds are pretty much moot at this point. It is all pure speculation right now on what's going to happen next week, and anyone thinking they have a clue based upon the "previews" is seriously deluding themselves. Hell, Chase used to show a lot more stuff, and almost every time that it dealt with an upcoming intense episode, he threw one red herring after another in the previews.

I've also seen some spoiler sites that talk about everything from A to Z. In one, Tony wakes up from a dream and finding he's actually Kevin Finnerty, and the whole thing was made up. That ain't going to happen...carve that in stone. That was the horrible way they ended the television series "St. Elsewhere", where it turns out all the

characters were just the imagination of an autistic boy, viewing his longshoreman father and grandfather as important doctors. People hated that ending (myself included), and there is no way Chase would go that route.

There is also speculation that Meadow dies in the cross-fire...and that could have some validity to it, but I still think Chase wouldn't do such a blatant steal from "Godfather III" and put that in...but I could be wrong. Other rumors regarding AJ and Carmela are just too far fetched to repeat. I saw it all before regarding the final episode of "24" this year, and the rumors weren't even close. Now Paulie being a traitor? That possibility I could buy, as he was viewing a switch to the New York side back when Carmine was running the outfit.

Regardless, Chase has historically been much more secretive than Keifer Sutherland, so I don't see how any real information has been secured by anyone. I find it interesting that he's left the door open for Silvio to survive...which could leave the door open for a movie...which implies that Tony and Paulie probably live. Or not.

What I do know is that I'll be up extremely late next Sunday night...as I'll Tivo it so as not to miss Game 2 of the NBA Finals, and watch it after the game.

Oh...and I won't be answering the phone that evening...no way I'll take the chance of someone spoiling this ending for me.