That Morgan Freeman would star in a biography of Nelson Mandela is not the least bit surprising. That Clint Eastwood should direct Freeman in this role is also not the least bit surprising. But what is surprising is the story they use in showing us the man who was tasked with holding his country together after the discontinuation of oppressive racial segregation under apartheid. Rather than creating a biography of the life of Mandela, "Invictus" shows us a snapshot of a brief period of time that helps define the man, a country, and its people, and how they started the process of re-uniting with a sporting event serving as the catalyst. Mitch reviews the highly acclaimed "Invictus" for our readers in his latest movie review here at TCF.

That Morgan Freeman would star in a biography of Nelson Mandela is not the least bit surprising. Freeman's age, stature as an actor and physical resemblance to the first man to be elected president of South Africa in a fully representative democratic election makes it an almost foregone conclusion that he should play this role.

That Clint Eastwood should direct Freeman in this role is also not the least bit surprising. Eastw ood has become quite the internationalist lately, and his relationship with Freeman has lasted for decades.

But what is surprising is the story they use in showing us the man who was tasked with holding his country together after the discontinuation of oppressive racial segregation under apartheid. Rather than creating a biography of the life of Mandela, "Invictus" shows us a snapshot of a brief period of time that helps define the man, a country, and its people, and how they started the process of re-uniting with a sporting event serving as the catalyst.

"Invictus", therefore, is not a typical sports movie. In fact, it's like no other sports movie I've ever seen. The emphasis is not primarily on the 1995 South African National Rugby team that participated in the World Cup finals hosted by South Africa, but on Mandela and his efforts to guide his country through the transition from world-wide pariah to acceptance; both from the international community and inside their own borders.

Mandela was a huge rugby fan; which was rather unusual as in South Africa, rugby was considered a "white" sport, while soccer was the favorite sport of blacks.

The South African team (call the Springboks) was seen as a representation of the "old days". With only one black player, and most of the whites being Afrikaners closely tied to the apartheid system, most South African blacks would openly pull for the opponent, no matter who they were. Mandela set about trying to change his countrymen's attitudes, and he started by meeting with Springbok captain Francois Pienaar.

Mandela asked nothing more of Francois but to do his best in leading the team, but Francois also knew what Mandela was really asking for; a World Cup title.

In some terms, "Invictus" is a standard sports movie, as the Springboks are shown to be a subpar team, one that may have only made the list of 16 finalists for the World Cup due to their status of being from the host nation. Matt Damon is very believable as Francois, and he does an excellent job in making the evolution of the team to a powerhouse seem effortless.

A very convincing South African accent and an incredible physical regime that added more muscular bulk than we've ever seen by Damon helped as well.

Where the movie deviates from formulaic sports films is in the presentation of the team, the sport, and "The Big Game".

As mentioned, the team is secondary and you really only get depth of character from the decent and dedicated Francois. The rest of the team is basically nameless and almost faceless. On screen, there is no more depth to any of them as you would see from an "opposing" team in standard sports movies like "The Natural" or "Hoosiers".

The game of rugby itself is difficult to present to mainstream audiences. As big of a sports fan

as I am, I will readily admit to being woefully ignorant of the rules of rugby...something I'm sure that 95% of the U.S. audiences share.

But it doesn't matter.

The games are shown mostly to give the audience a basic idea of how it's played, and to show that it is awfully violent...but it's also shown in such a way as to give you an idea of how wildly passionate some people can be about it.

Finally, "The Big Game" is shown in a different light. Anyone who has read my commentaries and reviews of sports movies know how much it irks me to see an over melodramatic and phony presentation at the end of a sports movie of The Big Game.

I get especially irritated when it's supposed to be a true story, and they totally disregard the actual events for the sake of "drama".

Well, this movie is all about The Big Game...so there is no way to avoid that part of it...but there are differences that make it not only acceptable, but exhilarating.

First is the fact that this story is completely true, and the drama at the end was not fabricated in the least.

It is also expertly filmed; so much so that even though the results are already known to most, the scenes were riveting and tension filmed nonetheless.

But the biggest difference is that The Big Game scene was filmed with attention being paid more to the fans than the players. Often, I didn't know exactly what was going on in the game due to my lack of rugby knowledge, but Eastwood made sure I knew how I was supposed to feel about it by constantly going to fan reaction shots. Since the game truly meant more to the fans than to the team itself, in the confines of the times and events, this was an excellent choice by Eastwood.

Great movies are defined by "moments", and this film had plenty of them during these final scenes. Touching, funny, and surprising, they all work together to express the message of how sports truly can unite a people.

It is something that really doesn't happen often in the United States. Our major sporting events are in sports where it's one city (or state) against another or one school against another.

The closest thing we get to the country-wide pride and insanity of a World Cup would be the Olympics...although that is most often just for the individual performers, with one notable exception; the 1980 US Olympic Hockey Team, a story most Americans know well.

It is THAT level of exuberance and national pride in a sports team that is conveyed here.

And it is something that is all the more meaningful due to the hardships, trials, and dissention that had nearly ripped the country of South Africa apart in the preceding ten years.

So did Nelson Mandela really pull a country together just due to one sporting team's success? Of course not, and Eastwood is not arrogant enough to make it appear so.

Mandela is shown as the force behind the reconciliation, and the movie shows other efforts on his part that had nothing to do with Rugby.

Freeman gives an Oscar winning performance in showing the man's incredible leadership skills, as well as the charisma, the determination, and the pain still living inside him due to 27 years in captivity.

The film was much more about the times and the people than the sport and the event, and Eastwood did a beautiful job in showing the small moments that defined the time and the place.

Many scenes focused on Mandela's security detail, showing the mistrust of his security chief in the white Afrikaners Mandela insisted on being put on his staff to show solidarity between blacks and whites.

As the film progressed, we often went back to see these men as they learned to put away their distrust and hatred, and to work together for the protection of someone they all ended up admiring greatly.

As sports fans, we too often put too much emphasis on a simple game in our lives, when there is so much else that really matters...but we understand the sentiment of the connection and sense of pride with the team and their accomplishments. Just ask any Browns fan still in euphoria over their first victory over Pittsburgh in six years, and you'll understand it.

The loyalty and emotional investment people place on their sporting teams is real, so debating whether it is deserved or not is totally moot.

In 1995, in strife torn South Africa, a great leader was able to work with a superlative athlete and captain of a sporting team to create a circumstance where the people of a nation received exactly the shot of self esteem they needed. It came in the form of a performance from a group of men wearing their flag and their colors; a circumstance which is not much different from those early months of 1980 in Lake Placid, New York, where an underachieving group of young men beat the baddest of them all; the USSR hockey team, at a time when American self-esteem was near an all-time low.

Kudos to Clint Eastwood, Morgan Freeman, and Matt Damon. They have made one of the best sports themed movies I have ever seen.

My Rating - Bernie Kosar (4 footballs).