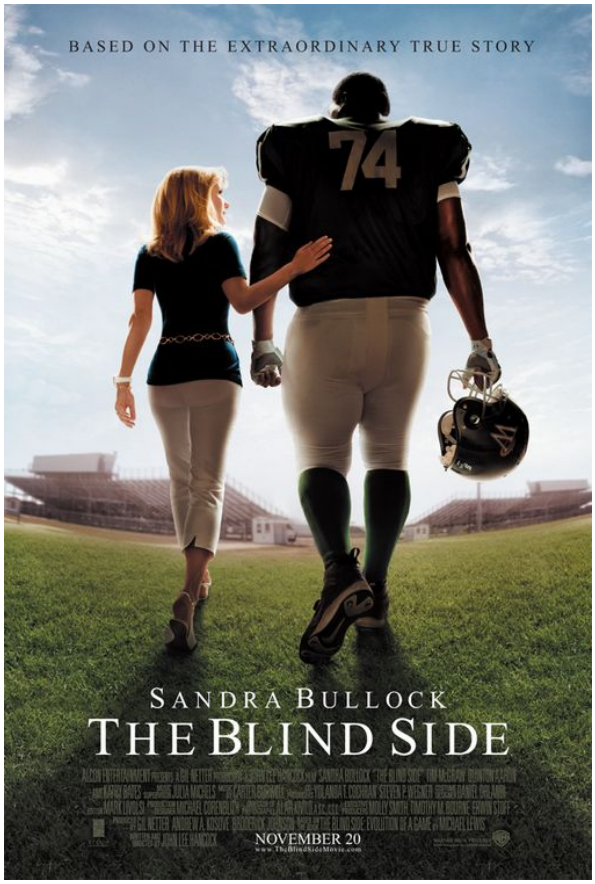

The Oscars will be broadcast next Sunday night, and as is our tradition at TheClevelandFan, we will be looking at the film vying for the title of Best Picture. We start with "The Blind Side", the surprise hit of the year and one of the highest grossing football films of all time. While this "feel good" film is one of six films that will be content with just being nominated, it may not be shut out of the major awards, as Sandra Bullock is the favorite to win Best Actress for her role as the spunky, real life Leigh Anne Touhy.

Just three years ago, Michael Lewis wrote a very unique and very successful book about football entitled "The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game". The book focused primarily on two very distinct topics, one of which was a very technical analysis of the changes to the game of football over the last three decades, starting with the arrival in the NFL of Lawrence Taylor. Taylor's dominant play from the outside linebacker position, particularly as a pass rusher attacking the left side of the offense, led to a fundamental shift in offensive line play. In order to protect the highly valued (and highly paid) quarterbacks, teams needed a new type of player...a left tackle that could counter the new style of pass rushers; behemoths who were blessed with incredible strength, incredible quickness, and incredible finesse. These protectors of the quarterback's "blind side" have evolved to the point that they are often the second highest paid players on NFL teams.

The other focus of the book was on one particular player who fit that description, one whom at the time of the publication of the book, was still in college. It was a story of a young man who, due to his size, speed, and strength, was perfect for the role of the new NFL left tackle. But the gist of the story wasn't his amazing success at the game, but more so the amazing fact that he was even alive, and had survived his childhood. His circumstances were almost too incredible to be true. But they were true, and hence it was only natural that a movie company such as Disney would make a film about Michael Oher (The other part is touched upon, as the evolution is described briefly at the start of the movie, with a narration of it being given while graphic replays are shown of that fateful Monday Night Football game where Taylor snapped Joe Theismann's leg...a "cover your eyes" part for me).

Only it's not about Michael Oher as the primary point of view...instead, it's more of a look at a remarkable woman named Leigh Anne Touhy; a Southern Bell, a woman of privilege and pampering, a mother of two children attending one of the most exclusive private schools in the Memphis area. Nothing about this woman, her upbringing, and her life up until she met Michael Oher would give you any indication that she would be the type to do something so selfless...but she did.

Michael Oher was the type of child who falls through the cracks 99% of the time. He never knew his father, his mother was a drug addict, and he alternated being homeless or being in foster homes for several years. As part of the charity work done by the school where the affluent Tuohy children attended, Michael was given a scholarship. Of course, it helped that he was 6'5", over 300 pounds, and was agile enough to dunk a basketball. I give credit to the film makers that they don't disguise that fact, nor even try to pretend that it's fair.

Michael may have been going to school (and struggling mightily), but that didn't mean much else to him. As played by newcomer Quinton Aaron, Michael is the epitome of a "gentle giant", just trying to get by, even if that meant spending the entire night at a 24 hour Laundromat in order to stay warm. Then one day, as the Touhys are driving their expensive BMW SUV home, Leigh Anne sees Michael, in shirt sleeves, walking alone on a freezing night. She sizes up the situation almost immediately, and then quickly demands that her husband turn the car around and pick him up. Offering a place for him to sleep for a few days eventually evolves into the Touhys taking legal guardianship of the young man.

The movie itself is absolutely wonderful; touching, funny, sad, and continually inspiring. Sandra Bullock gives the best performance I have ever seen from her as Leigh Anne. She is the epitome of a strong, Southern woman...and on a personal level, with me being married to a strong, Southern woman, I can say without hesitation that she had the part nailed. Bullock

strikes the perfect balance of a woman of means who is totally caught up and in love with her status, but who is not even remotely shallow, as women of her position can be.

It was impressive that they did not try to over-analyze Leigh Anne's motivation. She wasn't the typical liberal do-gooder taking on this project as a case of "white guilt", as she is semi-accused by her country club hen group of similarly pampered women. In fact checking this movie, it is reported that the events truly did occur as depicted; a snap decision made by a woman and her family...one that they never regretted. I also respected the fact that the filmmakers didn't shy away from the controversy, as several comments were made regarding the questions people would have about a rich, white woman with a teenage daughter opening up her home to a very large black male from the projects.

By far, this is Bullock's movie, and she handles her role with ease; but it would fail without the strong supporting characters. Quinton Aaron shows potential in his first role, as it was a difficult one to perform. Michael is painfully shy, insecure, and withdrawn. He is woefully behind on his schooling, and this embarrasses him as well. His timidity is so extreme that he initially has problems on the football field, and he doesn't seem to have the appetite for physical contact required for the game. Aaron captures the sad solitude that Oher inhabited, but also triumphed in projecting the inner intensity and intelligence, as well as the burning desire to be loved and accepted.

Tim McGraw once again did well playing a football father, although this was a far different role than his intense performance in "Friday Night Lights". Here, his Sean Touhy was an amiable, calm influence on the family; a man completely comfortable in his own skin, and appreciative of his firecracker of a wife. McGraw's understated performance was spot on.

If you have read some of my reviews of sports movies, or my essays about them, you know that one thing I HATE about sports movies in general, and football movies in particular, are the fact that they always end (or almost end) with The Big Game...which almost always comes down to The Last Play. This especially irritates me on movies that are biographical...such as "The Express", "Invincible", or "Remember the Titans". In this movie...we finally get to avoid that cliché. Yes, there are game sequences, but the one extended football game showed in this film is actually the first game of the year, with all of the drama coming in the first quarter...quite a welcome relief from the norm.

I am also on record as getting very disgusted when biographical movies totally fabricate events

and circumstances just for dramatic effect. Often this is bad enough to severely reduce the enjoyment I have with the movie. Two very bad ones in the last few years were the aforementioned "Invincible" and "The Express". For "Invincible", the film makers inexplicitly added the character of Vince Pepale's father, even though in real life, the senior Pepale had passed away long before his son's tryout with the Eagles. For "The Express", as a Browns fan, it irked me to have them portray Art Modell as the man who drafted the great Jim Brown, as Brown came into the NFL before Modell's purchase of the franchise. They also totally distorted a key game against West Virginia, portraying the entire WV team, all of their coaches, the fans, and the referees as mindless racists screaming for Ernie Davis' blood.

For "The Blind Side", the fact checking shows that there were none of these fabrications just for dramatic effect...although I wasn't able to verify that Leigh Anne actually did go up to a gangbanger in West Memphis, and threaten him if he were to make any trouble for Michael or her family, saying "I'm a member of the NRA, and I'm always packing". But given the interviews I've seen from the real Mrs. Touhy...I can believe it. There were a few scenes I learned where things were changed slightly; Michael did not move in immediately after that first encounter...it came a couple of weeks later. But I do understand that some things are needed to keep the movie under four hours.

I could have been a bit happier had they not made the little brother so precocious as to be almost unbelievable...no kid is that cute, witty, and lovable...but that's the only thing they seemed to pull out of "Sports Movie Cliché's 101". Also, the inclusion of cameos of all the SEC college coaches also fell a bit flat for me. Lou Holtz, Phil Fullmer, Houston Nutt, and Nick Saban should thank their lucky stars that they are successful coaches, as their acting was awful.

The entire college recruiting process drug the movie down. I will give credit, however, that they did not sugarcoat the NCAA investigations regarding Oher's decision to attend Ole Miss. The concerns from the NCAA were that the Touhys were both graduates of Ole Miss, gave money to the school, and hired an Ole Miss graduate to tutor Michael to get his grades high enough to attend college. So while there might have been legitimate reasons to at least question Oher and it was right to show it in the film, the sequence it just wasn't written very well.

Minor quibbling. The bottom line is that "The Blind Side" is an excellent movie for everyone...but I'd especially recommend it for sports fans and for young men and women currently involved in athletics at the middle school or high school level; a truly inspirational story about teamwork, perseverance, and family that will tug at your heartstrings. You will walk out of this movie with a smile on your face, water in your eyes, and a warm feeling about people in

general...not a bad thing at all.

My rating - Frank Ryan (3 footballs).