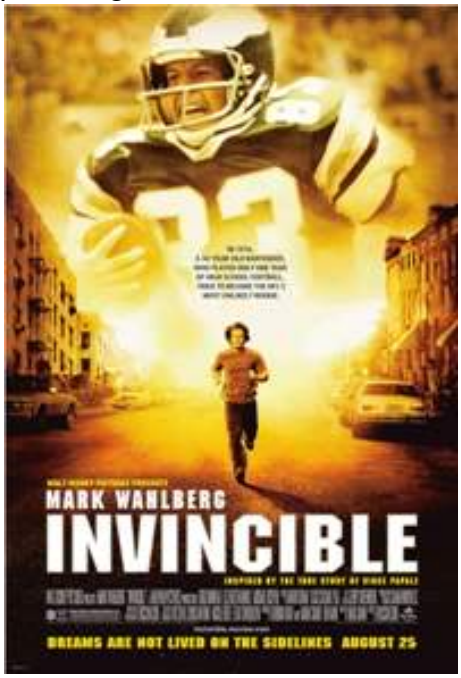
There's only three things you can count on in life. Death, taxes, and Mitch Cyrus cranking out quality movie reviews on The Blurbs. This week, Mitch is here to report on "Invincible", which stars Mark Wahlberg in a true story about a guy that essentially walks on to play for the Philadelphia Eagles. Is it worth the $7.50, or the rental 3-4 months from now? Mitch has the skinny.



Disney Studios may have opened up a whole new franchise, the “based on true events, underdog over the hill guy makes a professional team” heartstring tugger. First was 2002’s “The Rookie”, the story of a thirtysomething teacher/coach named Jimmy Morris who was challenged by his team to audition for a spot on a professional baseball team. After that successful film, Disney now follows up with the football version, “Invincible”, the story of a thirtysomething teacher/bar tender named Vince Papale who was challenged by his friends to audition for a spot on a professional football team.

The differences? Go back to an old George Carlin routine: “In baseball you run around in a circle and go HOME! In football, you pound the ball down the gridiron to the END ZONE!”…in other words, baseball is slow and genteel; football is not. “The Rookie” was an upbeat tale about wife, child, and high schoolers in a bucolic town in Texas. “Invincible” is about working class blue collar friends dealing with a stagnant economy, depression, and just getting through each week in a dilapidated city in the North. In other words, it’s “The Rookie” meets “Good Will Hunting” with a touch of “Rudy” thrown in.

Vince’s life is falling apart all around him in South Philadelphia in mid-1976. He has just lost

his job teaching at a local high school, and his wife has just left him, taking everything in the house but a phone. Next to it she leaves a hand scrawled note telling him he'll never make any money, and will never amount to anything. Life isn't much better for the group of friends he hangs out with at the local bar; many don't have full time jobs and grim prospects of finding one in a city rapidly losing its manufacturing base. Those that do have work, like Vince's father and his friend Tommy are stressed out due to a pending strike against their factory that could push them to the limit financially.

These conditions existed throughout the working class cities during this time, as similar circumstances were seen in Pittsburgh, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago in the recession years immediately following the Vietnam War. For Vince and his friends, diversion was found in religiously following the city's pro football team, the Philadelphia Eagles. Unfortunately, the Eagles' luck wasn't much better than the luck of its fans, as they were coming off a 4-10 season where the team actually took a knee and quit towards the end of their last home game, a 31-0 drubbing by the Cincinnati Bengals. In fact, the Eagles had not had a winning season ten years, resulting in a desperation hire, a college coach from California (UCLA) with no professional experience as head coach, 39 year old Dick Vermeil.

Vermeil is certainly not as we view the real man today, as the Super Bowl winning wise sage crying at the drop of a hat…but rather as a neophyte from California who is totally alien in the lunch pail mentality of what is widely perceived as the nastiest football fans in America. As a publicity stunt to endear him to the fans, Vermeil holds an open tryout for an invitation to the Eagles training camp. Vince, a former college track star and terror on the street football team he and his friends play on, is egged on by almost everyone he knows to go for it…if for no other reason than to spend a few hours on the sacred field of their autumns.

The scene at the tryouts was quite hilarious. Hundreds of overweight and/or out of shape has-beens and never-will-be's show up and perform pretty much as you'd expect…quite badly…with the exception of Vince. Just as Vermeil is about to give up in despair, Vince drops jaws with his time in the 40 yard dash. After seeing that, Vermeil has him run some pass routes as well. Later on the news we learn that out of the hundreds that showed up, only Vince will have a chance to make the team.

The rest of the movie does follow the standard "underdog sports movie" playbook. The

players resent Vince taking up a potential roster spot and Vermeil's perceived favoritism towards him. Vince doubts himself while his friends hang on desperately to his progress, all their dreams tied vicariously to his efforts. He's also dealing with his growing feelings towards someone he recently met, an attractive fellow bar tender who knows as much football as any guy in a bar…which makes her a gem of a find…except for the fact that she's from New York, and a huge fan of the hated NY Giants.

Unfortunately, like too many sports movies, we end up having to endure "The BIG Game" at the end of the film that will either make or break the character. It is a tired cliché, but in its favor, the cinematography is incredible. Football movies are not as easy as baseball or basketball in regards to simulating the game due to the speed and violence. "Invincible" rings true throughout the movie, conveying the frantic intensity of the game, along with the physical skills needed to be successful.

But as much as this is a sports movie, it is also an excellent study of another time in this country. Most movies and shows that are set in the mid 1970s seem to be done so for comedy. The bad hair, stupid clothes, and hideous music all inspire ridicule and parody. In this film, first time feature film director Ericson Core (a renowned cinematographer) captures the atmosphere almost perfectly. The decaying South Philadelphia neighborhoods and their denizens are spot on, and Core has done an excellent job in re-creating the mood of people that have suffered far more than they should have. Vince and his friends are bloodied by years of just seemingly spinning their wheels, but like all true sports fans, they are not beaten as long as they can hold on to hope for better luck next season. The soundtrack even works, with vintage songs from such artists as Jim Croce, Dobie Gray, Jackson Browne, Ted Nugent, and Bachman-Turner Overdrive complimenting the action without being distracting or campy.

But what works best is the acting. Mark Wahlberg is perfect as Vince, and he portrays the characters in a sad, realistic manner. This is not someone showing a little boy's thrill at just being there, but a man who is positive that the ride will eventually come to an end. He carries the hopes of an entire city on his undersized shoulder pads, and the day to day battles make it nearly impossible for him to enjoy the journey and relish in how much he has achieved, as he is too focused on its perceived conclusion. Wahlberg's understated determination and grit shine throughout the movie. Greg Kinnear also excels as Vermeil, capturing the intensity and the genuine love the man has for both the game of football and his players. Elizabeth Banks adds feistiness to the role of Janet, while Kirk Acevedo, Michael Rispoli, and Dov Davidoff stand out amongst Vince's circle of close friends.

This is a rare film that works both in the action sequences, and in the quiet conversations of its characters. And though the screenwriting too often reduces itself to formulaic sports clichés, overall “Invincible” is a highly entertaining feel-good movie that no NFL fan should miss.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs).