Written by Mike Schulz
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GLORY ROAD

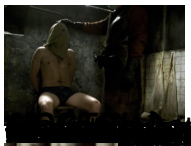
Is it just a coincidence, or do you think there's an annual meeting wherein Disney shareholders tell the studio's executives, "Bring us this year's feel-good, triumph-of-the-underdog sports flick, and if you can find one that's more formulaic, clichéd, and shameless than *last* year's, all the better!" A couple of years back, we endured Kurt Russell guiding a bunch of interchangeable skaters to Olympic victory in the hockey drama *Miracle*, and my head is still reeling from the moribund sentimentality – and beyond-obnoxious miniature caddie – of *The Greatest Game Ever Played*, which managed to make golf look about five times *less* exciting than the sport's reputation would suggest.

This year – well, this *month*, at any rate – it's basketball's turn to get Disneyfied. *Glory Road* tells of the 1966 NCAA basketball-championship victory of the Texas Western Miners, whose all-black starting lineup scored an unexpected victory against the favored, all-white players of the University of Kentucky; in the film, the Miners and their coach, Don Haskins (Josh Lucas), have to face not only the formidable championship race, but the prejudice and bigotry of others in their community, on the road, and on their very team. Director James Gartner's work is well-meaning and, for what I'm guessing is its intended, youthful audience, probably inspiring.

Of course it is. But is *Glory Road* any good?

It certainly *thinks* so. The movie's noble intentions are spelled out before *Glory Road* even begins, when a title card pops on-screen that reads, "Based on the true story," which we *expect* to see, but which is immediately followed by another card that completes the sentence – "of the team that changed *everything*" (italics mine). Usually, such self-regarding hyperbole would be left to the film's advertising campaign, but in

Glory Road
, it feels absolutely appropriate – the movie certainly
feels
like a 100-minute advertisement, for Respecting Your Teammates and Embracing Our Differences and Following Your Dream and any other generic, life-affirming message to be found in its pedestrian screenplay.

And that's a shame, because the story behind the Miners' victory *is* inspiring, and in *Glory Road* , it even leads, occasionally, to some edgy moments; the film's most effective sequence is probably its most subtle one, when the Miners, one by one, are introduced at one of their first games, and while the white players receive a healthy ovation from the crowd, the black players jog on to the court in almost total silence. Every so often,
Glory Road
details the fear and hatred the African-American Miners had to endure in ways that feel fresh, but those times are rare, and the hopelessly routine arc of the film's script dulls the movie of rooting interest beyond its weighty themes. (When critics complain about works of this type being "predictable," they're not saying that because the good guys inevitably triumph in the end, but because the
path
to that triumph is so unsurprising.)

Most depressingly, though, the racism that the Miners experience turns out to be nothing that can't be undone through a series of wins on the basketball court. The subject of race in America is so incomparably large that when it's dealt with as blithely as it is in most of *Glory Road*, you almost wish it weren't addressed at all, and
Glory Road
compounds the problem by having its characters orate when they should speak, sometimes in ways that make the movie's dialogue seem senseless. When one of the African-American Miners declaims, regarding the white bigots the team is confronting, "They're takin' away our dignity!" Coach Haskins responds with, "Nobody can take away somethin' you don't
give
him." A stirring line, in theory, but actually, they
can
– it's called
stealing
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