

Jocks Strapped: "Semi-Pro" and "The Other Boleyn Girl"

Written by Mike Schulz

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SEMI-PRO

In the '70s-era sports comedy *Semi-Pro*, Will Ferrell plays Jackie Moon, a one-hit-wonder pop star who becomes the owner of the American Basketball Association's Flint Tropics, a struggling Michigan team for which he also serves as coach, promoter, and star player. And forgive me for asking, but shouldn't any one of these five roles have been enough for Will Ferrell?

The notion of the comedian as a soulless Lou Rawls wannabe - his single is titled "Love Me Sexy" - is kind of funny, as is the notion of Ferrell as an inept hoops star, as is the notion of him as a misguided sports promoter prone to outfitting his teammates in seahorse and starfish costumes. But while raging megalomania has always been Ferrell's comedic forte, *Semi-Pro* seems to be the first of the actor's comedies in which he's determined to be the entire show, and unfortunately, it's not a pleasant - or very funny - sight.

Directed by Kent Alterman, the movie comes off as an amalgam of about half a dozen aborted ideas for Will Ferrell star vehicles, and since Jackie Moon serves so many different comic purposes here, the character's egocentrism becomes inseparable from the actor's; you sense

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that Moon was designed as a singer-owner-coach-promoter-player because Ferrell couldn't stand to play just *one* of these roles. (*Semi-Pro* is like one of Eddie Murphy's latex-heavy one-man-shows, only without Rick Baker.) I know we shouldn't ask for logic in this sort of goofball endeavor, but from the outset, you just don't buy

Semi-Pro

's central conceit - at least

Anchorman

and

Talladega Nights

fashioned their own kinds of warped realities - and subsequently, its comic inspirations fall flat, and its nose-dives into irony-free sentiment fall even flatter. (Poor Woody Harrelson and Maura Tierney are shoehorned into an unexplained romantic subplot that makes them look like sticks in the mud.)

And can't Ferrell give the '70s a rest already? I mean, we *get* it - the hair was big and the clothes were loud and the shorts were

short

Anchorman

managed to be moderately insightful about the Me Decade, but

Semi-Pro

finds Ferrell and his collaborators spinning their wheels, as if the mere sight of André Benjamin with a wild 'fro or Rob Corddry with bangs would make up for their lack of character, and lack of jokes. There are sharp performances by Andrew Daly (as an unflappable announcer seemingly modeled after Jim McKay) and Jackie Earle Haley (as a barely conscious stoner), but in general, the actors are secondary to their wardrobes and wigs; it's easy to forget that anyone is around

besides

Ferrell. (And those hoping that the film's R rating might unleash something hysterically subversive in the comedian will likely be disappointed; it turns out that Ferrell's apoplectic rants are more entertaining when he's not

allowed

to scream "f---" and "c-----er.")

There's exactly one terrific scene here, when Farrell and his cronies (among them an aggressively soused Will Arnett and a typically bland Tim Meadows) take turns shooting at each other, and themselves, with a pistol they presume to be unloaded; the gag is sustained and timed so well that you instinctively flinch every time someone pulls the trigger, and your giggles escalate while you await the inevitable punchline. When it comes, though, it turns out to be like everything else about *Semi-Pro* - not as dangerous as you were hoping, and a total misfire.



THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL

Justin Chadwick's adaptation of the Philippa Gregory novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* is a lot more enjoyable than it has any right to be, mostly because, given where they presently are in their careers, Natalie Portman and Scarlett Johansson are so spectacularly well cast in it.

Playing the fiery Anne Boleyn, who eventually (and literally) loses her head over King Henry VIII, Portman exudes authority and wicked intelligence, expanding on the rich, supple command she recently displayed in *V for Vendetta* and the Wes Anderson short *Hotel Chevalier*; confidence becomes her, and Portman is more radiantly poised and maliciously entertaining here than she's ever been before. Johansson, meanwhile, has always seemed uncomfortable about seducing the camera - in

The Black Dahlia

and

The Prestige

, she appeared embarrassed to be acting the siren - and the hesitant, earnest Mary Boleyn is a much better match for the actress' tremulous gifts; Johansson gives a heartfelt turn in a mostly thankless role, and she and Portman portray alternately loving and resentful sisters with slyness and panache.

If only they weren't stuck fighting over such a dud! But as Henry, Eric Bana winds up swallowed by his oversize wardrobe - as if the film's costumer were under the impression that the late Charles Laughton would be returning to the role - and gives a morose performance lacking in emotional shading; when this king glowers, the audience yawns. The beautifully designed *The Other Boleyn Girl*

, with its serviceable-at-best script by

The Queen

's

Peter Morgan, is moderately engaging bodice-ripper, but it would have been a lot more fun if someone other than Bana were ripping the bodices.