

## 'The Iron Claw' deserves some attention this awards season

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun  
Friday, 22 December 2023 00:00

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Rating: <<<<

out of <<<<<

Running Time:  
132 minutes

**This film from A24 opens at theaters on Friday, Dec. 22.**

This reviewer is no authority on the subject of professional wrestling, but does remember watching it on television as a kid in the early 1980s. In fact, this era appears to have been something of a "golden age" that introduced viewers to some of the biggest names in the industry. While not as famous as personalities like Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant, the Von Erich brothers were also from this period and performed in leagues like the WCCW, NWA and WWE (known as the WWF during the 80s).

*The Iron Claw* is a biopic that tells their story, including their rise to the top and the many tragedies that befell them. The end result is surprisingly compelling and will impress more than your average wrestling enthusiast.

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The story introduces viewers to Von Erich patriarch and wrestler Fritz (Holt McCallany) and his devoutly religious wife, Doris (Maura Tierney). Frustrated at never having won the WCW wrestling title, Fritz trains his sons Kevin (Zac Efron), Kerry (Jeremy Allen White), Lance (Maxwell Jacob Friedman) and David (Harris Dickinson) to follow in his footsteps and, at points, even pits them against each other for his affection.

Protective older sibling Kevin does his best to encourage his brothers and rises in the professional ranks, winning approval from his dad in the process. He also receives support from girlfriend Pam Adkisson (Lily James), who voices concern as the young Von Erich men face intense pressure to succeed. After a series of horrible events, Kevin becomes convinced that the Von Erich family name is cursed.

Yes, this is a film that does feature plenty of wrestling and offers insight into what goes on behind the scenes of pro wrestling leagues. Still, the characters are the primary focus here.

Efron's Kevin is the main character and while the actor is better known for his work in comedic fare, he delivers the dramatic goods and gives an exceptional performance. The actor looks virtually unrecognizable and effectively conveys the inner turmoil that the role requires. Kevin is pushed and pulled between being a devoted son wanting to achieve his father's dreams, while also protecting the health and safety of his younger brothers. Eventually, he is forced to question the manner in which he has been raised.

And naturally, the movie dissects the strange family dynamic and gets into more detail about the competitiveness thrust upon the brothers and its effects on each of them. The young men are sympathetically shown dealing with depression, drug abuse and various other issues as they try to succeed for their parents, who rarely show any compassion. Littlest brother David isn't even interested in sports, but is pushed to continue in the family tradition.

As things go wrong, Doris seems to explain every tragedy away simply as an act of God, while Fritz fails to take responsibility and, at one point, throws the blame onto Kevin's shoulders. It's all compelling to watch.

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On occasion, the movie could do with more subtlety. Pam's initial comment about Kevin having, "Older brother syndrome," does feel a bit on the nose. After all, anyone watching the film will already have a sense of his relationship with his siblings.

But in general, any critiques of the film are little more than nit-picks. The movie offers a scene between some of the characters that isn't based in reality and is instead designed to evoke an emotional response, but the moment does effectively tug on the heartstrings (as does another moment featuring Kevin).

Professional wrestling is by and large, exaggerated and over-the-top. This picture wisely takes a more intimate and personal approach to the material, featuring great performances and focusing on the smaller moments between family members. It's not so much a curse as an issue with parents arm-twisting and putting the screws on the children until they ultimately break. *The Iron Claw* is a very wonderful surprise that deserves some consideration this awards season.

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