

'Champions' doesn't find a spot on the winner's podium

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 17 March 2023 03:58



Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 123 minutes

This film from Focus Features opens at movie theaters on Friday, March 10.

Filmmakers Peter and Bobby Farrelly got their start making notable and exaggerated comedies like *Dumb and Dumber* and *There's Something About Mary*, which were massive hits. In the last decade, they've begun directing projects individually (with Peter even trying his hand at serious drama with the recent *Green Book*)

. Bobby Farrelly's latest is *Champions*, a remake of a 2018 Spanish film.

This feature attempts to blend broad humor and showcase the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. It's a well-intentioned effort, but one that never finds the right tone to deliver big laughs or convey a strong emotional response.

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Marcus (Woody Harrelson) is a minor-league basketball coach with a hot temper. His prickly personality has alienated him from most players and staff, hurting his career. After getting into another incident on the job with boss Phil Peretti (Ernie Hudson), he finds himself in a drunken fender bender. In order to avoid jail time, Marcus agrees to serve 90 days of community service managing the Friends, a local basketball team featuring players with intellectual disabilities.

After a difficult start, Marcus builds relationships with athletes like Johnny (Kevin Lannucci), Darius (Joshua Felder) and Cosentino (Madison Tevlin). But difficulties arise when he encounters Alex (Kaitlin Olson), a woman he had a brief fling with who also happens to be the sister of a player. Despite internal conflicts, the group begins to win under Marcus’s leadership and find themselves competing for a spot in the Special Olympics.

Of course, the talented Harrelson is effective as the coach. The character has a pleasant redemptive arc and the cast manage to eke some laughs out of his testy personality. In fact, some of the best moments are quieter ones between Marcus and the players. When the team insults him for his ignorance about their busy lives and capabilities, the dialogue is amusing.

The story also includes a couple of fun moments when the lead has to capably adapt his coaching methods to assist and inspire his new friends.

It’s simply unfortunate that other scenes in the movie aren’t nearly as successful. This is particularly true when the humor is played up in an exaggerated manner. Almost every person the group encounters comes across as excessively blunt and nasty. While there are certainly people who do behave abhorrently, in this film the bits ultimately come off as too magnified and phony.

The physical comedy often falls flat as well. There is one sequence that involves a player suffering from motion sickness on a public bus and proceeding to vomit on the rude passengers around him. It doesn’t end up eliciting laughs. A subplot involving Marcus trying to land an NBA job through coaching assistant Sonny (Matt Cook) is also broadly overplayed.

Additionally, the relationship between Marcus and Alex starts off in such an adversarial manner that it never feels like there is much chemistry between them. The story actually jumps between a dramatic scene in which the pair try to deal with their personal issues to another comedic bit in

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which they try to deal with a funding shortage that will prevent the team from taking part in a major tournament.

One would expect the protagonists to put their heads together and come up with a clever fundraiser to get the word out. Instead, the screenplay has Marcus and Alex carry out a ridiculous ruse to try and blackmail a nasty business owner. It doesn’t play and will leave most viewers stone-faced.

In general, one wishes that a more subtle and realistic approach had been attempted throughout.

The entire cast do their best and do manage to generate a chuckle or two here. And of course, the message is also a welcome one. It’s an amiable effort, but the script lets everyone down with some over-the-top elements and much of the film feels like a misfire. In the end, *Champion* s tries very hard but the final product doesn’t end up on the winner’s podium.

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