

DVD review: Big Fan

Contributed by Trent Daniel
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Big Fan is a black comedy starring Patton Oswalt, Kevin Corrigan and Michael Rapoport. Directed by Robert Siegel.

I am a fan of college football, in particular the Auburn Tigers. In 2004, the team went undefeated, yet did not get a chance to play for the championship due to the college football selection system (known as the BCS; too complicated to go into here for non-college football fans). What hit me some time later: I lived vicariously through the Auburn Tigers to the point that I took my team's snub personally. Even though I never played for the team, or even went to Auburn, I identified so strongly with them that their snub hurt and enraged me.

Paul (Patton Oswalt) lives by proxy through the NFL's New York Giants, in particular star linebacker Quantrell Bishop. Without the Giants or "Q.B." Paul is basically a nobody-he is chubby, in his mid 30's, works the night shift as a parking garage attendant and still lives with his mother. There is no girlfriend in his life and perhaps one friend, Sal (Kevin Corrigan).

The Giants and Quantrell offer Paul an alter ego: "Paul of Staten Island," a regular caller of late night sports radio talk shows, where he gets to defend his beloved Giants and favorite player, most notably against his arch-enemy, "Philadelphia Phil" (Michael Rapoport).

By chance, Paul and Sal see Bishop (Jonathan Hamm) at a gas station. Totally star-struck, Paul makes the fateful decision to follow him. Without giving away too much, the night turns very, very bad for Paul and Sal, culminating in Bishop pummeling Paul and sending him to the hospital.

Although the police try to question Paul (and Paul's lawyer brother seeks a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Bishop), Paul can't (or, in the words of a detective, "won't") testify against him. The reason why is what makes this black comedy so poignant and disturbing: even though Bishop the man nearly kills Paul, deep down, Paul knows he needs Bishop the star player to still exist. Paul's idol will be suspended and his beloved Giants will suffer. Thus, "Paul from Staten Island" will be gone. All that will be left is his sad, pathetic reality.

When watching this movie, note how Paul's vicarious existence seems to exist in an alternate universe. Though Sal and Paul go to every home game, they never go in the stadium. Instead, they watch the game on a TV hooked up to a car battery, the stadium looming in the background (it is unlikely Paul or Sal could afford tickets; yet it is also fitting Paul never actually goes in the stadium and gets close to the team; the one time Paul actually shares physical space with a Giants player ends horribly).

Patton Oswalt, as Paul, quietly delivers a brilliant performance. He hits the right note in his performance. Paul is limited in opportunities and what is sad and somewhat frightening, is that he seems fine with it. He is content to never grow up, to live with his mother, to have no relationship, save for Sal. As long as he has his Giants, his talk radio, his sugary soft drinks and salty foods, he is content. Deep down, he knows he is a loser and he doesn't care-just don't DARE insult his beloved Giants.

There are plenty of people like Paul in the world (yet, hopefully, few are as deranged as him). They identify so strongly with a team or a player that they live vicariously through them. If their team wins, they win. If their team loses, they lose (and many sports fans will tell you that the joy of a win is not comparable to the pain of a loss). These fans live through their team-a group of men or women they do not know and will unlikely ever meet. As a sports fan, I admit I can identify with Paul at times. Thankfully, I know I'll never be this bad.

