

Movie review: 'Spirit of West Point'

By Mark Purcell

Cast: Glenn Davis and Felix "Doc" Blanchard as themselves, with Robert Shayne as Coach Earl Blaik. Directed by Ralph Murphy, co-produced by Harry Joe Brown and John Rodgers. Script by Tom Reed from Margaret Howard's story.

Nobody in 1947 in the theatres, or in 1990 in the video shops, goes to see "Spirit of West Point" as a sample of cinematic art. What "Spirit" is selling is the only extended glimpse there is, on films available to the general public, of two football geniuses of the forties, both as "actors" (one of them could really act) and via extended authentic game clips within the film of their football exploits. The main clips are highlight runs from the 1945 season, bits from 1946 Michigan, and more extended sections from the 1946 Navy contest, their college finale. Davis-Blanchard, 1944-46, as a duo playing together, never played in a losing college game.

As 1947 Hollywood film art, "Spirit" was then reviewed and is now remembered as a bomb. In fact, at least for us football buffs, once you realize what the scriptwriters had to work with -- basically, some game film clips and the use of two celebrity amateur actors trying to make some quick dough on furlough, before they did their West Point tours of duty -- we become amazed it isn't much worse than it really is. Our only gripes, on viewing, are that the use of game films isn't more extended than it is, and that the script spends too much time trying to target a woman's audience, which seems bad demographics.

Most of the famous publicity stories about the Dynamic Duo are worked into the script: Blanchard's attempt to relive his dead father; Davis' bringing his mom to the prom as his "date", etc.

Davis tore up his knee on the cheap practice field the producers used for insert plot and action scenes, and when he is shown in "action" in the fake scenes, one notices he never has to move. More seriously, Glenn, who would years later show his considerable intelligence on sports talk shows, is emotionally frozen in "Spirit". Either because of this fact or his torn knee problem or both, the script shifts the main storyline to Blanchard, because it turned out that in front of the camera the Southern Blanchard was a natural. Physically relaxed, amiably flirtatious with the girl extras, able to put nuances into his lines of dialogue, and do a little silent emotive acting, as a modern civilian player Doc would have been first in line to do color commentary on TV.

The amount of falsification in the script about D&B's football careers is considerable. To extract "drama", Doc only goes into the big 1946 Michigan game when the score is already 13-13; this is a typical mis-statement. The error that most outraged my co-viewer was the insertion of a clip of the Michigan single wing offense into a late-game Navy T-offense drive.

This brings up the question of how good the game clips are. It is clear the producers had less decent footage to work with than they hoped. Towards the end, out of desperation, they used both slow-motion and speed-up film. What comes across is how unhappy defensive secondaries were at having to contact big Blanchard in the open field, and the relaxation with which Davis ran. Glenn got spun around once, near the goal, and simply keeps strolling, backwards, towards the endzone.

"Spirit of West Point" is essential viewing for any serious student of football genius. The rest of the world can comfortably give it a pass.