

Dull Story of Extraordinary Survival in 'Unbroken'

Submitted by [NickHC](#) [1] on December 24, 2014 - 4:00pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Olympic runner, plane crash survivor, and WWII POW Louis Zamperini had an extraordinary life of defeating even more profound conditions from cruel nature and fellow man. His is a tale of grandiose cinematic potential, especially considering our desire for beat-down underdogs and their gauntlets of adversity, but such gets a surface-level treatment from director Angelina Jolie's underwhelming tribute "Unbroken."

The film is a chronicle of Zamperini's struggles, a narrative that beats a character down specifically to see them endure. Embodying Zamperini is Jack O'Connell, a rising actor with an immense amount of power inside him, even though this movie undersells it with whimsical stoicism. (If you're looking for a great role to see the biggest sense of this, I recommend his 2014 bloody-knuckle prison drama "Starred Up.")

"Unbroken" has a strange flaw in that it makes plain a man of astonishing heroism. From the very beginning of the story, fate looms on what will happen to him, as if the experience he went through is all a part of some higher being's plan. Louis is introduced in the middle of a dogfight in WWII, his life in the hands of enemies that may or may not shoot down the plane he's flying in. This modern presentation is then interspersed with images of young Louis (portrayed by C.J. Valleroy) absorbing pointed advice about resilience and spirituality from the sermon he spaces out during at church, or from his older brother. At a young age, Louis becomes a 1936 Olympic runner, dashing for America's glory in Germany, but is sent to World War II before he can race again.

Later on in a second plane, Louis' life takes its unfortunate fall towards becoming a prisoner to cruel fate, as he is shot down with a few others. Stranded on the ocean for almost 50 days, Louis and two others (played by Domhnall Gleeson and Finn Wittrock) attempt to keep their spirits up as nature slowly eats at them. When the men are then rescued, that's only half of the hardship that they must face, as they become captives to Japan.

While lasting through horrors of WWII Japanese prison camps, Louis is then faced with direct human opposition in detainment camp leader Mutsushiro Watanabe (newcomer Takamasa Ishihara). Singled out for his Olympic ability, Louis is directly terrorized by Watanabe, who struggles to break him with relentless physical and mental abuse.



'Unbroken'

Photo credit: Universal

"Unbroken" is a movie so concerned with establishing an underdog, and also the horror of the conditions he overcame, that it doesn't create a thorough Louis outside of his achievements. The movie is pointed towards his suffering and successes, as if it yearns more for displays of him showing his great spirit than it does a vivid sense of who he is. He is a shining underdog from the very beginning, whose physical damage throughout the tale is like a piece of gold slowly losing luster. O'Connell is assuredly a game actor with the conditions of this movie, going through disturbing body transformations, but we can't get under his skin.

Or in this case, we can't get inside his mind. "Unbroken" is a brute presentation of endurance, with the subtext that Zamperini was prepared for these unique hardships by the bumper sticker advice slapped on him before he left for the war, and also because of his body's Olympic conditions. It's not so vividly an expression of his mental state, despite the damaging rigors placed upon him. Where is his mind during these traumatizing ordeals? O'Connell's performance is swept away in the movie's cold presentation.

As the story takes on a second tale of survival, "Unbroken" meets another road block in its character story of Watanabe, a force of intimidation that doesn't make the film's take on this story any more interesting, but actually a bit cheesy. Ishihara takes on his role as Zamperini's greatest challenge with as much energy as he can, including goofy sneers. Unfortunately he takes up much of the second act, and fails to create a gripping dynamic between a tyrant and the prisoner who won't back down.



'Unbroken'

Photo credit: Universal

In another year of shining true life tales, "Unbroken" has the most frustrating text epilogue of all. It hints at richer chapters to be shared the more immediate ordeals, where tagline elements of resilience and redemption seem pertinent to Louis' life after Japan. Lost are scenes of Zamperini beginning life again in America, tackling the trauma of his past, or later meeting those who only made him stronger. This coda only confirms the sadist inclinations of "Unbroken."

Zamperini's story is in a sense, one that could be the ultimate survival story. It encourages a great romance for humans to thrive most on their spirit, their physical conditions secondary despite their immediacy. In Jolie's film, it becomes a narrative that meagerly banks on the spectacle of the abused underdog, with a very curious Zamperini compacted to transparent title mascot.

"Unbroken" opens everywhere on December 25th. Featuring Jack O'Connell, Domhnall Gleeson, Finn Wittrock, Jai Courtney, Garrett Hedlund, and Takamasa Ishihara. Screenplay by Joel Coen & Ethan Coen, Richard LaGravenese and William Nicholson; adapted from the book by Laura Hillenbrand. Directed by Angelina Jolie. Rated "PG-13"



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