

Movie Draft: *Below the Belt*

by Jameson Simmons

You often hear of film studios indulging a star's character-based "passion project" in order to garner their cooperation for some mass-appeal popcorn movie with no artistic integrity (but an automatic greenlight). The way Sandra Bullock was granted authority to make *Hope Floats* so she'd acquiesce to appear in the floating turd that was *Speed 2: Cruise Control*. But in this case, the scenario is turned entirely on its ear: to convince Christian Bale to appear in his Oscar-nominated turn in *The Fighter*, Paramount had to finance *Below the Belt*, the slapstick karate goof that Bale had spent 13 years developing as a Chris Farley tribute.

They should've just recast *The Fighter*. Edward Norton never makes a movie worse.

In *Below the Belt*, Bale gains over 100 pounds to play Fritz Carley, a sad sack who's running his late father's karate school into the ground through incompetence, fart jokes, and getting beaten by 7-year-olds – with no help from his wisecracking younger brother Dade (Jesse Eisenberg). All of Carley's students are leaving for a dazzling rival dojo, run by Brent Bauer (played by Jeremy Renner, who evidently backed into Bale's car at an awards show and accepted this role for fear of reprisal; he's even more unsuited for physical comedy than Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio's lackluster script, and thoroughly out of his element). Carley finally reaches his breaking point when he's visited by apparitions of his dead parents who convince him to enlist his father's former karate master, Blackie Shepherd (Geoffrey Rush) in order to save the dojo. What he learns is that his father's legacy is not founded on intense focus or dedicated training: he just cheated. He hit below the belt, or to put it as frankly as this movie does (in many, many close-ups): he kicked people in the nuts. In order to save his dojo, Carley must start injuring his opponents, starting with his rival Bauer.

And this is where *Below the Belt* misses the mark – even as it hits it square in the scrotum, with the same ear-splitting sound effect every single time. Bale attempts to recreate the ineffable appeal of Chris Farley's comedy without fully understanding it. Notoriously short-tempered himself, Bale clearly found something to like in Farley's frequent rants and flailing outbursts, but failed to realize that the hilarity in those moments came from how ultimately ineffectual they were. Matt Foley might scream in your face about "living in a van down by the river," but at the end of it all, he'd get overexcited and fall through a table – he wouldn't kick a guy in the balls. There's a mean-spiritedness to Bale's version of slapstick, and a precision to it. It's out to get someone, and over the course of 83 long minutes, that takes its toll. You can't root for Bale (even a chubby version) because he's not a charming, good-natured oaf the way Farley was; he's a bully.

Alas, with Bale directing the project and shepherding it through every stage of its tortured development, this tone-deafness extends beyond the lead character. Dialogue will sometimes switch from serious to goofy and back in a single breath. Entire scenes will be elaborately staged in order to set up a double-entendre about a walk-on character. There's an interlude in Blackie Shepherd's Skid Row encampment in which the camera follows two rats having a belching contest. At first there's hope that it will be one of those movies that's just incompetent enough to be unintentionally funny, but it quickly surpasses that threshold. *Below the Belt* is best left to future film historians – as a puzzling glimpse into the madness that can envelop a great performer when he sets his mind to the wrong task.

Below the Belt is rated R. There's an unwritten rule that you can get away with two or three "fuck"s in a PG-13 movie, but not ten. Similarly, you can have 65 nut shots, but no more. Bale held firm that he needed 179, although it's impossible to imagine an audience for this film over the age of 14.
