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Any Given Sunday

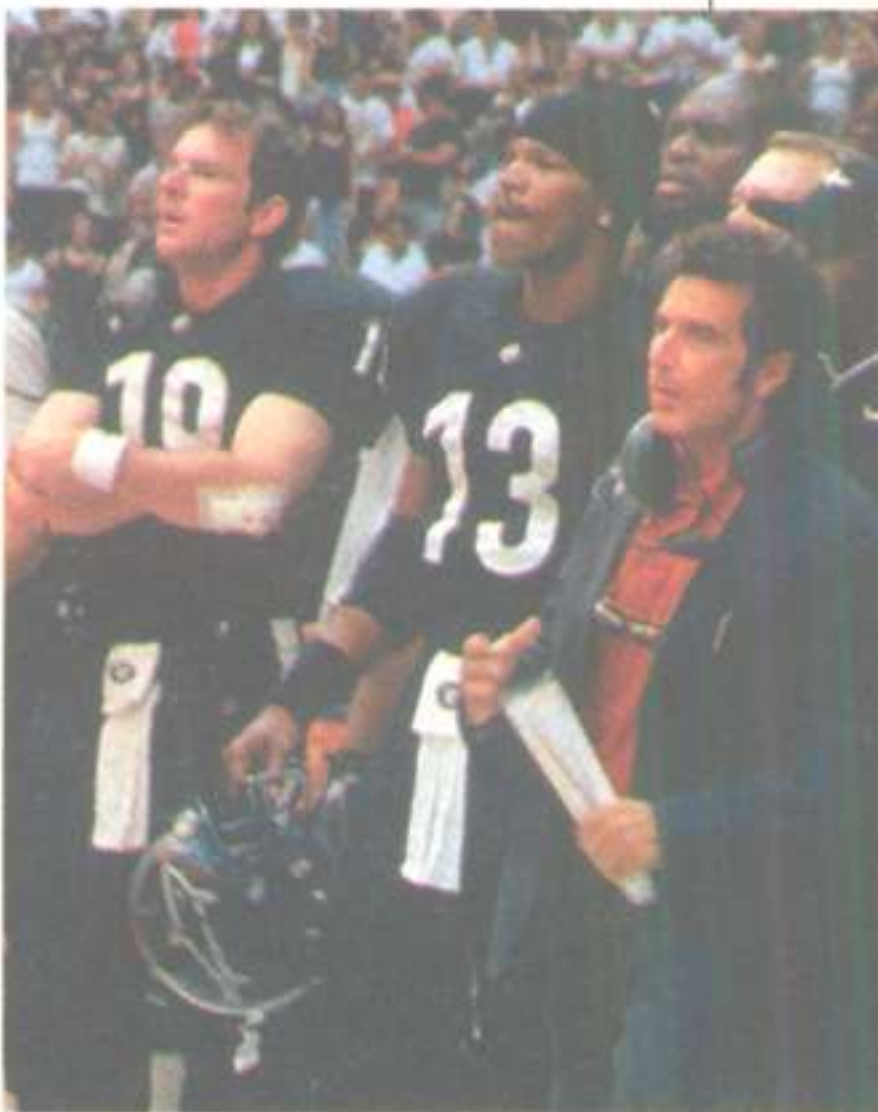
Dir. Oliver Stone. 1999. R. 2hrs 40mins. Al Pacino, Cameron Diaz, Dennis Quaid, Jamie Foxx.

It's often been said of films about sports that smaller balls equal better movies. *Any Given Sunday* explodes that theory, and not just because of the incredible intensity of its gridiron action. Oliver Stone's best movie in many years—and one of his finest ever—looks at the world of professional football from almost every conceivable angle, but it never tries to be the definitive statement on the subject. A surprisingly balanced film that merges Stone's hyperkinetic style with a character-centric narrative approach reminiscent of John Sayles and Robert Altman at their best, *Sunday* proves that powerful human drama and MTV visual pyrotechnics actually can coexist after all.

Sunday is the story of the Miami Sharks, a floundering franchise in the fictional AFFL that, in an opening sequence that's the sports equivalent of the Normandy landing in *Saving Private Ryan*, loses two quarterbacks—including its longtime mainstay, Jack "Cap" Rooney (Quaid)—to serious injuries in a single quarter. Third-stringer Willie Beamen (Foxx) takes over and begins a meteoric rise that poses problems galore for stubborn coach Tony D'Amato (Pacino) and feisty owner Christina Pagniacchi (Diaz), not to mention his teammates (including LL Cool J as a running back and New York Giants legend Lawrence Taylor in a very effective performance as the Sharks' defensive captain).

Stone is perhaps the most consistently pretentious of all American filmmakers, but he brings an unexpected off-the-cuffness to *Sunday* that's typified by his cameo as an announcer prone to chugging whiskey in the booth. Even when the old Stone emerges—during a stormy confrontation between D'Amato and Beamen

that's intercut with the chariot race from *Ben-Hur*, for example—the actors keep the film from running off the rails. Pacino's hysterics work in his favor for a change, allowing him to deliver a complex portrait of a man terri-



SUNDAY DRIVERS From left, Quaid, Foxx and Pacino propel Stone's latest.

fied that all his sacrifices have been for nothing. Foxx is awesomely magnetic in a role that could well transform him into a superstar, and Diaz works overtime—with impressive results—to ensure that her character is more than just a bitch on wheels. Instead of treating football as a metaphor for society, the film regards the game as a machine that chews people up and spits them out, and focuses on what it takes to survive under those circumstances. Yes, it all ends with the big game, but *Sunday*'s great success is that it leaves you feeling that the victories its characters achieve off the field are more important still. (Now playing; see Index for venues.)—Andrew Johnston