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# The Iron Claw (film)

***The Iron Claw*** is a 2023 biographical sports drama film written and directed by Sean Durkin about the Von Erichs, a family of professional wrestlers who are "cursed" by constant tragedy. The film depicts the struggles of wrestling company owner Fritz Von Erich's sons to achieve the success their father groomed them for, from 1979 to the early 1990s—resulting in more tragedy.

The film stars Zac Efron as Kevin Von Erich alongside Jeremy Allen White, Harris Dickinson, Maura Tierney, Stanley Simons, Holt McCallany, and Lily James as other members of the family, and is titled after the "iron claw", an in-ring signature move of the Von Erichs.

*The Iron Claw* premiered at the Texas Theatre in Dallas on November 8, 2023. It was released in the United States by A24 on December 22, 2023, and by Lionsgate in the United Kingdom on February 9, 2024. It grossed over \$45 million, on a \$15.9 million budget, and received positive reviews, with Efron's perfomance receiving critical acclaim from critics and deeming it the best of his career. It was named one of the top 10 films of 2023 by the National Board of Review.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Plot

In 1979, the World Class Championship Wrestling company (WCCW) is owned by retired professional wrestler Fritz Von Erich, who once dreamed of winning the NWA Worlds Heavyweight Championship. Fritz has five sons with his wife Doris, from oldest to youngest: Jack Jr., who died as a child, Kevin and David, who both wrestled in WCCW, Kerry, an aspiring discus thrower, and Mike, an aspiring musician. Kevin, the current Texas Heavyweight Champion, starts a relationship with a woman named Pam, and tells her about the "Von Erich curse" that killed Jack Jr. as a child, supposedly brought on by Fritz changing his last name from Adkisson to his mother's, whose family had suffered constant tragedy.

Kevin wins a non-title match against NWA World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race by disqualification, putting himself in the lead to challenge for the title. However, Fritz is disappointed that Kevin took a long time to get up after taking a vertical suplex directly on concrete, but is delighted by

### The Iron Claw



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	<span>Sean Durkin</span>
<b>Written by</b>	<span>Sean Durkin</span>
<b>Produced by</b>	<span>Tessa Ross</span> <div><span>Juliette Howell</span><span>Sean Durkin</span><span>Angus Lamont</span><span>Derrin Schlesinger</span></div>
<b>Starring</b>	<span>Zac Efron</span> <div><span>Jeremy Allen White</span><span>Harris Dickinson</span><span>Maura Tierney</span><span>Stanley Simons</span><span>Holt McCallany</span><span>Lily James</span></div>
<b>Cinematography</b>	<span>Mátyás Erdély</span>
<b>Edited by</b>	<span>Matthew Hannam</span>
<b>Music by</b>	<span>Richard Reed Parry</span>
<b>Production companies</b>	<span>Access</span> <div><span>Entertainment</span><span>BBC Film</span></div>

David displaying a natural talent for showmanship while cutting a promo. The 1980 Summer Olympics boycott dashes Kerry's hopes of competition, and he moves back home where Fritz presses him to also become a wrestler.

By 1983, Kevin, Kerry and David defeat the Fabulous Freebirds to win the Six-Man Tag Team Championship, and Fritz volunteers David over Kevin to fight current NWA World Heavyweight Champion Ric Flair. Kevin and Pam get married, and he reveals at the wedding to an ill David that he will soon be a father. A week before his match against Flair, David dies of enteritis while touring in Japan. Both Kevin and Kerry volunteer to fight Flair in his place, but Fritz lets a coin flip decide, resulting in Kerry being the one to face Flair—beating him and winning the World Heavyweight Championship. Although Fritz is overjoyed, a despondent and drunk Kerry goes out for a motorcycle ride and loses his right foot in an accident.

Fearing the curse, Kevin has his newborn son, Ross, legally surnamed Adkisson. Kevin begins training Mike, who badly injures his shoulder during a match and goes into a toxic shock-induced coma during surgery. Mike narrowly emerges from his coma with noticeable brain damage, and is no longer able to play the guitar. When Fritz presses him to get back in the ring, he takes his own life. A grief-stricken Kevin starts to distance himself from Pam and Ross, fearing the "curse" will affect them too. Nonetheless, he fights Flair for the NWA World Heavyweight Championship but is disqualified when he ignores the referee and grapples Flair with the signature Von Erich "Iron Claw" move for too long.

Kerry returns to wrestling with a new prosthetic foot, and works for the World Wrestling Federation, now dwarfing WCCW in popularity, where he wins the Intercontinental Championship at SummerSlam. Fritz gives Kevin the task of running the WCCW, who focuses on life with Pam, Ross, and newest son Marshall. Kerry gives Fritz a new gun for Christmas, but becomes upset when Fritz puts it away instead of firing it. Kerry later calls Kevin to tell him that the curse's constant presence and his declining career have made him consider suicide. He hangs up before Kevin can learn his location. After calling Fritz for help but receiving none, Kevin arrives at Fritz's house the next morning just in time to hear Kerry commit suicide with the gun, and nearly strangles Fritz to death in a fit of rage. Sitting with his brother's body, Kevin has a vision of his brothers in the afterlife: Kerry leaves behind the coin that decided he would face Flair and reunites with Mike, now free to pursue his musical dreams, David wearing the world title belt he had been chasing in life, and Jack Jr., whom he meets for the first time since being a toddler.

Sometime later, Kevin sells WCCW to Jerry Jarrett despite his father's protests, Doris divorces Fritz and gives up her housewife duties for her hobby of painting, and Pam becomes pregnant again. Kevin weeps while watching his sons play football, telling them he misses having brothers. They promise to be brothers

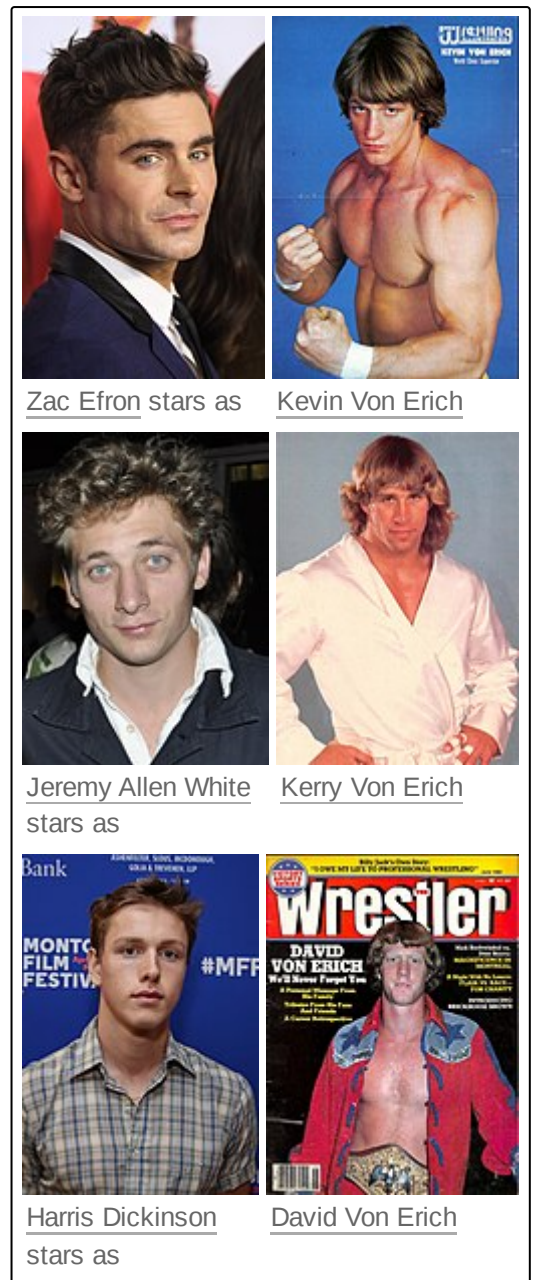
	House Productions
<b>Distributed by</b>	<u>A24</u> (United States) <u>Lionsgate</u> (United Kingdom)
<b>Release dates</b>	November 8, 2023 (Dallas) December 22, 2023 (United States) February 9, 2024 (United Kingdom)
<b>Running time</b>	132 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Countries</b>	United Kingdom United States
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$15.9 million <sup>[2]</sup>
<b>Box office</b>	\$45.2 million <sup>[3][4]</sup>

to him, and he gets up and plays with them. A textual epilogue reveals that the Von Erchs were inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2009, and that Kevin and Pam are still married and have bought a ranch in Hawaii, where their large family lives to this day, including their four children and thirteen grandchildren.

## Cast

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- Zac Efron as Kevin Von Erich, the second-oldest son
- Jeremy Allen White as Kerry Von Erich, the fourth-oldest son
- Harris Dickinson as David Von Erich, the third-oldest son
- Maura Tierney as Doris Von Erich, Fritz's wife and the mother of the Von Erich brothers
- Stanley Simons as Mike Von Erich, the youngest son
- Michael J. Harney as Bill Mercer, a professional wrestling commentator
- Holt McCallany as Jack "Fritz" Von Erich, the family patriarch, former wrestler, and WCCW owner
- Lily James as Pam Adkisson, Kevin's wife
- Maxwell Friedman as Lance Von Erich, a non-related wrestler billed as a member of the family
- Brady Pierce<sup>[a]</sup> as Michael Hayes
- Aaron Dean Eisenberg as Ric Flair
- Kevin Anton as Harley Race
- Cazzezy Louis Cereghino as Bruiser Brody
- Chavo Guerrero Jr. as The Sheik
- Ryan Nemeth as Gino Hernandez
- Scott Innes as the ring announcer



## Production

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### Development

Durkin had a long-term aspiration to create a film based on the Von Erich family. He was a fan of professional wrestling during his youth and he was personally saddened by the string of Von Erich family deaths. In 2015 he began research for the film's initial screenplay.<sup>[6][7]</sup> Chris Von Erich, the youngest member of the family, was not included in the screenplay because, according to Durkin, "it was one more tragedy that the film couldn't really withstand".<sup>[8]</sup> Chris died by suicide in 1991, a year and a half prior to Kerry Von Erich, and he was the fourth family death (after Jack Jr., David, and Mike).

In June 2022, the film was announced to star Efron and to be produced and distributed by A24. Later, it was also developed by House Productions, with the support of Access Entertainment and BBC Film.<sup>[9]</sup> In September, White and Dickinson were announced as joining the project to portray the Von Erich brothers,

alongside Efron. One month later, McCallany and James were cast,<sup>[10]</sup> and Juliette Howell, Angus Lamont, Maura Tierney, Tessa Ross, Derrin Schlesinger, and Harrison Huffman were confirmed as producers.<sup>[11][12][13]</sup> In November, Friedman was cast and was later credited as an executive producer.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Filming

Principal photography began in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in October 2022,<sup>[15][16][17]</sup> and it lasted six weeks.<sup>[18]</sup> Instead of filming the wrestling scenes in multiple edited sequences, however, the cast performed full-length, one-take wrestling matches, in front of a live audience, which was held in a furniture store that was converted to appear as the Dallas Sportatorium.<sup>[6]</sup> Chavo Guerrero, who portrays The Sheik, also acted as the film's primary wrestling consultant.<sup>[19]</sup> Guerrero also spoke to the cast about premature deaths in professional wrestling, including that of his uncle, Eddie Guerrero.<sup>[7]</sup>

The film received special dispensation from SAG-AFTRA, to continue production and promotion during the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike, subject to the acceptance of certain conditions and stemming from A24's positive relationship with the union.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Music

Richard Reed Parry of Arcade Fire composed the film's score.<sup>[21]</sup> Parry and Laurel Sprengelmeyer also wrote an original song for the film, "Live That Way Forever".<sup>[22]</sup>

Additionally, the film features songs such as "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" by Blue Öyster Cult,<sup>[23]</sup> "Thank God I'm a Country Boy" by John Denver,<sup>[24]</sup> and "Tom Sawyer" by Rush.<sup>[25][26]</sup> "Tom Sawyer", which served as Kerry Von Erich's entrance music from 1981 to 1983, was also featured in the marketing for the film.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Release

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*The Iron Claw* premiered at the Texas Theatre in Dallas on November 8, 2023, hours after the end of the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike,<sup>[27]</sup> and it was attended by Kevin Von Erich, making a public appearance in Dallas for the first time in over 20 years,<sup>[28]</sup> alongside Bill Mercer, Marshall, Ross Von Erich, and Trish Stratus.<sup>[29]</sup> The film was released, in the United States, on December 22 by A24, and premiered in the United Kingdom by Lionsgate on February 9, 2024.<sup>[30][31]</sup>

The film was released for digital platforms on February 13, 2024, and for Blu-ray and DVD on March 26, 2024.<sup>[32]</sup>

## Reception

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### Box office

In the United States and Canada, *The Iron Claw* was released alongside *Migration*, *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*, and *Anyone but You*, and was projected to gross around \$6 million from 2,774 theaters in its four-day opening weekend.<sup>[33]</sup> The film made \$2.5 million on its first day, including \$640,000 from

Thursday night previews. It went on to debut to \$4.9 million, finishing sixth at the box office.<sup>[34]</sup> In its second weekend the film made \$4.6 million, finishing seventh at the box office.<sup>[35]</sup> The following weekend it made \$4.5 million, a drop of just 3% and finishing eighth.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Critical response

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 89% of 258 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 7.7/10. The website's consensus reads: "Powerfully acted and profoundly sad, *The Iron Claw* honors its fact-based story with a dramatization whose compassionate exploration of family ties is just as hard-hitting as its action in the wrestling ring."<sup>[37]</sup> Metacritic, which uses a weighted average, assigned the film a score of 73 out of 100, based on 55 critics, indicating "generally favorable" reviews.<sup>[38]</sup> Audiences polled by CinemaScore gave the film an average grade of "A−" on an A+ to F scale, the best ever for an A24 title, while PostTrak reported 91% of filmgoers gave it positive score, with 72% saying they would definitely recommend the film.<sup>[34]</sup>

*The New Yorker's* Richard Brody wrote *The Iron Claw* "is as exuberant as it is mournful, and the high spirits of performance and achievement are inseparable from the price that they exact".<sup>[39]</sup> Adam Nayman of *The Ringer* called it "a sports movie with genuine existential heft",<sup>[40]</sup> and *The Atlantic's* David Sims commented "it is the kind of big, weepy, macho film that just doesn't get made much anymore, a soaring power ballad that should prompt a lot of loud sniffing in the theater."<sup>[41]</sup> David Fear of *Rolling Stone* noted the film establishes from the outset that "the physical violence in the ring will be nothing compared to the psychological carnage happening outside of it".<sup>[42]</sup>

The cast received widespread praise.<sup>[39][40][43][44][45]</sup> David Fear of *Rolling Stone* wrote of Efron's performance: "The lost, needy look in his eyes, especially when he's around his father, makes him seem like a frightened lad playing adult dress-up...Efron gets at what drove Kevin: discipline, love, and fear. He anchors the movie".<sup>[42][43]</sup> Of White, Fear added, "*The Bear* has already sold many folks on the fact White is not only a hell of an actor, but can do a lot with silences, pauses, those peepers, and a kind of simmering soulfulness. This movie should convince whatever few naysayers are left that he's the real deal."<sup>[42][46]</sup>

David Sims commented, "To wrestling nerds, the Von Erichs have a titanic legacy, and Durkin does his best to represent that by exploring the sport's crunchy, amateurish pre-corporate age, when regional live events were the big moneymakers and television was largely ignored."<sup>[41]</sup> Writing for RogerEbert.com, Christy Lemire said "the sequence in which the Von Erichs discover the song that would become their anthem—the iconic 'Tom Sawyer'—is a montage that moves with a verve that's reminiscent of Scorsese's muscularity".<sup>[25]</sup>

David Fear noted "there are times when the movie comes close to being an outright feel-bad sports movie".<sup>[42]</sup> Several critics discussed the film's tendency to focus on the tragic, and expressed that character detail and depth are unfortunately sacrificed in favor of covering more narrative ground.<sup>[25][45][46][47]</sup> Allison Willmore of *Vulture* wrote, "In streamlining their story to emphasize the tragedies that accrue as time goes on, the film risks reducing its characters into martyrs who suffer and die on behalf of toxic masculinity".<sup>[48]</sup> *The New York Times's* Manohla Dargis opined: "The iron claw of corrosive patriarchy, as it were, and of emotional repression and misplaced ambition proves more than [Durkin] wants to grapple with."<sup>[44]</sup> Richard Lawson of *Vanity Fair* said, "When the bad stuff does start happening—and then happens, again and again—it's hard to grasp the central why of it all. Why is this family so doomed, so pained, so self-destructive and unhappy?"<sup>[45]</sup>

Writing for *Texas Monthly*, Sean O'Neal said, "The film sparks most in those early scenes set against the nostalgic neon glow of the eighties Dallas skyline, when the Von Erichs—and the city that surrounded them—seemed invincible and electric. Selfishly, I found myself wishing it could have lingered there a bit longer, before that golden myth gave way to gray and murky reality."<sup>[46]</sup> Adam Nayman concluded, "It may be that by finally torquing a story about unimaginable loss into that of a mind who finds himself, *The Iron Claw* errs on the side of uplift. But as acted by Efron, the catharsis feels earned—the euphoric feeling of having broken out of a deathlock, even if only momentarily."<sup>[40]</sup>

## Reaction within professional wrestling

In October 2023, Marshall Von Erich, Kevin's son, praised Guerrero's role as a wrestling consultant, highlighting the accuracy of the film's wrestling sequences and complimenting Efron's performance.<sup>[19]</sup> Kevin Von Erich also positively highlighted Guerrero's contributions, stating, "He did a great job, pushing [the cast] and getting them ready. It is a lot more difficult than it looks, and they did so well."<sup>[49]</sup> Von Erich met Efron and endorsed both his portrayal and the overall film, which Efron later stated was "the most important review".<sup>[18]</sup> Von Erich stated that his niece Hollie, Kerry's daughter, was moved when she saw McCallany, who plays her late grandfather Fritz, on set, but believed the film inaccurately portrays Fritz as coming off "pretty rank".<sup>[50][51]</sup>

Wrestling journalist Dave Meltzer, who lived and worked in Texas during the events of the film, lauded the performances of the film's cast but noted the film's plot contained several historical inaccuracies and depicted many events in an incorrect chronology. Meltzer also opined that the film struggled to correctly depict the Von Erich's mass popularity at their height.<sup>[52]</sup> Additionally, Meltzer noted that some members of

the professional wrestling community heavily criticized the exclusion of Chris Von Erich from the film, but agreed that the inclusion of Chris would have prolonged the length of the film greatly. Meltzer panned Aaron Dean Eisenberg's imitation of Ric Flair, suggesting that it was the weakest aspect of the film.<sup>[52]</sup>

## Accolades

Award / Film Festival	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>Austin Film Critics Association Awards</u>	<u>January 10, 2024</u>	<u>Best Film</u>	<i>The Iron Claw</i>	7th place	<sup>[53]</sup>
		Best Stunt Coordinator	<u>Chavo Guerrero Jr.</u>	Nominated	
<u>Houston Film Critics Society Awards</u>	<u>January 22, 2024</u>	Best Ensemble Cast	<i>The Iron Claw</i>	Nominated	<sup>[54]</sup>
		Best Stunt Coordination Team		Nominated	
<u>National Board of Review</u>	<u>December 6, 2023</u>	<u>Top Ten Films</u>		Won	<sup>[55]</sup>
		Best Ensemble		Won	
<u>San Diego Film Critics Society</u>	<u>December 19, 2023</u>	<u>Best Actor</u>	Zac Efron	Nominated	<sup>[56]</sup>
<u>Seattle Film Critics Society Awards</u>	<u>January 8, 2024</u>	Best Action Choreography	Hiro Koda	Nominated	<sup>[57]</sup>
<u>St. Louis Film Critics Association</u>	<u>December 17, 2023</u>	Best Stunts	<u>Chavo Guerrero Jr.</u>	Nominated	<sup>[58]</sup>
<u>Minnesota Film Critics Alliance</u>	<u>February 4, 2024</u>	Best Ensemble	<i>The Iron Claw</i>	Runner-Up	<sup>[59]</sup>

## See also

- *The Wrestler* – Sports drama centered around professional wrestling.
- *Fighting with My Family* – Comedy-drama based on the early life and career of professional wrestler Saraya Bevis.

## Notes

- a. Credited as Michael Proctor in the end credits

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## External links

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- [Official website \(https://a24films.com/films/the-iron-claw\)](https://a24films.com/films/the-iron-claw) 
  - *The Iron Claw* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21064584/>) at [IMDb](#)
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