

# StudioCanal

## Story Coverage

TITLE: HARNESS

AUTHOR: Leigh Janiak

READER: Oscar Gervet

DATE READ: 10/26/2023

DRAFT:

GENRE: Erotic Period Sports Drama

Subbed To : Shana EDDY GROUF

Subbed By : Alex Heineman, The Picture Company (Heineman himself received from Bryan Besser, Verve)

Evacuation scores (Excellent / Good / Fair / Poor)

PREMISE: Good

PLOT: Good

CHARACTERS: Good

DIALOGUE: Good

Recommendation (Recommend / Consider / Pass)

STORY: Consider

WRITER: Recommend

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LOGLINE: Set in the violent world of underground horse racing, a wannabe female jockey and her trainer brother-in-law become entangled in an illicit relationship full of blood, sweat, and sex that pushes the limits of their bodies and the law.

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COMMENTS: HARNESS is an erotic Reagan-era sports movie that walks the line between prestige and pulp. This is an underdog's R-rated twisted pursuit of greatness in the spirit of BLACK SWAN (but with horse racing) and with an erotic BDSM romance reminiscent of 50 SHADES OF GREY. The script is unique and well-written, but the marketability and production challenges could make it difficult for this film to be profitable.

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SYNOPSIS:

POV: we're on a horse racing in the rain until our horse stumbles. We're thrown in the air and slam on the ground. Reveal that we are a little girl, RUTH (10). DAD wants to kill our horse, but our older sister, DIANA, tries to protect it.

1986, Ruth is now grown up and works at the stable but truly wants to race as a jockey. She is a woman in a man's world, and jockeys (all men) either sexually harass her or treat her like she does not belong. At the race, one of the favorite horses, WAR ON

DRUGS, is second until thunder hits; War on Drugs bolts and crashes into the lead horse. A catastrophic chain reaction leads all horses to collide and jockeys to fall violently. The horses cross the finish lines without any of their riders. Ruth smiles.

Now that many jockeys are injured and not able to race, Ruth takes this as an opportunity for her to ride War on Drugs. She tries to convince the owner MALLORY to let her run, but the latter humiliates her publicly. Angry, Ruth puts her bloody tampon in Mallory's glass. At the farmhouse, Ruth goes to take care of her sister Diana, now grown up. She has quadriplegia and is stuck in bed with tubes in her throat, nose, and arm. Ruth tries to convince her brother-in-law, HECTOR (mid 30s), that they need her to race for money to provide better care for his wife, Diana. For Ruth, winning is more than for the money; it's revenge on all those jockeys and people who mistreated her. Hector hesitates but ultimately agrees to coach Ruth.

On her first official race, Ruth's horse, WHISTLER, rears, and spins; Ruth loses balance and crashes into the starting gate. While this is a disappointment for Ruth, Hector shared that he had bet against her, so they won some money. Hector teaches Ruth to better control her horse by standing on a fence. While Ruth trains, Hector uses his relationships to buy a different horse, PACMAN. Ruth has a strict diet of juices, jelly beans, and pills to make her lose weight for the race. As days pass, she looks increasingly thin, on the edge of unhealthy.

Ruth races again with PacMan this time, but her horse runs wild early in the race, and she falls again. Later, Hector tells Ruth the horse didn't trust her. Ruth breaks down and rips her clothes off to show her body, which is grotesquely skinny and covered in bruises, cuts, and rashes. Unexpectedly, Hector tells her, "Get on your hands and knees." Perhaps even more unexpectedly, Ruth submits. Hector comes back and starts wrapping leather saddle straps around her body. He tightens each strap around her torso, and the leather cuts into her skin. It's violent and erotic. Hector tells her, "You don't have to love these horses, you just need to make them feel like you do... Can you win?" She asks back, "What about the whip?"

Hector gets a deal on a new horse, ALBINO AL, from the couple VICKY (early 50s) and JACK (50s), who buy and sell horses. Soon, Ruth races with Al, and they win to a cheering crowd. Later, Ruth enters the barn, where Hector cares for the horses. Hector walks to her, runs his hand up her leg, and gradually undresses her. He orders her to get on the ground, and she submissively crawls onto the barn floor on all fours again. He spansks her with the leather of a riding crop. Then, he has sex with her from behind in a dominant way.

Later, Ruth sees Hector care for her sister Diana and asks him, "Is that how you fucked her?" He answers negatively and takes Ruth's hand; there is something real here. Over a montage, we see that Ruth trains, has sex with Hector, and wins races. Everything feels interrelated. Until at one race, all the other horses pass in front of Ruth and Al. Blood flies from the horse's nostrils, splattering Ruth. Hector joins them after the lost race. He assesses Al and concludes, "We race him again and he dies." Later, Vicky asks for money that Jack and her are still waiting for Al's sale, but Hector does not have the money yet. Vicky gives him a "new price": she hands him a piece of paper where

she wrote, "I want to watch you come." Hector does not take the paper, refusing this "deal."

At night at the farmhouse, Ruth and Hector are about to make love when he spots a light through the window; it's a running horse on fire! It runs into the barn and sets it on fire. Hector vainly tries to put off the fire and save the horse with water. Meanwhile, Ruth goes to Diana and realizes that her breathing tube is disconnected and her sister Diana is dead. Outside, Ruth picks up a piece of paper and recognizes Vicki's handwriting: "I want to watch you come." As the words sink in, Ruth connects the dots and stares at the burning barn.

At dawn, the barn is in ruins. Ruth has a bandana around her face to mask the smell as flies swarm the remains of horses. Ruth rides Al through the field, dragging a tarp of horse remains to a "graveyard." At the farmhouse, Hector is silent in Diana's bed, refusing to eat anything. Ruth shares her childhood memories with Hector after she fell from the horse: Diana tried to protect her and her horse, but this just led their Dad to shoot both Ruth and Diana's horses. Ruth wants to race Al in the Derby but promises she won't let the track "eat" them like it "ate" her Dad and sister Diana. Hector believes Al cannot race anymore and does not want to lose Ruth to the race. He shares his guilt as he believes Diana died because of him, but Ruth tries to calm him and says, "You didn't burn that barn, Vicki's husband did." Later, Hector and Ruth have sex, and he whips her with the crop until she has an orgasm.

The numbers are drawn for the Derby race, and Ruth gets 11, the worst starting position. Hector tries reassuring Ruth about it by giving her a random fortune cookie that says, "Sometimes, winning means coming second." The next day at the Derby race, Hector sees Vicki and Jack from afar and looks into Jack's eyes, showing that he knows what he did. Jack looks away. The race starts, and Ruth has never raced with this many horses. Al starts bleeding from the nose midway through, but Ruth is in symbiosis with Al: they feel and understand each other and ultimately arrive in the second position. After the race, Hector gives Ruth his winning bet to cash out. As Ruth does so, she realizes this bet is a Super Hi-Five, the exact order for the first five horses to cross the finish line. This is the jackpot!

Later, at the farmhouse, the kitchen table is covered in money. Upstairs, Ruth picks up the whip, looks at Hector, and says: "Get on your knees."

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## THOUGHTS:

HARNESS is an erotic Reagan-era sports movie that walks the line between prestige and pulp. This is an underdog's R-rated twisted pursuit of greatness in the spirit of BLACK SWAN (but with horse racing) and with an erotic BDSM romance reminiscent of 50 SHADES OF GREY. The script is unique and well-written, but the marketability and production challenges could make it difficult for this film to be profitable.

It's hard to assess the target audience of HARNESS: an R-rated horse racing sports drama is already niche, and one highlighting a twisted erotic relationship makes this film particularly unique. The R-rated aspect (under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) would, for the most part, prevent reaching audiences under 17: the vast majority of parents will not take their children to an erotic BDSM romance film, and most children would not want to have this experience with their parents either way, regardless of how great the film is.

The project's other main challenge is its production, from dealing with horses, multiple horse races, and human falls to particularly intense dominant-submissive sex scenes. Amongst other things, such a production would require horse trainers, stunt coordinators, a lead cast comfortable with nudity the material, and intimacy coordinators; the production would be prone to related issues of all sorts and the consequent higher production costs.

That being said, the originality and high quality of the script could turn HARNESS into a festival darling and awards film if well executed. And if marketed through the erotic frame, HARNESS could become a cultural phenomenon in the vein of 50 SHADES OF GREY and appeal to a mainstream adult audience between 17-30 years old. In this optimistic scenario, HARNESS could become both a prestige and profitable film.

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## COMPS:

### BLACK SWAN (2010)

Budget: \$13 000 000

Domestic Opening weekend: \$1 443 809

Gross (US & Canada): \$106 954 678

Gross (World): \$329 398 046

Directors: Darren Aronofsky

Writers: Mark Heyman, Andres Heinz, John J. McLaughlin

Production Companies: Cross Creek Pictures, Protozoa Pictures, Phoenix Pictures, Dune Entertainment

Distribution Company: Searchlight Pictures

### FIFTY SHADES OF GREY (2015)

Budget: \$40 000 000

Domestic Opening weekend: \$85 171 450

Gross (US & Canada): \$166 167 230

Gross (World): \$569 651 467

Directors: Sam Taylor-Johnson

Writers: Kelly Marcel

Production Companies: Focus Features

Distribution Company: Universal Pictures

