



THE SIXTH MAN

Just in time for March Madness, Disney is hitting the hardwood with "The Sixth Man," a raucous yet sentimental comedy about a college basketball star who returns from the dead to help his younger brother fulfill his hoop dreams. One might question the wisdom of opening such a pic on the last weekend of the NCAA Tournament. (Won't basketball fans have something more pressing than moviegoing on their minds?) But the Touchstone release has enough across-the-board appeal to attract even those who don't know an airball from a hairball.

Oddly enough, "The Sixth Man" is most appealing during its opening half-hour, in scenes before the supernatural elements are introduced. The first act introduces Antoine Tyler (Kadeem Hardison) and his younger brother, Kenny (Marlon Wayans), as hard-driving hoopsters who first set their sights on NCAA stardom while they were still grade-school kids coached by their father (Harold Sylvester). After a brief character-establishing prologue, pic finds the brothers at the University of Washington, where Antoine is the reigning roundball superstar and Kenny is his talented but overshadowed sidekick.

The mood abruptly darkens when Antoine collapses during a tightly contested game, and subsequently dies from a heretofore unnoticed heart problem. (Here and elsewhere, screenwriters Christopher Reed and Cynthia Carle evidence an informed grasp of college basketball lore.) Kenny is shattered, and the other Washington Huskies, led by Coach Pederson (David Paymer), are crestfallen. The bad situation grows worse when Kenny tries to take over his late brother's role as team leader, only to be distracted by media scrutiny and impeded by self-doubt.

There likely is a good movie to be made about a college athlete who must overcome his insecurities while emerging from the shadow of a more famous sibling (or parent). And that same movie might be all the more interesting if it also dealt seriously with the trauma suffered by young people who are suddenly forced to confront their own mortality. But that isn't the movie that director Randall Miller ("Houseguest") chose to make. Instead, after an intriguing setup, "The Sixth Man" turns into an entertaining but predictably zany comedy, as Antoine reappears as a brightly lit apparition to alternately inspire and annoy Kenny.

Antoine --- who's visible only to Kenny --- uses his ghostly powers to help the Washington Huskies score stunning upsets. College basketball players haven't had so much help on the court since Fred MacMurray attached Flubber to their shoes in "The Absent Minded Professor."

At first, Kenny and his fellow players are grateful for the otherworldly intervention. After Kenny convinces his teammates that Antoine's spirit is quite literally with them, the players are more than willing to benefit from their unfair advantage. Trouble is, the more he continues to help the Huskies, the more Antoine behaves like an egomaniacal hot-dogger. He demands that the Huskies do things his way or not at all. And he even takes it upon himself to discourage Kenny's budding romance with an inquisitive woman sportswriter (Michael Michele).

By the time Antoine seriously injures a player on a rival team --- by accident, Antoine insists -- even Kenny is ready to cut the ghost from their team. Not surprisingly, Antoine does not take this news lightly.

Pic relies heavily on sight gags and special-effects trickery to earn laughs. But it also sustains interest with clever shadings of character and unexpectedly strong performances. Indeed,

director Miller gets so much out of his cast and screenplay that, paradoxically, the audience may actually wish the film had less humor and even more heart.

Hardison is very funny as a swaggering, trash-talking spirit. Better still, he skillfully reveals flashes of Antoine's darker side, showing how bullying the character can be (alive or dead), and how ferociously obsessed Antoine is when it comes to winning the NCAA title. Likewise, Wayans provides more than bug-eyed double takes and smart-mouthed bandying. He also does much to convey Kenny's profoundly mixed feelings about his brother, and his slow but sure development of an independent streak. Together, Hardison and Wayans give the comedy a bit more depth and texture than it might otherwise have had.

Also noteworthy is Paymer's nicely nuanced portrayal of the zealous but compassionate Huskies coach. Among the well-cast college team players, **Vladimir Cuk (as a towering Siberian center)** and Travis Ford (as a pugnacious guard) are standouts. As sportswriter R.C. St. John, Michelle has little to do but look beautiful, which she does very convincingly. Several real-life sportscasters --- including Brad Vitale and Brad Nessler --- make amusing cameo appearances.

Tech values, including special effects coordinated by Stewart Bradley and visual effects by Available Light Ltd., are first-rate. A minor quibble: Even by contemporary standards of PG-13 permissiveness, "The Sixth Man" seems unusually foul-mouthed. Parents of children who are attracted by Disney's full-court-press TV ad campaign might judge this as a personal foul.