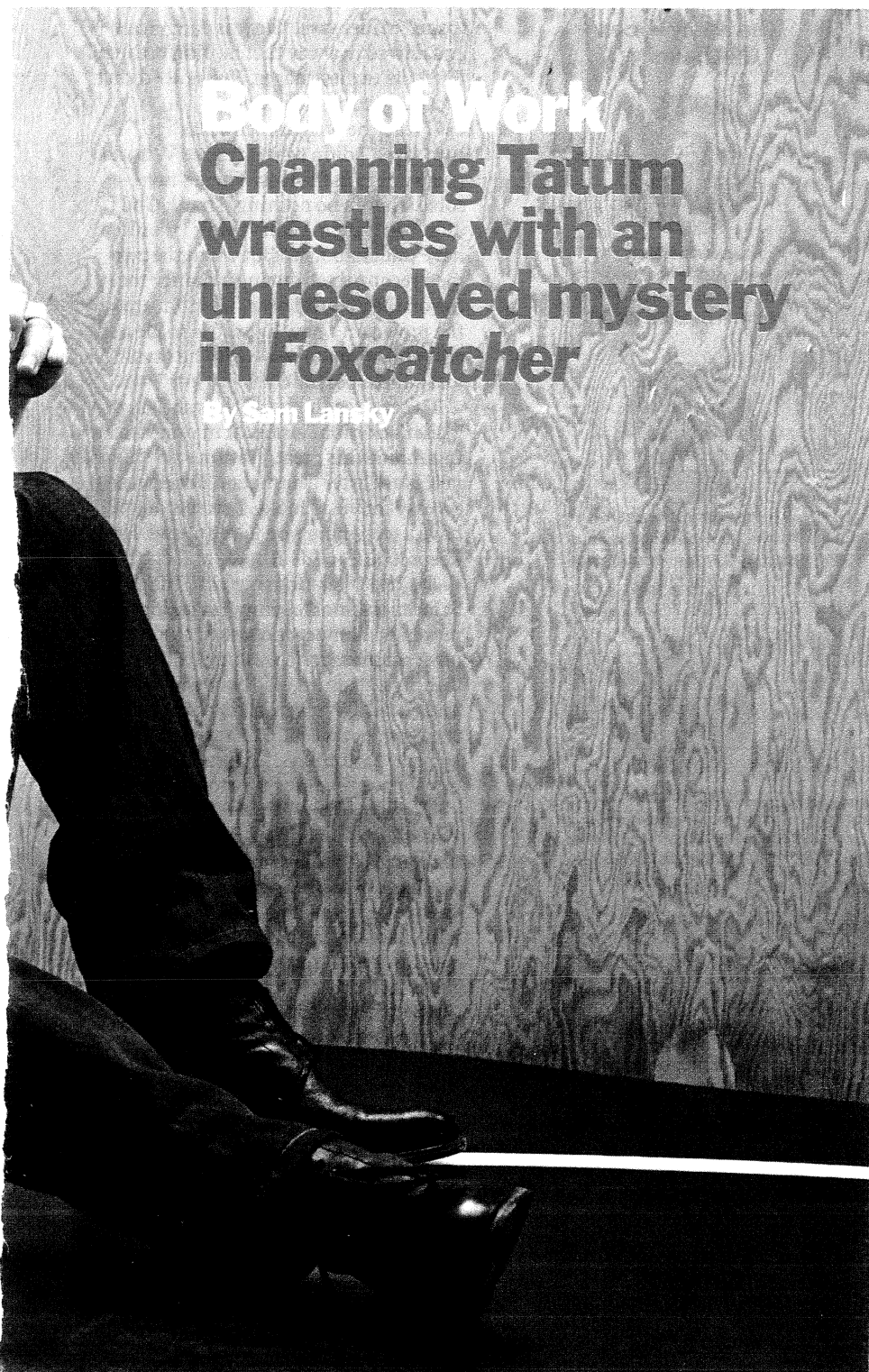


Brood awakening Tatum,
*photographed in Los Angeles. His
Foxcatcher role is the darkest so far in
an increasingly ambitious career*



Body of Work Channing Tatum wrestles with an unresolved mystery in *Foxcatcher*

By Sam Lansky

CHANNING TATUM HAS A COLD, SO instead of shaking my hand, he bumps his elbow against mine by way of greeting. Like so many of Tatum's mannerisms, it's a little funny: there's some machismo there, but it's also goofy and oddly sweet. Those qualities intersecting—therein lies his charm.

We're at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles. Earlier, during the photo shoot, he'd been more agile than his brawny physique would suggest, taking the photographer's direction to extend his arms like a fighter, then dropping nimbly to the floor to hit another pose. Now in an armchair with a cup of tea, he's still expressive—thoughtful, chatty, ever the good sport. All that charm is striking to see after watching him give such a muted performance in *Foxcatcher*, which may be the most claustrophobic, least uplifting sports movie of all time.

It's the darkest role yet for Tatum, who's eager to prove that he's more than just hired muscle. He's been an action star in over-the-top ordnance rippers such as *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* and *White House Down*, and a heartthrob in high-grossing weepies *Dear John* and *The Vow*. He's been an adept comic foil to Jonah Hill in *21* and *22 Jump Street*, as well as dirty-dancing eye candy in his 2006 breakout *Step Up* and the semiautobiographical male-stripper pic *Magic Mike*. "I've been the hungry kid at the buffet," Tatum says of his varied background. "I've wanted to taste it all."

But *Magic Mike* wasn't just chiseled male bodies on display; it marked Tatum as a more complex figure than his filmography indicates. Produced by Tatum and inspired by his experiences as an exotic dancer in Florida, the film, directed

by Steven Soderbergh, earned favorable reviews and turned into a box-office hit, raking in \$167 million worldwide from a \$7 million budget. (A sequel, *Magic Mike XXL*, will be released next year.) If Tatum is perceived by some as a good-looking lunk, he's not bothered by that. "Look, my parents had great genes. I was able to model for a short time," he says. "I still need to make myself understood. That's my job."

That's tough to do in *Foxcatcher*, which tells an eerie, confounding true story that can't be easily synopsisized. Tatum plays wrestler Mark Schultz, a 1984 Olympic gold medalist living a humdrum life in snow-caked Wisconsin. His only bond is with his charismatic older brother Dave (Mark Ruffalo), also a gold-medal winner, who is warm and extroverted where Mark is reticent. Mark gets a ticket out by way of wealthy John du Pont (Steve Carell), who invites the athlete to move onto his Pennsylvania compound and train for the 1988 Olympics as part of his Team Foxcatcher wrestling squad. But du Pont, an ornithologist and heir to the chemical-company fortune, turns out to be mercurial and controlling, and the relationship between the two men unravels. When brother Dave agrees to coach the team, events spin toward a shockingly violent conclusion.

It's a challenging film and not immediately rewarding, a Greek tragedy in slow motion. Director Bennett Miller builds tension with unrelenting authority, but the climax arrives too late to provide much resolution, offering instead a lingering, palpable unease. Three exceptional performances make it all the more riveting. As du Pont, Carell wears a prosthetic nose and decayed little teeth; his motives could be benevolent or sinister. Ruffalo radiates fraternal warmth as Dave, a beacon of positivity in a dark film. Then there's Tatum, who doesn't so much play the part as disappear into it. Off the mat, he hulks and staggers, yet there's a lightfooted grace when he wrestles.

If anything, Tatum says, the experience was doubly gratifying because it almost didn't happen. After Miller made 2005's *Capote*, which was nominated for five Oscars, including Best Director, he wanted to turn his attention to the fascinating story of *Foxcatcher*. He'd been impressed by Tatum in the 2006 indie *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*. "He exploded in that film

The Many Faces Of Channing



THE SLICK MOVER

As a kid with fancy footwork from the wrong side of the tracks in *Step Up* (2006)



THE ACTION FIGURE

As a soldier packing serious heat in *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* (2009)



THE HEARTTHROB

As a sergeant keeping an epistolary affair alive in *Dear John* (2010)



THE GOOFBALL

As an underachieving jock cop who goes undercover in *21 Jump Street* (2012)



THE JACKED TORSO

As a hard-partying, entrepreneurial stripper in *Magic Mike* (2012)

to me," Miller says. "He was dangerous and flawed in a way that he didn't realize." But in its earliest stages, *Foxcatcher* didn't capture Tatum's attention.

"I read the script seven years ago," Tatum says. "I didn't get it at first. Why do you want to make this? There's no resolve. There's no nothing. Thank God I didn't do it then. I don't think I would have understood it." But when the two men reconnected during a chance meeting on the Sony lot years later, Tatum saw the project in a new light. "He made a specific choice not to resolve it," he says. "We just paint a portrait."

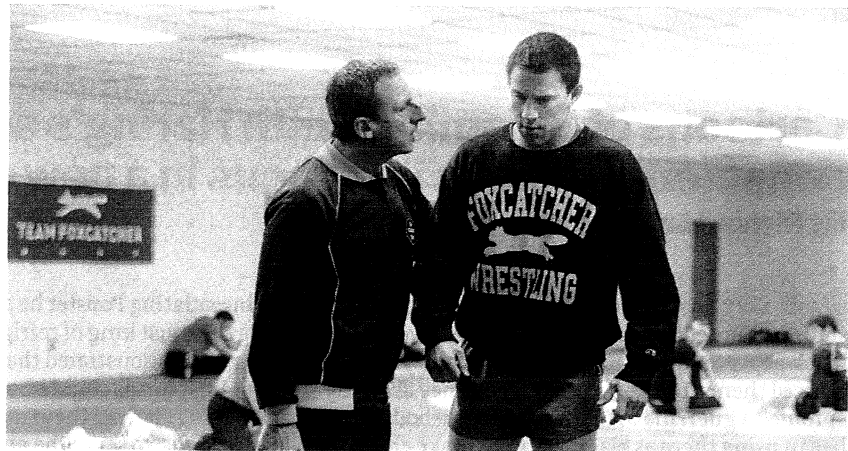
The end result has all the subtlety of Miller's original vision. "I'm proud to be in a movie this great," Tatum says. "Bennett is a master filmmaker. But it wasn't an easy movie to make. Bennett doesn't have a set [where] you joke around. He keeps it quiet and intimate and charged."

Du Pont's relationship with Mark Schultz is a snarl of envy, revulsion and repressed homoerotic lust; accordingly, on-set camaraderie was limited, maintaining a strained vibe between Tatum and Carell. "We weren't in character all the time, but we didn't hang out off-screen," Tatum says. "We carried the energy of our relationship around with us."

With Ruffalo, Tatum cultivated a closeness that buoyed him through a challenging production, in large part due to their physical scenes together. "You can't fake wrestling," Tatum says. "You can't fake hitting the mat together. It's very intimate. You're close. It's a language with each other. You become aware, after a repetitive activity together, of where the person is all the time."

There was great intimacy too between Tatum and the real Mark Schultz, who went on from his Olympic gold to win two world championships and be inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. (Schultz's autobiography, also titled *Foxcatcher*, is out Nov. 18.) They spent a week together before production began, to which Tatum credits the specificity of his performance. "How I walk in the movie is Mark," Tatum says. "That's not me making some actor choice. I tried to mimic the way he walks—the way he holds his fork." Because Schultz was so deeply withdrawn, Tatum is too. "He was like, 'I wanted to be a caveman. I wanted to be terrifying to people. I didn't want people to be my friend.'"

As a would-be mentor, Carell, left, beguiles Tatum in *Foxcatcher*



MOVIE REVIEW

Mat Madness. Tatum scores a reversal

By Richard Corliss

Wrestling is the most elemental of sports: one man grappling another in intimate combat. It follows that *Foxcatcher* is an investigation of men less comfortable in speaking than in expressing themselves through physical activity that can turn violent. These atavistic impulses start simmering when Mark (Channing Tatum) and Dave Schultz (Mark Ruffalo), the only brothers in U.S. amateur wrestling history to have won both Olympic and world championships, sign up with Team Foxcatcher, run by John Eleuthère du Pont (Steve Carell), heir to the gunpowder and chemicals fortune. Soon they will explode.

Director Bennett Miller's third feature blends the themes of his previous films: the complementary psyches of killer and journalist in *Capote* and sports as a nexus of genius and roughhouse in *Moneyball*. The difference is in *Foxcatcher*'s strange, bold muteness. Philip Seymour Hoffman's Truman Capote was profligately articulate; Brad Pitt's baseball executive communicated clearly in words, stats and caroming body English. The *Foxcatcher* men have no such eloquence; Miller describes their discourse as "repressed male noncommunication."

Du Pont may have been bred to reticence; raising one's voice on the Foxcatcher estate was simply not done. As for the Schultzes, they express their fury, grudges and superb skills on the mat. A marvelous early scene shows Dave leading his younger brother in a warm-up exercise—a stark ballet of embraces, pats, grips and flips that eventually draws blood. Beautifully choreographed, and revealing emotional vectors that the rest of the movie withholds, the sequence is equally a fraternal tussle, a grudge match and a love match.

John wants into that circle. An accomplished ornithologist, he chafes in the

imperious shadow of his mother (Vanessa Redgrave) and all the trophies and ribbons she has amassed as an equestrienne. John considers horses "dumb"; his mother calls wrestling "low." Eager to show his mettle, he founds Team Foxcatcher—his own stable, with manflesh replacing horseflesh—and collects wrestlers dependent on his largesse.

Even in his comedy roles—*The Office*, *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and the *Despicable Me* animated franchise—Carell projects a melancholy suitable for lovable losers and, here, a lonely aristocrat. In a delicate, creepy turn that is only occasionally upstaged by the gigantic prosthetic nose he wears, Carell plays John as gray and graceless, an inert entity. John has repressed so many of his family anxieties, as well as his urges to watch muscular men wrestle for his pleasure, that by the middle of the film he is emotionally dead. He may need to kill someone just to prove to himself that he's still alive.

Ruffalo is fine as Dave, the one major character at ease in his own skin and with others. But Tatum's is the central performance: most daring because it's least giving. He has often played young men of thick athleticism and slow wit. It's proof of Tatum's intelligence that he can make the audience feel smarter than the characters he plays—until they reveal a sly brilliance halfway through the movie. His Mark never makes that Mensa leap. A gentle galoot, he is so lacking in introspection that he seems not to understand the resentment he's supposed to feel at being John's pawn.

Foxcatcher acutely observes the collision of these men—strong in some ways, weak or disturbed in others—without explaining them or the violent act that tears them apart. Even at the end of this potent, perplexing work, the mystery lingers.

Foxcatcher opens in New York City and Los Angeles on Nov. 14 before slowly rolling out across the U.S. through Christmas, making it a well-timed awards contender. It's earned Oscar buzz for all three actors, as well as for Miller, who took home the Best Director prize at Cannes—the first American director to win at the French film festival in seven years. The conversation around Carell has been particularly strong, catalyzed by his striking physical transformation.

Tatum is less focused on the film's reception than he is on the ties he forged during the production and the time he spent with Mark Schultz hearing his stories. "To have made the connections, creatively and emotionally, with the people that were on this movie—it's everything," he says. "The experience was unique." It might sound trite, but he's completely sincere.

Which is the exact quality that made Miller certain that Tatum was right to take a dramatic turn in a demanding film. "That innocence and sweetness is something that the real Mark Schultz has also," Miller says. "The core of the character, Channing is especially well suited to play."

To Tatum, the most important thing was doing justice to Schultz's story. "I'm more proud that I did something that mattered that much than I am about how good the movie turned out," he says. "No one else will have the relationship that I have with Mark Schultz. I get to put that on my mantle."

If Tatum bonded with Schultz while making *Foxcatcher*, he thinks of his *Magic Mike* co-stars as brothers after wrapping production on *Magic Mike XXL* in Georgia this month. "Those guys are so much fun. They're the whole reason why I wanted to make a second one," Tatum says of the cast, which includes Joe Manganiello, Matt Bomer and Alex Pettyfer, all reprising their roles from the first film. (Matthew McConaughey is not returning.) For this installment, Tatum co-wrote the film in addition to producing, making him more invested than ever.

"Hopefully you're going to care about these guys, and then get to see a lot of ridiculous nakedness and stupidity," Tatum says. "We got Joe Manganiello naked as much as possible. Everyone in the world: you're welcome." ■

PREVIOUS PAGE: MAGIC MIKE, G. I. JOE, DEAR JOHN, STEP UP, EVERETT; 21. JUMP STREET, SONY PICTURES ENTERTAINMENT; THIS PAGE: FOXCATCHER, SONY PICTURES CLASSICS