

VS.

WHAT WERE
THEY THINKING?



The original *Rollerball* appeared in 1975, and it is undeniably rooted in the decade of its release. The styles, the view of the future, the science fiction — all of them scream “seventies.” For this reason, there is ample room for a reworking of the film. Even the director, in his commentary on the *Rollerball* DVD, says he wishes that inline skates had been invented before the movie was made. That innovation alone would be enough to make a new version of *Rollerball* even more packed with action than the original. Mix faster speeds with a more modern view of the future, and you’ve got the makings of an instant sci-fi classic.

But while we’re waiting for that new classic, let’s take a look at the remake of *Rollerball* which was released this month.

RB2002 is more a reworking of the original short story than a remake of the 1975 film, but it still has a great deal in common with the original, RB1975. For example, both films are titled *Rollerball*, and both are about a game played on rollerskates with a ball. Both films also have actors in them, take place on Earth, and are mostly in focus. Beyond this, similarities are few.

Difference #1: E is out, Cross is in

Chris Klein plays Jonathan Cross — counterpart to James Caan’s Jonathan E — in RB2002. He doesn’t have any of Caan’s angst, toughness, grit, or acting abil-

ity, but he makes up for it with an innocence-in-the-face-of-overwhelming evidence that kept me waiting on the edge of my seat for the inevitable, “Ward! The Beaver’s all grown up and playing Rollerball again!”

It’s really hard to get your blood pressure up for a character who is so obviously out of the loop. This may not be Klein’s fault, as he is badly miscast and given not so much as a wisp of something realistic to work with. For example, there is a scene where one of Cross’s teammates loses his helmet during a game, prompting Cross to freak out and try to warn the guy that he is in danger. Apparently, not having a helmet is a big deal — a fact born out when, later in the film, it is discovered that the strap that held the player’s helmet on had been cut. So far so good, until you notice that for the entire film Cross himself makes a point of never fastening the chinstrap on his helmet and none of his teammates even mentions it. Given all this, Klein could work his heart out trying to look worried about his helmetless friend, but there’s not a chance we’re going to believe it because his own helmet could be knocked off by a stiff breeze.

At least Klein is not the only one who has to suffer with this kind of handicap. Nobody in RB2002 comes across as particularly deep or with it. And as for tough, James Caan could whip any one of these suckers, which is saying a lot since the man is in his sixties.

Difference #2: The name game

The character of Moonpie in RB1975 is reincarnated as Marcus Ridley in RB2002. Ridley is played by LL Cool J, a man whose name is easily the coolest thing about this entire film (although Rebecca Romijn-Stamos’s name comes in a close second). It’s understandable that the filmmakers would want this character’s name to be something a little tougher, but I would have loved to see LL Cool J trying to act smooth hooked with the Moonpie moniker.

The names of the Rollerball teams are also entirely different in RB2002. In this version, the game isn’t played by international corporations; instead, it’s played by independent teams across the former Soviet Union. Since it no longer makes sense for teams to be named after their home cities (Caan’s character played for the Houston team), they have more traditional sports team names.

The focus team in RB2002 is the Horsemen, and the team’s owner refers to his players as his stallions (which just made me feel embarrassed for everyone involved every time he did it.)

Difference #3: Rampaging sexism

Unlike RB1975, RB2002 features a female team coach and female Rollerball players. Rebecca Romijn-Stamos’s



James Caan as Jonathan E in *Rollerball*, 1975: When he retires, it’ll be in a pine box
Chris Klein as Jonathan Cross in *Rollerball*, 2002: “Gosh, Wally, you think Dad’s gonna be mad?”



A weird shape, full of obstructions, and sitting in a pit — what more could a sports fan want in an arena?

character Aurora is one of those players.

As progressive as this may sound, Aurora spends the first third of the movie hiding from the camera because she is sensitive about a scar across one of her eyes, and this female-stereotype characteristic torpedos the air of strength that Aurora really needs to be interesting.

The locker rooms are coed in RB2002, but that's not nearly as exciting as it sounds. Female players seem to be taking obvious pains not to reveal anything significant to the camera, and what underwear they show seems more designed to titillate the PG-13 set than to make sense for a professional athlete. If you want to see a realistic coed dressing room, rent *Robocop*.

All of this added to the fact that throughout the film "entertainment" is equated with scantily clad women dancing around gives one the feeling that having female Rollerball players is less about hiring the most qualified athletes and more about getting the audience excited. This might make sense in the context of the film if the audience that was supposed to get excited was that watching the game, not sitting in a movie theater.

Difference #4: The rules of the game

The RB1975 arena was a circular rink with a goal at each end. The RB2002 arena is a figure eight with ramps for motorcycle and skater jumps, a pair of raised tubes in the center through which skaters much pass before scoring a point, and side-by-side goals suspended above the

ground on one side. All of this extra paraphanelia ensures that there is no seat in the house which has an unobstructed view of the playing field, but it gives the filmmakers all sorts of excuses for cool stunts.

The director of RB1975 said that they had to go to Germany to find a circular sports stadium to build the Rollerball rink in. That shape was so simple, that it added a feeling of reality to the game and forced stunt coordinators to be particularly creative. The elongated rink in RB2002 makes me wonder if the layout was stretched to a figure-eight so that it would fit in the space normally taken by a basketball court (making location scouting much easier). I'd be very interested to know where the stadium was filmed.

The rules of the game are also quite different in the new version of *Rollerball*. The RB1975 rules are fairly simple — ride around the arena once with the Rollerball always in plain view then stick it in the goal to score a point. Over the course of the film, the rules mutate, allowing more and more types of foul, etc. So far as I could make out, to score a point in RB2002, a player must get the Rollerball, pass through the raised tube in the middle of the court (which ends in a large jump to the ground), then circle the track once and make a jump, to throw the ball hard enough into the target to set off a fireworks display. If a team has fulfilled all of these conditions but has not yet scored a goal, then the opposing team may take the Rollerball from them and make the jump to set off the fireworks without passing through the center tube or circling the track. It's not explained what

happens if a team takes the ball from a team that's taken the ball after the first team went through the tube and circled the track, and frankly I couldn't care less.

The rules of RB2002 stay pretty much the same until, right before the final game when it's announced that all of the team owners have gotten together and decided that there shouldn't be any penalties any more. Yeah, right.

It is said that the stunt team on RB1975 became so enamored of the game that they would actually play it. If RB2002's team was this excited, it sure doesn't show up on the screen.

Difference #5: Those wacky Rollerball teams

The standardized uniforms from RB1975 with their instantly dated "computer" numbers on the front are gone. Players in RB2002 dress more like circus performers than football players, sporting helmets which reduce their field of vision to almost nothing, laughable tutu skirts, and various dangly acoutrements for other players to grab on to. Several of the female players (I didn't notice any males) also had "ethnic" costumes, some of which were perhaps of dubious taste. The net result of all this was to make the game seem much more like professional wrestling than a real sport, which made it significantly harder to be surprised (or to particularly care) when it became clear that some parts of the game were being scripted.

The RB2002 teams seem less than professional for other reasons as well. For

example, player trades are made as late as the day a game is going to be played, and there is no indication that the teams practice between games. In fact, one player introduces himself to his teammates as they are going out to play a match. You'd think that in a game so obviously dangerous there'd be some attention paid to keeping everyone coordinated. And most sports experts feel that a team which has some kind of strategy and can work together as a unit will tend to win more than a team which doesn't.

Difference #6: The plot (or lack there of)

There is no war in the world of RB1975, and very little crime. The planet is run by corporations who solve their differences with Rollerball games. One player, Johnathan E, becomes so popular that he's a threat to the company, and it is decided that E should be killed in a Rollerball game, both to end the threat he represents and as a bit of sensation for the violence-desensitized Rollerball viewers. The movie not only has great sports moments, but it contains interesting social commentary on violence.

The Rollerball universe is much smaller in RB2002. The game isn't even televised in the United States (because they haven't been able to work out a deal with a cable channel yet — as if such a thing wouldn't be snapped up in two ticks of the clock by ESPN or Fox). Rollerball teams have individual owners, and the owners have discovered that player injuries increase ratings. In RB2002, corporations are not the enemy, which I'm sure made it much easier for the RB2002 production team to put together all of the films product placement.

The plot of RB2002 generally concerns Jonathan Cross's realization that the game is being manipulated, his attempt to escape, and his eventual fight against the system. Believe me, it's not nearly as interesting as it sounds.

Difference #7 Reality check and double check

Although it is rather dated, RB1975 still holds together because it makes an honest effort to create a universe that makes sense. It's a lesson that RB2002 should have learned — particularly since they set their action in the near future.

A few items in RB2002 which may make the viewer question its universe's reality:

■ In order for the Rollerball team owners to be able to pretend that they have clean hands, they've got to be able to say with a straight face that they're trying to run an honest, safe game. However, the Rollerball arena is filled with obvious safety hazards, player motorcycles can go fast enough that they can jump out of the stadium into the crowd, the plexiglass surrounding the arena is so thin that a Rollerball or player can be hurled through it, most of the injure-a-player-for-ratings plots involve props or sabotage which leave significant evidence, and most of them are so hamhanded that a muppet would realize something was up.

■ The team steam room has a TV screen in it with which players can review any shot in a Rollerball game. These screens don't obviously appear anywhere else.

■ When Aurora and Jonathan want to have some privacy in secret so that they can get intimate, they smash a security camera and then go at it in the players' locker room. As it turns out, in the real world security personnel often notice when a security camera is destroyed and have a tendency to go and see what the problem is.

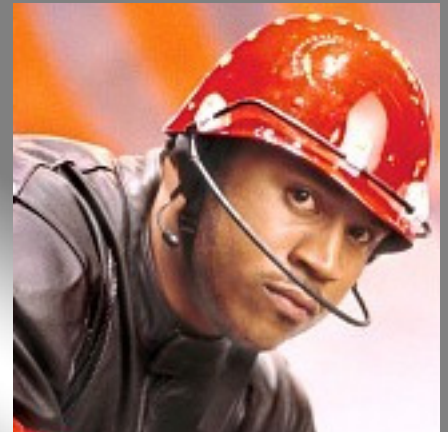
■ Throughout the movie, team owners are able to see an instant television-ratings display of the current game. Ratings always go up when there is tragedy on the field. How the heck does this work? What are these ratings measuring? Are people tuning on the television whenever they have a flash of psychic insight that someone has been hurt?

■ At one point the man who runs Rollerball gets very upset because a country has Rollerball on only one channel instead of five. Since, so far as can be told from the film, only one Rollerball game is on at a time, what's the benefit of having it on more than one channel?

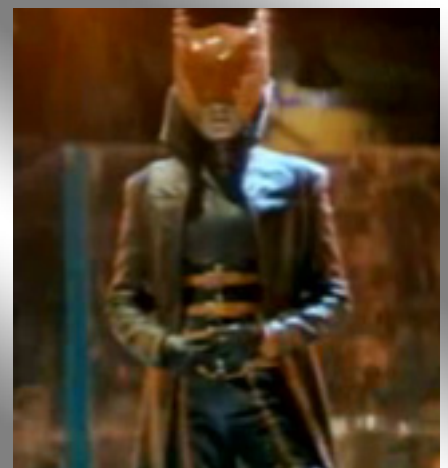
■ It appears that aside from the Horsemen all of the Rollerball teams know that there are planned injuries. Also, camera operators are told to turn their cameras on players who are about to be injured. With all of this going on, it seems like the plot to keep these incidents secret is doomed to almost immediate failure.

■ And while we're on the subject, the man who created Rollerball and owns the Horsemen is also the man behind the "accidents." And in every case, he arranges for the accident to happen to a member of his own team. Way to make sure you've still got enough players around for the playoffs, guy!

ROLLERBALL 2002: FOCUS ON UNIFORMS



LL Cool J as Marcus Ridley, doing his best to be cool despite the fact that he's wearing a sissy-looking helmet with a face bar that wouldn't protect him from a stern glare



We're sure that the helmet doesn't impede her vision any more than the long flowing cape thing gets in the way of skating or riding a motorcycle



Has she got the impractical African-looking outfit just because she's black?
Nope, nope, not a chance
— denials all around.



If you're a woman then you already know this, but if you're a guy then you're going to have to trust us — this is not the most comfortable underwear in the world for skating, cycling, or doing your own stunts. It is, however, an excellent indication of *Rollerball's* desire to give young male viewers a cheap thrill at the expense of portraying a universe that is in any way close to reality.

Difference #7: The level of suckiness

I'm not going to say that everything in RB1975 is good and everything in RB2002 is bad. There are plenty of people who find RB1975 tedious or too unrealistic or dated to watch. Sure, those people are wrong, but they're entitled to their opinion.

And there are several good things to be said about RB2002.

For example, there is some excellent stuntwork throughout the movie. Many of the cast members, in fact, had to do some of their own stunts for added realism. Fortunately, the camera is kept so close to the action and cuts so much throughout the film, that the viewer isn't burdened by having to appreciate most of this stunt work.

The *Rollerball* games themselves are also nicely predictable. During Game 3, I found myself so confident in what was going to happen that I was able to relax enough to almost fall asleep.

For the casual viewer, there's little chance of missing what's going on in RB2002. Instead of wasting a lot of time showing viewers behavior which would explain what's going on, there's lots and lots of dialogue explaining and repeating every little thing. This is particularly clear near the beginning of the film when the explanation of *Rollerball* goes on and on and on and on.

And finally, the brilliant final scene in RB1975, in which Jonathan E slowly circles the *Rollerball* stadium, weaving in and out of dead bodies in front of a silent crowd has been eliminated completely. In its place is a comfortingly familiar, if banal, "good guy goes after the bad guy" bit, involving Jonathan Cross (who had just received a beating which would have done in a marble statue, let alone frail-looking Chris Klein) jumping into the owner's box and beating gun-toting thugs to death with chairs and such as he rollerskates through narrow, carpeted hallways.

So, to sum up: *Rollerball 1975* good, *Rollerball 2002* bad. It's actually kind of tragic that a 25+ year old film has better action, more thought, and a deeper plot than a modern flick supposedly based on the same source material. If James Caan were dead, he'd be spinning in his grave.~

Dominick Cancilla was really looking forward to this movie. He's bitter and disappointed.