



The Halfback of Notre Dame

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Showtime's "Original Pictures for Kids" series presents this lightweight, unengaging reworking of Victor Hugo's classic "The Hunchback of Nortre Dame," a fairly good-looking telepic that makes "Saved by the Bell" seem like an evening of Eugene O'Neill.

The "hunchback" role becomes Notre Dame high's star halfback, Cragi Modeau (Gabriel Hogan), lumbering lummock of a kid who lacks any social graces, as if he were raised by wolves.

But on the football field, he undergoes a metamorphosis into a growling blocking machine - nick-named "Crazy" - allowing the school's quarterback-option offense to work brilliantly.

Spoiled-brat qb Archie (Allen Cutler) can't help but tease and play pranks on the only thing that keeps him from getting a concussion every Saturday. The rest of the kids in Archie's clique also taunt, their school's best player.

But lovely little Esmeralda (Emmanuelle Vaugier), who is Archie's gf (the telepic also has players with the surnames "Victor" and "Hugo" - get it?) and a French transfer student, takes a liking to Crazy and teaches him something he always wanted to learn: the piano. (Music soothes the savage beast?) of course, a romance blossoms and it screws up everything before the big game.

Suffice it to say that the climax involves a bell tower.

"Beverly Hills, 90210" is a more accurate portrayal of high school life than "Halfback." Pie's central flaw is its one-dimensional, stereotypical characters: Archie, the preening egotistical, rich (he drives a Porsche) quarterback; Crazy, too oafish to walk upright; catty cheerleaders; the overly poised, elegantly dressed and perfect Esmeralda.

No gray here.

Actual teenagers - presumably the pic's target audience - won't identify with these kids and will probably mock them; a cute idea, "Halfback" in its execution loses yards for its emotional hollowness and should be penalized for lack of drama.

That said, Hogan and Vaugier deliver pleasant performances in spite of the material given them.

Tech credits are ok.