

## **SUPERFIGHTS (1995):**

Executive Producer: Ng See Yuen

Director: Tony Leung

Producer/Writer: Keith W. Strandberg

Cast: Keith Vitali, Brandon Gaines, Chuck Jeffreys, Cliff Lenderman, Brian Ruth, Rob Van Dam, Kelly Gallant

Locations: Harrisburg, PA

"SUPERFIGHTS is a very well made story about the dark side of fame and glory mixed in with some top notch fights courtesy of Tony Leung."

After AMERICAN SHAOLIN, Seasonal Films took a break from their U.S.-Hong Kong crossover glory to concentrate on primarily Hong Kong films. However, in 1995, producer Ng See-Yuen and writer Keith W. Strandberg collaborated on this take off, combining elements of the popular Ultimate Fighting Champion and the dark side of fame.

Since he was a child, Jack Cody (Brandon Gaines) has always followed the Superfights, a martial arts program where the fighters look like professional wrestling and use their martial arts talents to the max. He spends his time practicing martial arts in his warehouse, hoping to one day live his dream of becoming a Superfighter. One night after work, Jack finds a young woman, Sally (Faye Yu), getting robbed at a bank by two thugs. Jack saves Sally and takes her to her grandfather's house. Sally's grandfather (Patrick Lung Kong) is an expert in martial arts himself and thinks Jack is all talk. He makes Jack look like a fool when the two spar.

Meanwhile, word comes around of Jack's rescue of Sally and he is hailed as a hometown hero. This catches the eye of Robert Sawyer (Keith Vitali), the man who created Superfights. When Sawyer tells Jack that he wants to make his dreams come true, Jack accepts the offer and begins training under the watchful eye of fellow Superfighter Angel (Kelly Gallant). During training, Jack takes "vitamins" and befriends Superfighters Dark Cloud (Chuck Jeffreys), Nightstalker (Brian Ruth), and "No Mercy" Budokai (Cliff Lenderman). After Jack completes his training, he takes on his first opponent, The Enforcer (Keith Hackney) and with the help of Sally, who is in the audience, Jack wins.

Jack soon becomes one of the most popular Superfighters as he continues to win. Jack begins to live his glory and fame, but soon learns that there is a dark side to fame. When a masked man begins to attack Jack, Jack tries to fight back but the masked man has Jack in a wrist lock and warns him not to take the "vitamins". Sally's grandfather learns of the vitamins after deciding to teach Jack the art of tai chi and has them analyzed. The so-called "vitamins" are a combination of steroids and mind-control drugs.

Even worse, Jack learns that Sawyer is more than just a fight promoter, he is an underworld crime boss. With Budokai, Dark Cloud, and Nightstalker as his lackeys, Sawyer intends to take over the whole city under his iron fist. When the brother of one of Sawyer's victims comes to confront him, Sawyer proves to be not only a martial artist with impressive kicking skills, but has a weapon in two rings with hooks at the end to poke at his adversaries.

Things take a turn when it is revealed that the masked man who told Jack about the vitamins is none other than Budokai, who has been working undercover for the Drug Enforcement Agency. When Budokai's cover is blown, he is forced to fight in an illegal cage fight against Sawyer's secret weapon, The Beast (Jim Steele), who was once Jack's childhood idol, Mike Rocco. Rocco was the very reason why Jack wanted to become a Superfighter. When Budokai is critically injured, Jack and Sally's grandfather are able to heal him using their inner chi. However, Jack learns that Sawyer has kidnapped both Sally and Jack's mother (Karen Bill), who was against the whole plan to begin with. Now, Jack must prove that he truly is a hero by taking on Sawyer in the ultimate showdown. Capitalizing on the crazes of both the Ultimate Fighting Championship and the World Wrestling Federation (now called World Wrestling Entertainment), screenwriter/producer Keith W. Strandberg has crafted a story revolving around a young man who lives his dreams but learns that there is a dark side to fame. Cast in the role of Jack Cody is 3rd-degree karate black belt Brandon Gaines. Gaines had never worked in films before and this makes for a very impressive film debut. In the opening of the film, he is seen attending a Superfights contest, but it is his workout in the warehouse alone that showcases his impressive martial arts skills. Under the supervision of director/action choreographer Tony Leung Siu-Hung, Gaines gets to show some pretty nice kicking skills against the likes of former UFC Champ Keith Hackney, former WWE star Rob Van Dam, and others.

Keith Vitali plays Vince McMahon..err, Robert Sawyer, the man behind the Superfights. Strandberg must have done his research prior to writing the screenplay. In real-life, Vince McMahon was allegedly involved with steroids and was actually on trial, only to be acquitted. As for Sawyer, it goes beyond steroids. He is involved in drug trafficking, extortion, and even murder. Vitali, a former semi-contact karate fighter, uses his trademark kicking skills halfway through the film and it is clearly some of his best fighting since NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER 3: BLOOD BROTHERS (1989), in which Leung also choreographed that film's action.

What helps are the additions of actor/action director Chuck Jeffreys, AMERICAN SHAOLIN co-star Cliff Lenderman, and national martial arts champion Brian Ruth as the three Superfighters who befriend Jack only to get more involved in Sawyer's crime ring as well. A nicely shot fight involving the trio taking on a street gang showcases some of their best moves. Ruth doesn't look to be much of a kicker himself like his fellow co-stars, but he is a weapons champion and briefly gets to showcase his weapon skills in the finale. Lenderman utilizes his

jeet kune do skills while the flashy Jeffreys shows why he is one of the best American wushu experts today.

The movie's Hong Kong influence not only comes in its martial arts sequences, but also in the form of Sally and her grandfather. Faye Yu, a Hangzhou-born actress, appeared in mainly Chinese language films such as TIAN DI (1994) and BEIJING ROCKS (2001). Patrick Lung Kong, who plays Sally's grandfather, is perhaps best known in the West as the main villain in Jet Li's BLACK MASK (1996). However, Lung was also a successful director whose 1963 film STORY OF A DISCHARGED PRISONER was the basis for the John Woo classic A BETTER TOMORROW (1986). Lung gets to bring sarcastic humor to the role at times to good effect but becomes Jack's "father figure" throughout the course of the film. In the end, SUPERFIGHTS may not have the caliber of NO RETREAT, NO SURRENDER or THE KING OF THE KICKBOXERS, but it is a very well made story about the dark side of fame and glory mixed in with some top notch fights courtesy of Tony Leung Siu-Hung.