

# How ‘The Iron Claw’ Wrestles With Legacy, Toxic Masculinity, and Breaking Generational Curses

Sorry, Vince McMahon — there’s plenty of crying in wrestling.

By Jordan Nishkian | Last modified: February 8, 2024



The movie is named after Fritz Von Erich's signature move. (Image: A24)

When my partner and I were choosing a movie for date night, we were between “All of Us Strangers” and “The Iron Claw.” On one hand, we have a [beautiful queer love story](#) with [Andrew Scott](#) (we’re watching “Fleabag”), and on the other we have an A24 film with [Zac Efron](#) and [Jeremy Allen White](#) (we loved “[The Bear](#)” — who didn’t?).

Laughably, I remember saying, “I’m not in the mood to be emotionally destroyed. Let’s go with

“The Iron Claw.”

Oof.

In my defense, I was making that judgment call solely on the previews we’d seen in theaters. I thought it would probably be sad at some points, but mostly about wrestling, mullets, and denim cut-offs — all in all, a campy good time. By the halfway point of the movie, I realized how wrong I was.

\*\*\*Spoilers Ahead\*\*\*

## The Family Behind ‘The Iron Claw’



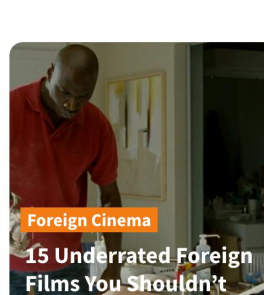
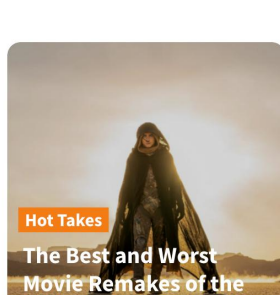
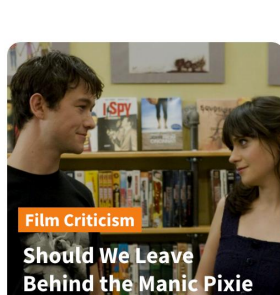
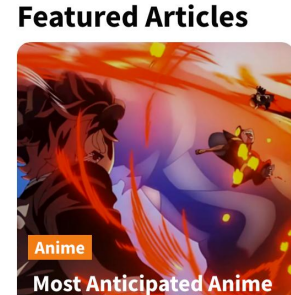
Kevin is the only surviving son of Fritz Von Erich in real life. (Image: A24)

“The Iron Claw” is a heart-wrenchingly beautiful film inspired by the true story of the **Von Erichs**, a family of professional wrestlers who were rumored to be cursed. In real life, the curse plagued the family because the patriarch, **Jack Adkisson**, took on the ring persona of **Fritz Von Erich**, a Nazi. By the second generation, the Von Erich brothers dropped that persona and went for the All-American angle, which helped them rapidly gain popularity in their home state of Texas and the wrestling community.

Even if you don’t believe in superstitions, the Von Erich Curse may have you second-guessing that. In the film, Kevin (**Zac Efron**) mentions that their oldest brother, Jack, died when he was a very young child. As the movie progresses, [we watch](#) the family shrink with the loss of David (**Harris Dickinson**) to an internal injury and Mike (**Stanley Simons**) and Kerry (**Jeremy Allen White**) to suicide.

Unfortunately, it’s somehow worse in real life: The youngest brother, Chris (who isn’t mentioned in the movie), also takes his life at the age of 21. According to writer and director **Sean Durkin** in an [interview with Variety](#), keeping Chris in the script may have shut down the film entirely: “It was one more tragedy that the film couldn’t really withstand. I honestly don’t know if it would have gotten made.”

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## The Von Erich Curse: Real or Self-Fulfilling?



White wrestled in middle school and high school, inspired by his dad, who wrestled as well. (Image: A24)

In the film, the Von Erich Family is as tight-knit as you can get — at least on the surface. There’s an undeniably loving bond between the brothers, but Fritz is less of a father and more of a tyrant whose only goal is to make at least one of his sons the NWA World Heavyweight Title-holder. Being raised by Fritz and their emotionally distant mother, Doris (**Maura Tierney**), the brothers are as close as they can be, but there’s still a palpable isolation that surrounds each of them.

Each member of the Von Erich Family is their own island. They may have bridges tethering them together, but the water only gets deeper as time passes.

The role of Fritz is the typical Greatest Generation toxic dad who teaches his sons that men don’t cry, sons don’t disobey their fathers, and family legacy is everything. His relationship with his sons is as unhealthy as his quest for glory is delusional. He treats their lives as game pieces and their deaths as obstacles that keep him from achieving his dream.

It’s impossible not to feel bad for the brothers. Aside from being physically young, they’re entirely mentally and emotionally unprepared to handle the ruthless string of tragedies they face — and that’s their parents’ fault. Fritz is so hyper-focused on physical strength that he neglects his sons’ emotional needs — and who knows what Doris is doing besides ignoring cries for help and flipping pancakes?

Ultimately, the curse in the movie is both real and unreal. It may not be cosmic destiny, but it’s definitely a product of Fritz’s values.

## Breaking the Mold of Generational Curse Movies



Efron learned his wrestling stunts with the help of pro wrestler Chavo Guerrero. (Image: A24)

The film features a repeating shot of Fritz overpowering the camera, putting the audience in a position where it may be able to get a glimpse into what the brothers must feel. From the very beginning, that camera angle forces us to feel small and powerless compared to this godlike figure, who literally has the upper hand.

It isn’t until Kerry’s death that Kevin flips the power dynamic between him and his father. We see Kevin overpower the camera and hold Fritz’s life in his hands, eventually making the decision to show him mercy. It’s a pivotal moment in which Kevin comes dangerously close to becoming his father — the violent man he was raised to be.

From the start of the movie, Kevin tries to please his parents and protect his siblings, but he doesn’t become the curse-breaker until he loses all his brothers.

There has recently been a noticeable uptick in movies about breaking generational patterns — or in this case, curses — but the cycle-breakers tend to be female characters. We saw it in movies such as “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” “Encanto,” “Turning Red,” and “Crazy Rich Asians.”

Why don’t we see it as much with male characters?

Rather than breaking generational curses and addressing generational trauma, male characters are typically tasked with upholding the legacy thanks to — you guessed it — toxic masculinity.

To better understand the male concern with legacy-building and legacy-keeping, I went down a rabbit hole on Google, and, honestly, it was everything I expected it to be. Everyone is entitled to their opinions (and their typos), but most of the results seemed to circle the idea that issues with legacy can be blamed on someone or something else (e.g. feminism or other men), making their lack of control something entirely out of their control. It’s a confusing cycle that eats its own tail.

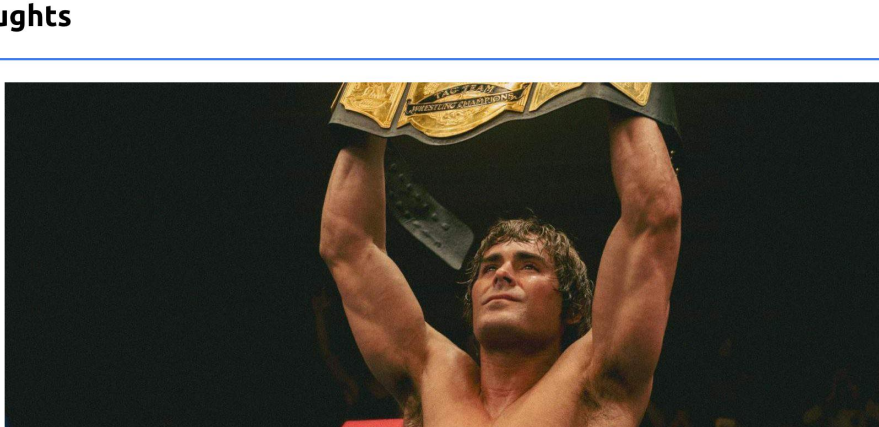
Maybe I wasn’t using the right search terms, but where I was hoping to find introspection and collaboration, I found blame, cringe-worthy rants, and a lack of genuine discussion. It felt like a cluster of islands.

Is this a byproduct of millennia of gender expendability? Anthropologically speaking, our hunter-gatherer ancestors were more concerned with the safety of individuals who could bear children versus those who couldn’t. That division of labor led to gender roles, something we all know have stuck around.

Remember exemplifies the idea of expendability, but it also creates heroes, legends, and villains that have the potential to be remembered as a part of a greater mythology. There’s an element of fantasy and grandeur in the sport of wrestling. In “The Iron Claw,” Fritz is intoxicated by his desire for glory.

“I was drawn to this idea that wrestlers show the extremes in the ring,” Durkin said in an [interview with Salon](#). “They perform pain. But behind the scenes, they can’t really show their feelings. They are supposed to be tough men who don’t talk about it if they hurt, or have pain, or are sad. That was the thing to explore: how to get inside the emotional journey of guys who are not able to talk about feelings and the toxic and damaging toll that took on their family. That silence is the real curse that destroys them, and the film looks at how Kevin breaks that by being able to change.”

## Final Thoughts



In the wrestling world, the Von Erich Curse serves as a cautionary tale about sibling rivalry, parental influence, and how dangerous the professional wrestling business can be. (Image: A24)

There wasn’t a dry eye in our theater row during the movie. I almost made it to the end without crying, but the last scene that shows Kevin talking with his sweet, empathetic sons got me.

KEVIN

I’m sorry. I’m sorry boys, you shouldn’t see this.

A man doesn’t cry. I’m sorry.

SON

It’s OK, Dad. Really, it’s OK. You can cry.

Everyone cries.

OTHER SON

Yeah, what are you talking about?

We cry all the time.

While my partner and I were still reeling from the curse’s tragedies, “The Iron Claw” left its audience with a parting gift. Seeing his sons’ attitudes toward emotion and softness — and Kevin’s willingness to take a second to talk about his feelings with them — was such a powerful way to close the movie. Not only does it give us hope for the next generation of Adkissons, but also for anyone looking to break a harmful cycle in their own lives, regardless of age, gender, or background.

“The Iron Claw” will be available to stream on Max in spring 2024.

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