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Synopsis

Well, after four episodes of widely varying semi-filler, the twerps arrive at kumquat Island for Ash's final badge and his companions couldn't be more supportive!

"Hey, come on! I may have lost a tournament but I've never failed to get a badge!" and misty's all "Oh relax, you know we're just talking about the first act"

But as the group step onto the island we see that there's somewhat of a tourism industry here as demonstrated by the human pop-up ads that commune near the shoreline.

Wait, did he say free binoculars? Sign me up! But none of these can hold a Litwick to the lungs in human form that is this lady, whom I'm sure is just a throwaway gag and won't show up again at all! As she tauts her hotel's fantastic underwear sales (no, I'm not joking)

She spots ash and after making a scene that immediately hints as to why her son left in the first place -

- immediately attempts to murder him with her mama-wamas.

muffled "Ma'am, is it too much to ask that you check your son's ID before smothering them?"

So after extricating himself we learn that thankfully there isn't another glut of missing children caused by an exclusive club of rich insomniacs - geez, that episode - but instead that kids leaving on Pokemon journeys with a cap and a single pikachu is surprisingly common! Man, I know part of ash's appeal is that he's not really special in this world, but I didn't think they'd go that far! Then Misty's all

And Mama Oedipus is all "No, he left to pursue a career in Freudian psychology. Of course he wanted to be a Pokemon master!" But before we have time to unpack their relationship, team rocket show up in an admittedly pretty darn sweet mech.

Rhydon is an odd choice for an amphibious craft, but hey, if it can learn surf in the games, who knows… now, let's consider here: team rocket have shown up in full mech mode within the first five minutes. There are three ways this could go:

A) The writers don't want them in the episode, so they're filling their quota ASAP
B) They're here to be exploded so that they can show up for a brief conflict later, or
C) They're actually going to be integrated into the plot properly

Obviously I'd prefer the third one, but since this is a gym episode I'm not holding my breath. Well anyway, the populous freak out, Ash is all "Don't worry everyone, it's not a REAL rhydon, It's just a tank!" and the rockets espouse the virtues of the mech being environmentally friendly before showing them whipping their Pokemon to make it move. Never change, team rocket…

"Are you kidding? Do you know how many coins you need for hyper beam?" "James, we OWN the game corner!" "Oh right…"

Then after some franky rather disturbing tableaus of human suffering…

Ash steps up and thwarts the crooks using Standard Ash Procedure #001: T-posing in front of the problem.

"These tourist deserve to purchase overpriced cocktails in peace! COME AND GET ME!"
"Kid, the last time you did this we tried to kill you with a flamethrower. You want to take the risk that Moltres is close by?"
"Well it DOES live just a few islands over!"
"Shoot, he's right…"

Nevertheless after attempting to poison a child with snake venom, the bad mama jama steps in with her alakazam and ash is all

"Ma'am this group can be pretty dangerous, maybe you should take your stage 3 trade evolution Pokémon out of harm's way and leave it to me, a kid with a squirtle."

But it turns out this lady with a powerful Pokemon that can easily block team rocket's attacks isn't just ANY lady with a powerful Pokemon that can easily block team rocket's attacks… She's a GYM LEADER lady with a powerful Pokemon that can easily block team rocket's attacks! This of course changes everything! So Alakazam shuts the rhydon's mouth, trapping the smog inside. Why don't they have ventilation? Well…

Wow, I'm guessing that was a conversation…

"Boss, can we requisition a rhydon mech to capture a single pikachu?"
"I suppose, just be sure to rotate the treads on it."
"Also could it have air conditioning?"
"YOU THINK I'M MADE OF MONEY?"

Then Ash brings out charizard and Tracey's all

Oof, that was clunky. I know you need to re-establish the relationship for a few episodes for the viewers who missed the episode, but you do that by saying "It sure is awesome that charizard finally trusts Ash!", not implying that he just kind of randomly decided to! Well anyway, Jessie then accidentally whips Arbok until it vomits acid - now there's a sentence - and Charzard utilizes their new weak point for massive damage and a beautifully animated explosion.

So it seemed like the writers went with a combination of options A and C here, getting the Rocket stuff out of the way first but taking half the episode to do so. I can get behind that! Then of course Ash challenges… Mom? Have they even found out her name yet? To a gym battle and she's all

Great, here we go…

Oh, you tease!

Yes, we have a bona fide gym battle with 10 minutes to spare, that's a good sign! Let's see how it plays out. What's the mandated Orange Island Gimmick? Well for one thing it takes place in a hotel / host club, apparently…

What would you call a hotel that doubles as a host club, anyway? A Host-el? No that's not right… Well anyway, this gym already stands out by having an actual, well, gym in it, as misty even points out!

"Man we need to work on our terminology…"

But enough of that! TIme to get down to brass tacks in this… shockingly normal looking stadium! What, no elevator battle? No target shooting on a helipad?

Okay, settle down, Tracey. THIS is the nicest gym you've ever seen? This? The last stadium you visited was a scenic plateau that you observed from a balloon! You're the kind of guy who pours water on his cornflakes, aren't you? Well anyway, Luana then lays out the Orange twist.

Smack DID GAME FREAK JUST HAVE THE ORANGE LEAGUE ON REPEAT IN THEIR OFFICES? Contests, regional variants, island regions and now freaking double battles with an elite trainer WHO'S CONNECTED TO A HOTEL? I was joking in episode 100 about double battles, serves me right! I guess in sword and shield we're going to win badges through target shooting!

But yes, double battles. Tracey's all

"... except with this you try to knock one of the other players unconscious!"
"So more like squash then."

Alright, so let's DO THIS! I'm hyped!

What? No! Why? Boo! Boo, I say! Well, at least they actually spend the time discussing strategies rather than getting into another wacky misadventure, so I can let it slide. Tracey - at least I'm pretty sure that's Tracey, dang, I guess the headband makes the man - is all

"You know, it almost seems like the psychic type is pretty overpowered at the moment…"
"Don't talk to me about overpowered, I got killed by psychic pokemon!"
"What?"
"Oh right, I don't remember that, never mind. Though I was nearly killed by a psychic gym leader!"

Thankfully the interlude is brief and we get right to the actual battle! Oh, and it seems Brock came over to be a guest referee!

Oh, nope, it's just discount Michael Buffer here, that's a shame. So Luana brings out Alakazam and marowak while Ash goes with PIkachu and Charizard. Oof, too bad Marowak has a type advantage against both of ash's, though Charizard is flying type so he at least can't get hit by him…anyway, unfortunately even though Charizard may have learned to trust Ash, the same can not be said for pikachu and they start off on the wrong hotfoot… or tail in this case.

Then pikachu gets his revenge by willfully misinterpreting ash's instructions? Okay, I know that little rat's been vindictive in the past, but never at ash's expense! This is a disaster!
"You're telling me! I finally get charizard to obey me and now pikachu won't! Am I a bad trainer? No, it's the Pokemon that are wrong."
He doesn't have time to dwell on this though as Charizard is getting pummeled by a ground type move. Dang it, I know I'm not supposed to talk about the show getting the games wrong, but type advantages always seemed to be the exception!

ASH: *It's coming right at you!*

CHARIZARD: "No, I'm pretty sure it's already here. The twisting ligaments kind of give the game away."

Then Pikachu's all "Who would have thought that attacking my teammate would be detrimental to his health and the battle? I'm a MONSTER… A pocket monster!"
And ash is like "Pikachu, do something!"
"You're right, I need to leave my beef on the bench! What's the plan?"
"Help Charizard!"
"Got it, but what's the play? What move should I use?"
"...Help Charizard!"
"*sigh* fine, I'll just go with the default…"

So alakazam gets zapped, and marowak subs in with a head-only body slam!

There's gotta be a better name for that thing! Luckily Charizard catches pikachu and they're a well oiled machine! He jumps on Charizard's back which I admit looks way cooler than when he did it with pidgeotto. They dodge another bonemerang only for Alakazam to aim a hyper beam at them. Luckily they're able to pull a galaxy quest and knock it off balance with the returning bonemerang. Then the frankly terrifying looking uncontrolled hyper beam backfires and the battle is over! So Ash gets his final badge, with only the champion left! With plenty of time, I guess that means he can stop by pallet and finally drop off that GS ball, huh? Hahahaha… ehh

Thoughts
This one was kind of boring, but in the best possible way. Shame it could have been so much more.

I mean, looking through the synopsis, it feels like a summation of everything good in pokemon: Team rocket getting a proper integration with an impressive mech, an interesting Gym leader with a unique location and a long battle with interesting tweaks and cool strategies. Yet unfortunately the pacing, animation and writing are individually just poor enough together to bring down the whole. It just seems like for every good thing they do, something else comes along and sours it.

The art is pretty great for example, that rhydon looked awesome and the locations were varied throughout. But the animation was super stilted and a large chunk takes place in a featureless stadium. Tracey may have been impressed but I feel like I need a little more to work with. Even Cissy's gym, which was almost literally a barn, at least had a pool and moving panels!

The pacing was good in the individual battles, with stakes being changed and cool callbacks and reintegrations making for flavorful interactions, like the whipping machine coming back and the bonemerang being used against the other team. But then the pacing as a whole felt so disjointed. Apart from the tenuous purpose of meeting Luana, this was basically just two episodes separated with very clear borders. Also, and I admit this is just a personal gripe and won't affect the rating, I feel like they really missed a trick by not making Luana Ritchie's mum! She has a similar hair color and clothing palette, Ritchie could easily be mistaken for ash if you squint and, you know, the freaking pikachu! It would have been a really cool callback, a bit of insight into ritchie as a character AND a nice reminder of his existence before we see him again! But this wasn't written by Tomioka-san or Takegami-san so apparently it has to have the same continuity memory as the movies.

Speaking of the writing too, the same problem occurs. There are some great strengths in it. Ash actually planning his next battle is something desperately needed in the indigo league, and being challenged in your biases as to how you feel a gym leader should look and act is always fun, but although as I said there are many cool strategies in the final battle, it still felt flat to me and I think I can lay most of the blame for that on the weak writing. Pikachu and charizard learning to work together is a great conflict, but to lean into that organically you shouldn't have to make them suddenly hate each other to the point they begin to willfully sabotage each other out of spite! Just adjusting to a new battle style should be conflict enough!

Basically, this episode is the equivalent of a great burger with way too many raw onions. No, not red onions, you know what I mean. The burger tastes good, you can see the potential but it's just that much harder to enjoy it when the weakness permeates every

aspect of the flavour. However, I wasn't bored and it was a step in the right direction, so I'll still give it a Great Ball.

Trivia
As you saw in the synopsis, There was a focus on the feminine form in this episode, albeit brief and not as much "breathtaking" as it was "breath-taking". However, it somewhat gave me pause when I realised that this episode had the same animation director as The Mandarin Island Miss Match,Sato Yamamoto which also had somewhat of a male gaze, if you will. I'll have to keep an eye on this guy, he seems a little too into his work…

Funny thing too, that both this episode AND Episode 99 have another connection, this time with censorship, and for the exact same reasons! Just as episode99 was taken off streaming for Jynx's appearance and edited for excessive femininity, this episode was also cut for air to shorten ash's bosomy breath-blocking and remove a shot of Jynx! At least it wasn't taken off streaming but still! The showrunners really need to calm down!

Speaking of rules, though, this episode actually has another first: the first time a referee is present in a gym battle! From this point on there's one officiating every time there's a gym battle, funny how it took them this long. I'm guessing a few of the indigo gyms would have gone a little differently with a ref present…

And lastly, speaking of sporting events, When Jessie says in response to Luana being part of the Orange Crew…

You might have thought it was just a nonsense made up term, but it might actually be a reference to Major League Baseball's Spring Training league in Florida, which is colloquially called the Grapefruit League. Of course this implies that florida exists in the Pokemon world but let's not open THAT can of Weedles… basically, like fruit and fish, they just hadn't gotten around to that rule yet.

Bulbapedia

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And so, Suede heads towards the final destination in this fascinating side story, his hopes high for a better conclusion. But first he must pass through the traditional final filler episodes, and who knows if they'll be worth watching?