

This episode was sponsored by the good folks on my patreon, but I bet some of them are registered on Bulbapedia, so it's like they sponsored me directly! I'm not sure that could sound any more pathetic.

Synopsis

I could easily just say "filler filler crappy filler, filler filler this one SUCKED!" but I'd like to think I'm better than that so here goes.

Ash just won his first actual battle in several episodes. The kid he beats is all "GGWP" and ash is bizarrely all "GG EZ noob" despite BEING that kid for most of the show leading up to this point. Misty and Brock disapprove but do nothing. The kid then tells the about an unofficial gym where a trainer trains "savage" pokemon who never lost a match. Ash is all "Wow, that sounds like a scary guy to battle, maybe I should check him out to see if he's on the level-" nNOPE he instead says "What a loser, I'm going to beat him despite being ground into powder by nearly everyone else I've met!"

They visit the gym and they meet AJ, indeed a vicious trainer with powerful pokemon that can ignore type advantage, and will take on the gym circuit when he wins 100 battles. Ash is all "whatever, I got TWO badges with only ten battles" even though that doesn't mean anything. Misty and Brock disapprove but do nothing. Aj then says that those must have been really lame gyms (which they were, considering one gave him a badge even though he FORFEITED FOR CHEATING and the other were going to GIVE IT TO HIM FOR LITERALLY NO REASON and then did because he MIGHT have one) and misty and brock, despite rightfully being embarrassed about Ash's behaviour earlier suddenly want ash to beat A.J the restore their... honor? Geez, Misty was just as harsh on her own gym as AJ was, what the heck? Ash of course blindly battles A.J, ignores Misty's correct advice,

Borderline ABUSES Pikachu and is pounded into the pavement. He then ignores pretty much everything he's learned about fair play and common decency in the season so far and calls hacks.

Yes, to him it's impossible for A.J to have beaten him, BECAUSE ASH BELIEVES NO ONE CAN BEAT HIM WITHOUT CHEATING. There is absolutely no lead up to this behaviour. None! Team rocket see that Sandshrew is ludicrously powerful and want to capture him at any cost... and then feel that they screwed up when they do just that.

Ash is at first outraged at AJ's extreme methods of training, to which AJ replies "mind your own Combee's wax" and when Sandshrew is kidnapped (as mentioned before) Ash, seeing that AJ lost his very first pokemon, the equivalent of him losing his beloved pikachu, says these tender words of understanding and concern.

He THEN tries to confiscate AJs other pokemon! I'm NOT KIDDING!

After Ash establishes he wants to be the biggest jerk like no one ever was, they find team rocket, beat team rocket, and because ash sees that AJ likes Sandshrew and vice versa, he ignores all the sketchy behaviour and “special recipe pokemon food” are you SERIOUS and immediately becomes friends with AJ. AJ reciprocates, Misty and Brock do nothing. Catch ‘em catch ‘em gotta catch em all, this was CRAP!

Thoughts

This episode has some good ideas but it fails miserably in its execution. It would make sense for Ash to get a swelled head, definitely, but much later, after, oh I don’t know ACTUALLY WINNING SOME BATTLES AND EARNING SOME BADGES. Nearly everyone involved has amazingly out of character tendencies, from ash forcing Pikachu to fight after RESPECTING HIS OPINION IN THE LAST EPISODE, Misty and Brock ignoring A.J’s possibly abusive behaviour despite one clearly having a deep concern for pokemon welfare and the other being an aspiring pokemon breeder, Team Rocket acting dumber than dirt and giving us cringeworthy gags out of nowhere that I can’t imagine would be much better in Japanese,

and everyone in general just suddenly losing 50 IQ points! Then there’s the story. My goodness this episode is so confused when it comes to its morals. Ash is unjustifiably shown as a bad guy for being concerned about A.J’s insanely brutal training regimen, but then he’s JUSTIFIABLY shown as being an insensitive jerkwad just minutes later!

A.J’s regimen, by the way, is sketchier than a back-alley smeargle. Onix is shown to be in pain when he gets hit with water. What A.J is doing here is the equivalent of dipping your body in acid to toughen your skin. He uses a bullwhip to command them for Pete’s sake! Hasn’t he ever heard of a whistle? There’s a reason it’s called a bullwhip, it’s used to FRIGHTEN BULLS! Even lions are intimidated by it, hence the analogy by Misty! He gives them SPECIAL SECRET POKEMON FOOD for Pete’s sake! But wait, hold on! He LOVES his pokemon? And they want to stay with him? Well, I guess there’s no such thing as an abusive relationship so let’s leave them be.

Ok, hold on in the comments there. I know intense regimens cause pain, I know that the pokemon chose not to leave AJ after Ash offered them an out. But two things there: one, they saw what happened to Ash earlier, they know he couldn’t defend his way out of an ace attorney tutorial so he really wouldn’t seem like the savior they needed right then. Also, and this is the most important thing, it isn’t Ash’s call to judge whether AJ’s regimen is abusive, but it also isn’t his call to say it’s not. When you are legitimately worried about whether an animal is being abused or not, you still report that crap! You don’t insult the owner, and you also don’t pass it off as “probably fine”, Get Nurse Joy over and she, as a qualified individual can assess whether or not it’s a harmful relationship!

Not only that there are some massive plot holes (mentioned before) and the writing is pretty darn sub-par even when it isn’t insulting. I look for the positives in every single episode but I couldn’t ignore the fact that this episode SUCKS! I give it an E-, prevented from an F ONLY

because it didn't CLEARLY give a wrong moral message. Honestly I don't know what it WAS trying to achieve!

Ok look, real talk here. I know I probably went a bit too nitpicky in this one, and got mad at things that I probably should have hand-waved as unintentional. But when an episode gets me mad by giving me a main character that has suddenly forgotten everything he learned, his friends turn on him and ignore his concerns in equal measure and just overall ignores what it's been trying to get across beforehand, it's hard to get out of that mindset. Right now the only good thing I can see coming out of this episode plot-wise is a perfect example of what happens when a screenwriter has absolutely no idea what he or she wants to say. I'm as done with this episode as the writers were with A.J. Spoilers: we never see him again. So much for seeing if his training worked.

Trivia

Here's a really interesting tidbit that I would have completely passed over if not for my wife remembering something she learned from her Japanese classes. It's not even on Bulbapedia! *gasp*

You may notice that when Ash boasts about getting two gym badges in 10 battles, his nose grows. This doesn't seem all that out of place as, you know, he's LYING. But in reality, this is most likely not why they put it there. You see, there's actually a saying in Japan, "tengu ni naru", or "becoming a Tengu," which is synonymous with getting a swelled head or being too prideful. Tengu look like this.

Yeah, isn't it bizarre how two completely different cultural touchstones with different meanings just happened to line up so bizarrely perfectly? Ash has a swelled head... AND he's lying! No modification necessary! I bet the Localisation team gave each other high-fives after figuring THAT one out!

Yet again, just to hammer the point home that Pokemon and animals originally lived in the same world, Misty refers to A.J. as being like a Lion tamer. LION. Tamer. Man there were actually way more real animal references in the early episodes than I first thought!

The bit with Ash getting Abbot and Costello'd with Pikachu's pillow was originally a pun gag in Japan, where Ash says Sandshrew is not a sandbag (probably in reference to his training) and Pikachu whips out a pillow because "sandbag" and "pillow" sound similar in Japanese. I actually thought Ash's stammered line was one of the more well-written gags in this otherwise heinous episode, so props to the writing team for that if nothing else.

And lastly, perhaps one of the only good things to come out of this episode is something that has nothing to do with the episode in question, that being the replacement of James' voice actor with the absolutely untouchable Eric Stuart, right about... here. Now don't get me wrong, the original VA, Ted Lewis, was a perfectly fine actor who and he just wanted to take some time off to

some theater, which is awesome. But Eric Stuart lent James that unmistakable lilt and effortless camp that came to define the character for eight more seasons. The funny thing is that Mr. Stuart was intended to just be a temporary replacement, but after they realised that Team Rocket was much more comedic than they originally thought, they decided to keep Eric's more comedic voice and the rest is history. It makes me wonder how they would have dealt with it if Ted didn't leave, but that's neither here nor there. What I find incredible is that, completely accidentally, they created an awesome connection between Team Rocket and Ash's friends, at least in the first and third arcs. Think about it: after this episode, Ash's best friends and his worst enemies ARE VOICED BY THE SAME PEOPLE. It's like they represent his best and worst influences, I'm surprised that this wasn't really mentioned in any of those dumb Ash-coma theories I read! Oh, and don't feel bad for Ted Lewis, he went on to do a great job as Tracy and Giovanni and he even got to write and direct some episodes, so it's definitely not like he got kicked to the curb. Also, I just had to mention this. Even though some believe that Stuart's distinctly fruity tone and occasional innuendos were what led most viewers to believe James was either Gay or Bi, Don't forget it was actually Lewis who first kicked it off with this line in the last episode.

Yes, I know that "straight" is old fashioned slang for "honest" (as in straight, not crooked) but I only know a handful of people who were actually aware of that phrase. I was one, but that was because I loved 1950's Scrooge McDuck comics where the phrase was used by the Beagle Boys a lot. But for the most part it seems like the other meaning was what was taken and it seems Stuart ran with it and spiked it into the freaking endzone. The funny thing is it seems like this portrayal, a campy, sexually ambiguous goofball, actually had a positive effect on helping those watching to be just a little more tolerant. I've even heard some people, including Channel Awesome alumni and current writer for the Anime News Network Jacob Chapman, say that Stuart's portrayal even helped them overcome deep-seated prejudices. In his own words:

I'd like to go more into how much of a strange force for tolerance, perspective and understanding James bizarrely came to be, but I think I'll at least wait until a certain famous episode surrounding him before going down that rabbit hole. Let's just say that this seemingly innocuous case of switching cast had a profound effect on the whole show in the west, and that milestone at least deserves a mention.

The above facts were delivered fresh to my door by the artisan truth-seekers at Bulbapedia. If you knock twice on the door around the back and say "suede never goes out of style" I'll make sure you get what's coming to you.

And so, Suede runs madly away from the cruel trainer and his abusive relationship with his pokemon, desperate to get clear of the invisible mist that caused the dumbing down of his favourite characters. However, another fog is coming, and this one has something much better hiding within...