

Sugar: baseball and struggle

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Written and directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck

Originally developed in the United States in the 19th century, the game of baseball, as the recent World Baseball Classic (which Japan won by defeating South Korea) demonstrated, has become an increasingly global sport. And it is well known that some of the best players in the world come from the Dominican Republic (DR), with multi-million dollar contracts in the US to prove it. In fact, some 15 percent of major league baseball players currently hail from the country.

Baseball has become as popular in that small, Spanish-speaking Caribbean nation as it is in the country of its birth (or perhaps more popular). For many young talented Dominican athletes, the game is far more than a means of recreation, it is a vehicle by which to escape dire poverty. Many Dominican players come to the US and attempt to win a position playing for a major league team and earn considerable amounts of money.

The median salary of the 800 or so Major League baseball players in 2009 stands at \$1,125,000; in the Dominican Republic, more than 40 percent of the people live below the national official poverty line and 30 percent of the population of 9.5 million are undernourished.

Sugar, which has just opened in New York and Los Angeles, is a fictional account of one such aspiring pitcher, 19-year-old Miguel Santos. He expresses his dreams by telling his girlfriend in the DR that when he makes it to Yankee Stadium in New York, he will buy her a Cadillac that they can drive on water. His role is not played by a professional actor, but by a Dominican ball player, Algenis Perez Soto. The filmmakers, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck (*Half Nelson*), have cast a number of actual players in the film.

The film as a whole achieves a sensitive realism in which the viewer is invited to experience both the beat of Latin music, as well as the visual rhythms of the

game itself. There is also the locker room banter: Santos explains that he calls himself Sugar because he is sweet with the ladies and has a sweet curveball. One of his teammates jokingly replies that the real reason for his nickname is that he eats so many desserts.

Santos, as well as many other players in the DR, is observed by an American scout seeking out those players who might be good enough to compete in the US. Santos impresses with his curveball and wins a contract to play for a fictional minor league team in Iowa.

When he comes to America, he struggles both on the baseball field and off, where he lives with a local family. He has language problems, as it takes time for him to develop English, and cultural problems as he seeks to adjust to a world previously unknown to him, that includes his attempt to relate to women in this new environment.

However, the focus of his struggle is the game. When the Dominican players arrive, the American coach explains that they have to work very hard because the competition is rough, there are simply far more players than positions for them to fill. Do the math, he tells them. And it is the case that the vast majority of minor league players do not make it to the majors.

Baseball, no less than any other modern sport, is highly competitive, both as an economic activity and by the nature of the game itself. Much of the competition within the game takes place between the pitcher and the batter. The pitcher attempts to throw balls in a deceptive manner to fool the batter so he does not get a hit, and the batter's job is to follow the ball and decide when to swing, in order to get a hit. One's player's success is the other's failure.

Santos demonstrates a considerable ability, but when the batters begin to get hits off him, he becomes frustrated and loses his control, both on the field and off. For example, after one difficult game, he destroys

the water fountain in the locker room.

Santos is talented, but so are the other players. He also suffers an injury on the field that increases his challenges. As his frustrations increase, his pitching becomes progressively worse. The same coach that explained the brutal math to all the newcomers tries to help. He explains to Santos that playing with his emotions does not work. He must get better control of himself, the coach explains.

There is no cheap moralizing in this film. There are no good guys and bad guys. In his interaction with Santos, the coach makes clear that as a player he went through the same issues and is himself someone with unfulfilled ambitions.

The exploitation of these athletes is, in a certain sense, a matter of numbers. Most will not and cannot make it. There are not enough positions to be filled no matter how talented and passionate the players are. It is how the system works.

Afraid of being dismissed by the team, as has happened to so many others, Santos leaves voluntarily. With what money he has, he travels to New York City to find a former teammate, Jorge (Rayniel Rufino), who had previously been dismissed and had given him some of the emotional stability that Santos needed. He looks for him in a Spanish-speaking part of the South Bronx. He quickly finds a job as a dishwasher in the community and begins looking into a career in carpentry.

He eventually finds his former teammate, and along with other ball players who did not “make it,” begins to play the game just for the fun of it. The film ends on a bittersweet note of personal liberation.

There is no doubt significant truth to the notion that baseball, like any other creative activity, is spoiled by the drive for riches and all the intense competitive pressures placed upon the players. However, there is some irony that the kind of personal discovery made in *Sugar* takes place in New York, a city that has a reputation for being the toughest sports town in the country.

The city’s tabloid press routinely condemns highly paid ball players for the New York teams either for poor performance or what they consider to be inappropriate behavior. These articles appear not only in the back sports pages, but make for screeching front-page headlines as well, as has recently happened in just

the first week of the baseball season. The fans themselves get caught up in the winning and losing of their team, which makes it harder for them to appreciate the beauty of the game itself.

The problem, however, is not a psychological one, in and of itself, but is rooted in the very reality of a sport that is produced and sold, just like anything else, as a commodity. While *Sugar* does do a good job of showing the hopes and struggles of its lead character, it is throughout a pleasing and sweet film—but perhaps a bit too much so for today’s realities.



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