

Moneyball, and the uneven playing field of professional sports

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Directed by Bennett Miller, written by Aaron Sorkin and Steven Zaillian, from the book by Michael Lewis.

The new film *Moneyball*, based on the 2003 non-fiction work *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* by Michael Lewis, takes up a number of interesting themes, including the corrosive influence of money and profit interests on the sports industry and a winning-is-everything culture in which fame and fortune represent the pinnacle of success.

Moneyball follows the 2002 efforts of Billy Beane, general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team, to turn the small-budget A's team into a winning ball club on the level of big-budget teams such as the New York Yankees.

If nothing else, the film is aptly titled. There are extraordinary sums of money at stake in the US professional sports industry. According to *Forbes* magazine's most recent list of the most valuable Major League Baseball teams, the New York Yankees were valued at an astonishing \$1.7 billion in 2011. The second most valuable team last season were the Boston Red Sox, worth \$921 million. The Oakland A's, currently the second least valuable team in baseball, are worth \$307 million.

Today, the highest paid athlete in baseball is Yankees' third baseman Alex Rodriguez, who receives an annual salary of \$32 million. This number is even more extraordinary when one considers the 2011 payroll for the *entire* Kansas City Royals ball club was \$35.7 million. The top 10 highest paid players in baseball today each make \$20 million or more.

To borrow a phrase from the film itself, baseball has become less a game of fair competition between athletes, and more and more a competition of "payroll against payroll" on an uneven playing field where the

wealthiest have tremendous advantages over smaller-budget teams. Such conditions have a corrupting influence on everyone involved in the game.

As *Moneyball* opens, the Oakland Athletics have just lost a 2001 postseason game to the Yankees, bringing their hopes of winning the American League championship and moving on to the World Series to an end. The A's General Manager Billy Beane (Brad Pitt) knows his team will be in trouble the following season. Several star players are leaving as free agents, forcing him to rebuild the club with new players. As a "small market" team, the A's can't afford to pay the kind of salaries that would bring top players to Oakland. Beane puts it bluntly to the Oakland A's staff during one meeting: "There are rich teams and there are poor teams, then there's fifty feet of crap, and then there's us."

In his effort to rebuild the A's, Beane recruits Peter Brand (Jonah Hill) from the front office of the Cleveland Indians. A Yale graduate in economics, Brand encourages Beane to reject the appeal of superstar players and the subjective impressions and predictions of veteran scouts, in favor of a new form of player analysis called sabermetrics (from the acronym SABR, Society for American Baseball Research) pioneered by historian and statistician Bill James.

Using this method, according to the film, Beane builds a new team of unknowns and undervalued players—"misfit toys"—who are ignored by the major teams, but nonetheless have something to contribute. Individually, the players are imperfect and anything but well-rounded. They score runs, however, and when they come together according to the plan set out by Beane and Brand, they stand a chance of competing with the big-budget teams, or so the theory goes.

Moneyball, directed by Bennett Miller (*Capote*), is

appealing in many ways. Pitt, who dominates the film and appears in virtually every scene, is a talented actor, and the work is thoughtfully written and directed. The numerous scenes of backroom deals, including the trading of players and the financial negotiations involved, are honestly and critically done. While not everything is developed to the degree one would like, the film provides a sense of the extent to which the game has been distorted by financial concerns and profit-making interests. The pressures exerted on those involved—from the front office to the locker room—come through in the performances and scenario.

The filmmakers treat ordinary players, and people generally, with an unusual warmth. The notion that players who do not fit into the star system for whatever reason—because of remarkable but uneven talents, mistakes that “official life” won’t forgive, a failure to “pass the eye-candy test”—have something to contribute, if only the opportunity were presented, is also a welcome sentiment. A humane current runs throughout the work.

If Beane and other characters are treated sympathetically, however, they are not treated uncritically. In his efforts to revitalize his team and make it competitive, Beane’s new system demands its own sort of ruthlessness. A certain amount of cut-throat maneuvering against the team’s manager Art Howe (Philip Seymour Hoffman), in which certain players are sacrificed for reasons having nothing to do with their playing, is required for Beane to press ahead. The sense one gets from the film, that this sort of ruthlessness is *necessary* if one is to be successful under the prevailing conditions, is one of the more insightful features of the work.

While the film has much to recommend it, one feels, however, that the filmmakers have made too much of a virtue of out of the sabermetrics system and the ability of “little guys” Beane and Brand to outsmart the system, as it were. They are viewed, ultimately, as though they were card counters who managed to beat the casino’s odds. The film leaves viewers with the impression that with a few fresh ideas and the right statistical approach, the two were somehow able to make the game a little fairer.

(There is also the issue, raised by some commentators, as to how accurately *Moneyball* portrays

Oakland’s success in 2002. Miller’s film makes virtually no mention of the trio of remarkable starting pitchers, Barry Zito, Mark Mulder and Tim Hudson, who won 57 games between them, or talented hitters such as Miguel Tejada (Most Valuable Player in the American League that year), Eric Chavez and Jermaine Dye, preferring to focus on Beane’s “misfits.”)

For all their concerns about the ugliness of the professional sports industry, the filmmakers tend to treat the subject too narrowly. They might have hinted at how this state of affairs has come to pass. And they also might have asked themselves what explains the extraordinary attention given to sports today in America, both by the media...and wide layers of the population.

The failure to pursue some of the thornier questions, as well as the timid conclusions at which the filmmakers arrive, limits the work to the level of “appealing” and “friendly to people.” There remains the need for artists to really get to the bottom of things. *Moneyball* doesn’t go quite that far, but it does have something to offer.



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