

Steven Soderbergh's *High Flying Bird*: Sports and racial politics

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High Flying Bird directed by Steven Soderbergh, script by Tarell Alvin McCraney

Steven Soderbergh's latest film *High Flying Bird*, released on Netflix, concerns itself with a fictional National Basketball Association (NBA) lockout and the interplay between athletes, their agents, their union and the team owners. Scripted by Tarell Alvin McCraney (*Moonlight*), the movie is fast-paced and occasionally insightful, but, in the end, essentially a shallow accommodation to identity politics.

Ray Burke (André Holland) is an African American sports agent who represents the talented draft pick Erick Scott (Melvin Gregg), now playing for an unnamed New York team. Unable to settle with the Players Association, the owners have organized a lockout.

Spence (Bill Duke), a middle-school basketball coach and former NBA player, counsels Ray, who can also rely, sometimes grudgingly, on the collaboration of his ambitious former assistant, Sam (Zazie Beetz), and Myra (Sonja Sohn), head of the Players Association. Peculiarly, any reference to slavery has Spence insist that the words "I love the Lord and all his black people" be recited.

Throughout the film, actual NBA players Donovan Mitchell, Karl-Anthony Towns and Reggie Jackson speak about their rookie experiences in the league.

During the lockout, a rivalry develops between Erick and a fellow draftee for the New York team, Jamero Umber (Justin Hurtt-Dunkley). At one point, Ray gives his client a book he calls "the Bible." It turns out to be *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969) by Harry Edwards, who appears briefly toward the end of the film.

The inclusion of Edwards, 77, has a certain historical significance. A sociologist and civil rights activist, Edwards helped establish the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) in 1967, protesting racial segregation in the US and elsewhere, including South Africa, and sports in general. The campaign led to 200-meter sprint Olympic medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their black-gloved fists on the podium at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968 in

protest against racism, while wearing socks and no shoes to symbolize African American poverty. Australian sprinter Peter Norman, the silver medalist, solidarized himself with the protest by wearing an OPHR badge. Smith, Carlos and Norman were all victimized by the sports establishment because of the stance they took.

Among other demands, the OPHR called for South Africa and Rhodesia to be uninvited from the Olympics and for the restoration of Muhammad Ali's world heavyweight boxing title. Ali had been stripped of his crown because he refused to be drafted into the US military, citing his religious beliefs and opposition to the Vietnam War. *High Flying Bird* does not so much as hint at this history of protest nor even to the more recent case of Colin Kaepernick, excluded by National Football League teams for kneeling during the national anthem in protest against police brutality and racial inequality. There is nothing oppositional about Soderbergh's new film or anyone in it.

Indicative of the social shift, Edwards has largely devoted himself in recent decades to campaigning for more African Americans in professional sports management. He is a consultant to various teams.

Soderbergh's Ray Burke envisions a scheme for a player-run alternative to the NBA ("Man, I could see a whole infrastructure that put the control back in the hands of those behind the ball, instead of those up in the sky box"). This propels white owner David Seton (Kyle MacLachlan), complacent to the point of somnolence, to the bargaining table.

High Flying Bird has few likable characters. Besides the rookies, everyone is prosperous and on the make for more—with a racist bone to pick. For example, in one conversation, Ray, speaking about the owners, says: "You think these fools, these rich white dudes gon' let the sexiest sport fall by the wayside? I mean, football is fun, but it don't sell sneakers. You can't see the players half the time. Baseball ... is a whole lot of tradition, but in order to move merch and inspire rap lyrics, they need your services. Too much money at stake." Is this supposed to be appealing or

inspiring? Who or what would it inspire?

One of the most unattractive characters is Jamero's mother Emera (Jeryl Prescott), a character presumably meant to be exemplary. In fact, she is a money- and status-obsessed nightmare: "And I intend my sons to know heaven here, in this world. They have the opportunity to do that right here. They have the skill, the charm, the drive to be the best in this world. And they don't drink or smoke or any of those other natural afflictions that can halt a man ... And I think they should be compensated for it. Gospel of Prosperity! Amen!"

In Soderbergh's far superior *The Laundromat*, the director attempts through the Meryl Streep character to show something of the suffering of the American people at the hands of corporate swindlers. In *High Flying Bird*, that sentiment and social layer are both absent. Instead, the filmmaker concentrates on a pool of sharks preying on the players, who in turn are encouraged to be as self-seeking and individualist as possible.

The film's artistic and technological cleverness and fluidity (the movie was shot entirely by Soderbergh on an iPhone) are meant to lend a vaguely "cutting edge," radical and even anti-establishment air to the project. Unfortunately, its content has nothing of those qualities. The elevation of a handful of African Americans to sports management and ownership positions would only improve the situation of the top one percent of the black population, whose economic distance from the majority of African Americans is already vast. This is just another crude iteration of "black capitalism," which has absolutely no positive meaning for broad layers of the population, or even the players themselves.

Indeed, the conceptions behind *High Flying Bird*, to the extent that one takes them seriously, are extraordinarily selfish and exclusivist. All concerned only have sympathies for "black players" in the NBA. Aside from the fact that not all NBA players are African American (more than three-quarters are), what about other professional athletes? In regard to the most widely followed sports leagues, some 65 percent of National Football League players are black, while 60 percent of Major League Baseball players are white and nearly 30 percent Latino, 97 percent of National Hockey League players are white (46 percent of NHL players are Canadian, 25 percent American and 27 percent European) and Major League Soccer—almost half of whose players were born outside the US and Canada—is the most ethnically diverse of all (some 48 percent of its players are white, 25 percent Latino, 10 percent black and nearly 20 percent are identified as "other.")

Is there the slightest indication that black players at present are more exploited than white, Latino, Canadian or European athletes? If so, no one has made that case. The

NBA has the highest average annual player salaries in professional sports in the US, followed by the MLB, NFL and NHL, but this is related to various factors, including the wealth the league generates, the relatively short career spans of professional basketball players, etc. In any event, the corporate stranglehold and atrocities caused by the profit system are universal in the professional sports world.

In an interview with *GQ*, scriptwriter McCraney reveals how the film was conceived: "If you look at Congress, they look a lot like what these team owners look like. Mostly white, mostly older people who will be fine during a lockout. And then there are those who are on the ground floor, who are mostly black, who if the lockout doesn't end, they are struggling. Now they're taking loans, they're taking in debt."

Despite McCraney's assertions, the only apparent economic repercussions from the lockout are depicted in the scene when Ray, a fast-talking opportunist who always lands on his feet, finds out—while dining at an exclusive restaurant with Erick—that his employer has cancelled his credit cards. Not to worry, his manipulation of the lockout allows him to push out his white superior and take over his position: "You've done well. You kept your head down and your nose clean. But now you gotta get up. You're sitting in my seat." The film's theme is neatly summed up in that last line.

In another interview, the screenwriter laments the fact that because of the white "gatekeepers," he is separated from his "community": "I navigate with a sense of knowing that I'm being 'allowed' entry into these spaces, by the gatekeepers. They can now say, 'this space is being occupied by Tarell McCraney', and there isn't any room for any more like him." Again, the emphasis here is on self-interest and career, not political and ideological opposition.

Soderbergh should know better. Why is he promoting and arguing for these big and little entrepreneurs?



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