Moneyball: Romanticizing Sabermetrics

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Overall, the film *Moneyball* is a good representation of the events that happened in Oakland in 2002. However, much like the quote later in the movie, "How can you not be romantic about baseball?" the film has been romanticized from its source to better fit a narrative (Moneyball, 2011).

Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game follows the Oakland Athletics through their 2002 season, but in a nonlinear fashion, while also throwing in chapters on other relevant characters in the sabermetrics world (Lewis, 2003). To copy the book exactly would be to subject audiences to nonlinear storytelling and a film that would have been a few hours longer. While the die-hard stats nerd might have still enjoyed the film, the casual fan may have been bored to death when it got to parts like Bill James's backstory and writing his twelve abstracts (Lewis, 2003).

The first unrealistic moment in the film happens about five minutes in, when general manager Billy Beane, portrayed by Brad Pitt, has a conversation with A's owner Stephen Schott. While it's not unrealistic for the GM to have conversations with the owner, they usually happen over the phone. The movie has a few in person visits that would have been phone calls. This particular conversation gives the audience the feeling that the A's are just coming off a terrible season and Beane is certain they are about to have another one. That wasn't the case. Since Beane took over in 1998, the A's had steadily improved. They had 74 wins his first year, 87 the next, 91 the following year, and 102 in the season Beane and Schott are discussing. In both 2000 and 2001, with the 91 and 102 wins, respectively, the A's had playoff appearances – far from bad seasons. This conversation was simply a plot device specifically to set the tone of the movie (Lewis, 2003; Moneyball, 2011).

In fact, Beane had a plan for the 2002 season. With his assistant general manager, Paul DePodesta, he was going to use undervalued statistics to find replacements for the three big players he lost – Jason Giambi, Johnny Damon, and Jason Isringhausen. This wouldn't be done with area scouts though, as shown nine minutes into the movie. They come in later in the season – usually there are about thirty of them in a room – when it is time for the amateur draft (Lewis, 2003; Moneyball, 2011).

DePodesta, a Harvard grad with an economics degree, who was hired before the 1999 season, was not featured in the film. Instead, Jonah Hill played Peter Brand, a Yale grad with an economics degree, that Beane hired during the movie. Brand closely resembles Paul DePodesta, except he also does the work of real-life Dan Feinstein, who worked in the video room, and an unnamed assistant of Billy Beane who helped field calls. Beane and DePodesta/Brand highly valued the statistic on-base percentage, or OBP. This was not a new concept to Beane, as Sandy Alderson, former GM of the A's had created a culture centered around OBP. As Alderson hired Beane, he would have been quite familiar with this statistic by the 2002 season (Lewis, 2003; Moneyball, 2011).

Other small storytelling mistakes include Peter Brand pitching the idea of Chad Bradford as a closer for the 2002 season, however Bradford was already a part of the team and had pitched for the entire 2001 season. There is a lot of tension between Beane and manager Art Howe, however Alderson had hired Howe to implement ideas of the front office. He was not as resistant to Beane's plans as the movie suggests. It was also not the last year of his contract. Ron Washington and Billy Bean visiting Scott Hatteberg's house was not something that happened. That transaction happened over the phone and Washington was not involved, though he was integral in teaching Hatteberg to play first base. The movie downplayed how patient a hitter

Hatteberg was, which was integral in the A's twentieth win in their streak (Lewis, 2003; Moneyball, 2011).

While changing details and the order of events for the story is forgivable, there are a few names it leaves out that are unforgivable. Barry Zito, Tim Hudson – you can see Hudson on the mound during the twentieth win game – and Mark Mulder were the A's main starting pitchers. In the book, Beane mentions that he needed to build a team around three good starting pitchers, and he felt he had them in these three. Zito went on to win the American League Cy Young award for 2002. Somehow this great pitcher failed to fit the romantic narrative of data helping the A's to a twenty-game winning streak (Lewis, 2003; Moneyball, 2011). While some of the storytelling changes are what made this film great, what would have made it more realistic is showing the marriage between analytics and "old-school" methods that baseball clubs have to navigate.

After *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* was published, MLB teams began to invest in their own analytics teams. This started a fast-growing rise in data used in baseball. The publishing of *The Book* by Tom Tango, Mitchell Lichtman, and Andrew Dolphin, as well as sites like Baseball Reference, FanGraphs, and Baseball Prospectus allowed data and ideas to be spread to a wider group of people with the idea of quantifying manager decisions (Stone, 2021).

The creation of the statistic Wins Above Replacement (WAR), from the older statistic Value Over Replacement (VORP) allowed comparisons between major league players and a replacement level player. Defensive Runs Saved (DRS) captured the total defensive value of a player compared to the average. Other statistics were created to help see the whole picture of a baseball player (Stone, 2021).

Technology changed from the pitchfx system – a two-camera system in 2006 – to Statcast – which was made up of Trackman (radar) and Chyronhego (cameras that tracked players) – to Hawkeye, which is what is now used in most major and minor league parks. With all these

systems, data on ball flight, pitch speed, arm release angle, runner speed to first space, and so much more can be collected (Stone, 2021).

As for the next big thing in baseball data, currently, big things are happening in biomechanics, especially at labs like Driveline Baseball. Branching out from that, advances in Sport Science and nutrition, as well as gathering data and being able to forecast the performance of international players will give baseball teams the next edge (Owens et al., 2024).

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