Moneyball directed by Bennett Miller, and: Trouble with the Curve directed by Robert Lorenz (review)

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Focusing on the application of sabermetrics and statistical analysis by general manager Billy Beane and the Oakland A’s, journalist Michael Lewis’s *Moneyball* (2003) was an unlikely bestseller, and baseball statistics would seem an even more unlikely subject for a major Hollywood film. Indeed, it would take eight years to translate *Moneyball* from book to film. The project was piqued by the commercial and critical success of *The Blind Side* (2009), a film based upon Lewis’s 2006 bestseller of the same title. Nevertheless, the film version of *The Blind Side* emphasized the relationship between Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron) and his adoptive mother Leigh Anne Tuohy (Sandra Bullock), rather than how Oher helped to revolutionize the position of left tackle in professional football. Bill Beane’s story in *Moneyball* fails to offer the dramatic possibilities of race, gender, and class contained in *The Blind Side*. Actor Brad Pitt’s interest in the project, nevertheless, kept *Moneyball* alive as a film, and Steven Soderberg was signed to direct the picture. Sony Pictures, however, was reportedly nervous regarding Soderberg’s efforts to inject humor into the film as well as blurring the line between feature film and documentary with actual players commenting upon Billy Beane’s approach to talent evaluation. Accordingly, on the eve of filming in June 2009, Soderberg was removed from the picture and replaced by Bennett Miller, who earned a Best Director Oscar nomination in 2005 for the biographical picture *Capote*, for which Philip Seymour Hoffman received the Best Actor award. Filming commenced in July 2010, and *Moneyball* was released in the fall of 2011 to critical acclaim and a strong box office. With a budget of approximately $50 million, the film grossed nearly $90 million while earning Oscar nominations for Best Picture (in an expanded category), Best Actor for Pitt, and Best Supporting Actor for Jonah Hill.
By the time *Moneyball* was released, sabermetric concepts, such as OPS, were common knowledge to serious baseball fans as well as baseball executives, but many of the ideas discussed in *Moneyball* were novel for more casual observers of the game. In fact, in tracing the 2002 Oakland season *Moneyball* is somewhat of a history film, and in Hollywood neither the history nor baseball film genre have generated great box office excitement. The appeal of the film owes much to the performances of Pitt and Hill, as well as the script by Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin, which reduces the abstract principles of *Moneyball* to a few easily-internalized concepts—such as hitting is more important than pitching and fielding, a walk is as good as a hit (a cliché which many weak Little League hitters learn early in life), bunts and stolen bases are risky activities which may squander scarce outs, and the worth of a player may be measured statistically by past performance. Yet these simple concepts are resisted by the baseball establishment who focus upon such traditional scouting tools as power, speed, and the look of a ballplayer. The audience is invited to identify with Beane’s smug sense of insider knowledge, which his contemporaries reject in favor of a conventional wisdom that privileges investment in power pitching and hitting home runs.

*Moneyball* is a David and Goliath story which appeals to the audience’s support for the underdog. In 2001, the Oakland A’s won 102 games in the regular season before falling to the New York Yankees in the playoffs. Yet, the Yankee payroll was $126 million, while the A’s were limited to spending $40 million. And the gap between these two representative large- and small-market clubs seemed destined to grow even greater when after the 2001 season the A’s lost three of their best players to free agency: relief pitcher Jason Isringhausen, center fielder Johnny Damon, and first baseman Jason Giambi. In fact, Giambi signed with the Yankees for $120 million. It would seem impossible for the A’s to compete with the Yankees, but Beane finds a way. And perhaps it is not surprising that film audiences in 2011 identified with the Oakland club. In the midst of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, the Yankees embody the values of Wall Street, earning large bonuses while most people are simply struggling to survive. Billy Beane represents Main Street values against the entrenched power and money of the Wall Street Yankees.

To compete with the large-market club, Beane is convinced that teams with smaller budgets must change their approach. Rather than rely upon his traditional scouts, a roomful of white-haired men dependent upon their accumulated years of baseball knowledge and conventional wisdom, Beane chooses to follow the advice of Peter Brand, a young economist from Yale, who seeks to introduce empirical evaluation based upon past player performance. Brand is a composite figure of the young economists whom Beane brought to Oakland,
most notably Paul DePodesta, who became assistant general manager but did not want his name used in the film. The Brand character is essential to the film. Jonah Hill, whose previous credits include sex-obsessed young men in Superbad (2007) and Knocked Up (2007), plays Brand as a quiet, unassuming young intellectual, who initially shows up to work every day in a suit and tie, but after hanging with Beane jettisons the tie and dons a windbreaker. Although he initially appears to be a comical sidekick, a Sancho Panza for Beane who is tilting at windmills and attempting to dream the impossible dream of beating the Yankees, there is considerable strength to the Brand character as played by Hill. At first, Brand is somewhat intimidated when confronting the scouts and players; he has never played the game, but he has the strength of his convictions and is even able to hand an athlete his unconditional release. Brand is an everyman, suggesting to intelligent audience members that they could also run a major-league ball club based upon sound scientific principles.

Moneyball is also successful as a film because it does not confuse audiences by attempting to introduce too many members of the A’s 2002 roster. The film concentrates upon three players, David Justice (Stephen Bishop), Chad Bradford (Casey Bond), and Scott Hatteberg (Chris Pratt). Justice, who is sometimes best remembered for being married to Halle Berry, is in the twilight of his career, but Brand and Beane like him because he draws walks and the Yankees are willing to pay part of their former player’s guaranteed contract. Bradford is a middle-relief pitcher whom few wanted because of his low velocity, yet with his extreme submarine delivery, Bradford is able to fool hitters by getting his eighty-four mile per hour fastball to move in the strike zone. Hatteberg was a catcher with the Boston Red Sox whose career was thought to be over due to an elbow injury. But Brand and Beane propose transforming him into a first baseman, as defense plays second fiddle to offense, and Hatteberg is a master at working the count and getting on base.

The Beane and Brand experiment, however, is undermined by A’s Manager Art Howe (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who insists upon playing rookie Carlos Pena at first base rather than Hatteberg. Beane deals with this insubordination by trading Pena to the Detroit Tigers, and he fails to give Howe more than a one-year extension on his contract. Hoffman, a personal friend of the director, is an interesting choice as he seems to fit the stereotypical image of an old-school baseball manager. While the real Howe was a tall, thin man, Hoffman is more heavyset and his stomach tends to hang over the belt on his uniform.

After Howe begins to play Hatteberg and makes better use of Bradford out of the bullpen, the A’s begin to rise in the standings, reeling off twenty straight victories to establish an American League record for consecutive wins. The twentieth game of this stretch is the only game which director Miller develops
in any detail. Most of the action in the film takes place off the playing field, and Miller often relies upon archival footage of A’s games. But the contest of September 4, 2002, was different. After attaining nineteen consecutive wins, the A’s led the Kansas City Royals 11–0 in the fourth inning. The A’s, however, began to commit errors, and Bradford gave up a three-run home run. In the top of the ninth, the Royals tied the game, and the A’s and their fans were stunned. During the bottom half of the inning, Howe sent Hatteberg in to pinch hit, and in true Hollywood fashion he hit a home run to win the game. Reality provided the filmmakers with a perfect ending, and Miller can be forgiven a little slow-motion imitation of Scott Hatteberg as Roy Hobbs.

In 2002, the A’s who appeared decimated by their free-agent losses actually won 103 games, one more than the previous year. Yet they again lost in the first round of the playoffs; this time to the Minnesota Twins, another small-market team. Critics, such as broadcaster and Hall of Famer Joe Morgan, asserted that the tactics of Moneyball were inappropriate to the playoffs where the bunt and stolen base were essential to manufacturing runs. The film concludes with Beane mulling an offer to employ his strategy on a larger canvas as general manager of the Boston Red Sox. Beane, however, elects to stay with the A’s, but the film concludes with the caption that in 2006 the Red Sox were able to win their first World Series since World War I and the trading of Babe Ruth by implementing Beane’s Moneyball strategies. The film suggests that Moneyball concepts now dominate Major League Baseball due to the visionary Billy Beane. While baseball enthusiasts continue to argue over the merits of Moneyball and sabermetrics, more casual fans and filmgoers will be drawn to Beane’s story, which is in many ways more interesting than the deciphering of baseball statistics.

In the film, Beane remains a rather enigmatic figure. We learn that scouts depicted him as a “can’t miss” prospect with power, speed, an excellent throwing arm, and the proper look. But for whatever reason, Beane did not reach his potential as a player, often displaying irrational outbursts of anger that appear out of character with his emphasis upon empirical evidence as a general manager. Beane regrets that he signed with the New York Mets rather than accept a scholarship to attend Stanford. He asserts that he will never make another decision based entirely upon financial considerations. While on the surface he is laid back and relaxed, Brad Pitt’s Beane is actually a bundle of nervous energy; pacing around the room, dipping snuff, exercising and working out during games as he is afraid that he will jinx the team by watching them play, and driving endlessly to destinations that are not always clear. Beane’s only passion outside of baseball seems to be his daughter Casey (Kerris Dorsey), and although the film fails to consider the reasons for his divorce from wife
Sharon (Robin Wright), one can surmise that Beane may have focused more on his job than his marriage. The Beane presented on the screen seems to have no interests or friends beyond the Oakland Coliseum and his daughter. He is driven by one desire: to prove that the scientific principles of *Moneyball* are sound. In the final analysis, Beane rejects the Boston offer so that he may stay near his daughter, pursuing his vision from his California home.

*Moneyball* emphasizes the role of statistics, but the film’s personal insight into Beane’s character makes *Moneyball* of interest to the moviegoer and casual baseball fan. As for the principles of *Moneyball*, there is still some debate. From 2007 to 2011, Beane’s teams did not make the playoffs, although the general manager’s defenders point out that it is more challenging for Beane now as other clubs emulate his approach to the game.

In *Trouble with the Curve*, Clint Eastwood is again speaking to an empty chair, but rather than addressing an absent President Barack Obama, Eastwood’s target is Billy Beane and *Moneyball*. Sabermetricians and fans of *Moneyball* may be uncomfortable with a film which has little use for computers and new modes of statistical analysis. Instead, *Trouble with the Curve* places its faith in the traditional baseball scout who relies upon experience with the sport to evaluate talent—the older baseball organization men whom Beane fires early in *Moneyball*.

*Trouble with the Curve* is also an old-fashioned feel-good movie. Written by Randy Brown and directed by Eastwood’s friend Robert Lorenz in his directorial debut, *Trouble with the Curve* is dominated by the eighty-two-year-old Eastwood, who portrays aging baseball scout Gus Lobel, struggling with his prostate, hearing, and eyesight. In many ways, Gus is similar to Eastwood’s grumpy old man in *Gran Torino* (2008), but *Trouble with the Curve* does not explore the darker regions of this character.

The film begins when executives from the Atlanta Braves, such as Phillip Sanderson (Matthew Lillard), seek to dismiss Gus and rely more upon computers and statistical analysis, which should also save the ball club money. Pete Klein (John Goodman), director of scouting for the Braves, defends his old friend and arranges for Gus to scout a new slugging phenomenon, Bo Gentry (Joe Massengill). Nevertheless, Pete has some reservations regarding Gus and urges the scout’s daughter, Mickey (Amy Adams)—and all baseball fans should know that she is, of course, named after Mickey Mantle—to accompany her father on his scouting mission to North Carolina. Although Mickey is an attorney working on a major case and seeking to attain a partnership in her law firm, she accepts the responsibility of monitoring Gus, who is opposed to her joining him on the road.
The core of the film concerns the estranged relationship between father and daughter. The stoic Gus finds it difficult to talk with his daughter, and she wonders why her father continues to push her away. As the story unfolds, we learn that following the death of her mother, Mickey accompanied Gus on his scouting trips. When she is nearly molested, Gus decides that he cannot properly care for his daughter, dispatching her to live with relatives and attend boarding school. Yet Gus fails to explain the reasons for his actions, and Mickey feels rejected by her father and unable to pursue her passion for baseball. Gus grudgingly admits that Mickey is helpful to him as he struggles with failing eyesight, and the father and daughter reconcile.

Meanwhile, Mickey finds a love interest in Johnny Flanagan (Jason Timberlake), a scout for the Boston Red Sox, who was originally signed by Gus. Flanagan was traded by the Braves to the Red Sox, and his career ended prematurely due to arm troubles. Thus, he is considerably younger than the other scouts with whom Gus associates, making him an appropriate romantic partner for Mickey. Flanagan is also scouting Bo Gentry, and the Red Sox and Braves have the top picks in the baseball draft.

Gentry is an egotistical home-run hitter who seems destined to be the number-one pick in the draft. Gus, however, is convinced that Gentry is a prospect who will require considerable development. Eschewing computer and statistical models, Gus is able to discern by the crack of the bat and examining his swing that Gentry has a serious problem with the curve ball. His home-run statistics are inflated by metal bats, and Gus instructs the Braves to not draft the prospect. He also convinces Flanagan and the Red Sox to pass on Gentry, but Flanagan feels betrayed when the Braves select Gentry with their first draft pick. The Braves rejected the scouting report submitted by Gus, and his career appears over.

Trouble with the Curve, however, is hardly a tragedy. Redemption comes in the form of a left-handed pitcher discovered by Mickey after Gus departs to Atlanta for a confrontation with Braves management. Mickey is packing to leave a motor lodge when she observes Rigo Sanchez (Jay Galloway), the son of the Latina woman operating the motel, playing catch with his younger brother. She grabs a catcher’s mitt and has Sanchez throw to her. Impressed with both his fastball and curve, Mickey insists that the young man and his family accompany her to Atlanta. Mickey arrives at Turner Field just in time to prevent Gus from being released by the Braves. Employing her feminine charms as well as litigation skills, Mickey convinces the Braves to give Sanchez a tryout. In a perfect example of an only-in-the-movies coincidence, Bo Gentry is taking batting practice. The first-round draft pick, however, is unable to put a bat on Sanchez’s curve ball.
In a classic happy ending, Philip Sanderson is fired rather than Gus, and Pete Klein's confidence in Gus is rewarded when the aging scout is offered a new contract by Braves management. Atlanta also extends a contract to Sanchez, who will be represented by his agent, Mickey. In fact, Mickey is considering abandoning her legal firm to pursue a career as a sports agent. To complete this all-too-convenient happy ending, romance triumphs as Mickey is reunited with Flanagan. The couple walks off arm-in-arm, while Gus grabs a bus, finally acknowledging that he should abandon driving. He cannot see the road signs anymore, but he is certainly able to judge trouble with the curve ball.

Trouble with the Curve is a sappy movie which has, nevertheless, proven entertaining to audiences interested in light romantic-comedy fare. Clint Eastwood is his crusty old self, while Amy Adams is charming as Mickey. Justin Timberlake is certainly a pleasant romantic interest for Adams, but he never touches a baseball during the film, so viewers do not have to evaluate his athletic abilities.

For baseball fans, Trouble with the Curve is primarily of interest as a rejoinder to Moneyball. For those less enamored with Bill James, Billy Beane, and technology, Trouble with the Curve suggests the primacy of the individual in the evaluation of talent. Although baseball has finally embraced many of the innovations associated with technology and the analytical tools of Bill James and his disciples, it is well within the human spirit to hope that there will always be room for a Gus Lobel in the game. It would be a shame if the empty chair in the future proves to be the professional baseball scout who has dedicated his life to baseball. Trouble with the Curve may be light fare, but it does raise some serious questions regarding the future of Major League Baseball.