

Brad Pitt, Baseball Evolve in Magnificent ‘Moneyball’

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Using sports, especially baseball, as a metaphor for life can get dicey – sometimes the symbolic pieces don’t fit universally for everything. But “Moneyball,” starring Brad Pitt, hits a grand slam with this old allegory, and educates regarding the true nature of modern large dollar sports.

As he did in “Capote,” director Bennett Miller guides a real life story as a basis for the bigger picture. Just as we saw Truman Capote get sucked into the fame machine and spit out in less than favorable ways, baseball is targeted in this based-on-truth narrative for what it has become – a cynical, cash oriented, mercenary shadow of its simple roots. The game though, as we are taught in the film, is never over, and that is where Moneyball displays its best intentions and heart.

Brad Pitt is Billy Beane, the real life general manager of the Oakland Athletics. The year is 2002, and the Oakland A’s have lost their two best players to free agency, and “only” have \$41 million for their payroll, as opposed to the New York Yankees with \$125 million. Faced with the prospect of competing in such a market and trying to avoid a lost year, Beane is willing to roll the dice, and he hires a economics major from Yale as Assistant General Manager. Peter Brand (Jonah Hill) has developed a new system for signing players, based on their statistical on-base percentages. Basically, Beane and Brand go after the undervalued players in the market with high on-base stats.



In the Field: Brad Pitt as Billy Beane in ‘Moneyball’

Photo credit: Melinda Sue Gordon for © Columbia TriStar

This of course goes against the established baseball scouts in the Oakland system, and their on-field manager, Art Howe (an understated Philip Seymour Hoffman). The crew of cast-offs that Beane and Brand assemble at first have difficulties on the field, but their statistics slowly begins to show some promise. At the same time, Beane deals with a daughter from a previous marriage, and his devotion to her factors into his work. When the risky player experiment begins to yield some fruit, the next era in baseball is launched.

The highlight is the smaller personal story of the executive, even though the subject of baseball can be vast. It focuses on Billy Beane, not as a major league "suit," but as a hot-blooded ex-baseball player, father and idea man. He is frustrated with his limitations, but at the same time he is shown reveling in the experimental and wheel-dealing nature of the GM position. Even his hiring of Peter Brand is presented as personal intuition. They've tried everything else, why not this? Even though the words "money" and "ball" are in the title, the film succeeds because it is ultimately a human story.

Brad Pitt furthers his cause with a nuanced and comprehensive performance. He controls the narrative as the other characters plays off his distracted, passionate and driven personality. There are many close-ups of his reaction to a variety of moments, both baseball and otherwise, and he subtly magnified the emotion inherently, which is a reflection of a mature and able performer. He should get some attention around awards time.

Jonah Hill also played his role exceptionally, both cagey and unassuming. He has to perpetuate a risky and non-traditional approach to America's Pastime, and he reacts exactly as expected given those challenges. He is almost positioned as a wizard in the film, stoically appearing as his alchemy takes hold. He never gets overly exuberant, even as Oakland begins to win at a record breaking pace. He is omnipresent in a way, with his belief in percentages and statistics.



On Call: Jonah Hill as Peter Brand in 'Moneyball'
Photo credit: Melinda Sue Gordon for © Columbia TriStar

When play actually occurs on the field, in comparison to the confined quarters of office hallways, locker rooms and cars, its take on a mythical proportion in the film. The humans that populate it seem smaller against the larger elements of the actual modern game, with the money, hard statistics and distance from the fans. But as the story grandly emphasizes towards the end, what we root for is the redemption of the underdog – whether a player, a risk-taking executive or a small market team trying to compete.

It's hard even characterizing this as a "baseball movie." The goal is winning games, yet victories also come outside the actual process of baseball. The film's lesson asserts that figuring out how to live is the first step towards victory, and Moneyball is triumph for that simple point of existence.

"Moneyball" opens everywhere on September 23rd. Featuring Brad Pitt, Jonah Hill, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Robin Wright, Bob Costas and Tammy Blanchard. Adapted for the screen by Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin. Directed by Bennett Miller. Rated "PG-13"



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