

## ‘Concussion’ Can’t Quite Tackle its Difficult Subject

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 25, 2015 - 6:53am

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Concussion” suffers from what I call the “Moneyball” problem – it’s got an interesting subject matter, but it doesn’t seem to know what to do with it. It doesn’t have enough faith in its own material or its audience, so it stocks up on a lot of off-the-shelf melodrama in effort to avoid digging into what makes the story interesting in the first place. It’s also a movie that chickens out at the end and seems afraid to pick a fight.

Will Smith plays Bennet Omalu, a highly educated pathologist from Africa who has more degrees than most physicians and is working as a medical examiner in Pittsburgh. Smith gives a highly mannered performance – complete with an African accent – which is a little jarring at first. But Smith seems to be working from the outside in. The character is defined first by his idiosyncrasies, such as talking to the bodies he’s performing autopsies on to try to get a sense of who they were.



Will Smith in ‘Concussion’

*Photo credit: Columbia Pictures*

Smith seems to let his accent, those idiosyncrasies, and a few nods to faith define Dr. Omalu, rather than getting at the heart of what makes him tick. His life changes forever when a Pittsburgh Steelers Hall of Famer dies and winds up in Smith's morgue. He performs an autopsy, and on nothing more than an educated hunch he orders a few more expensive tests to find out what years of blows to the head had done to the man.

Omalu's search for answers about the effects of concussions and traumatic brain injuries is the heart of the film, but at times it seems like Will Smith is remaking "Enemy Of The State" – with the NFL as the all seeing, all powerful boogeyman. He's aided by a former team doctor for the Steelers (Alec Baldwin) who is heartbroken by the sight of so many former players he treated dying so young. He decides to help Smith take on the NFL to get the word out and get a kind of shot of redemption for himself in the process.

While the NFL is the all-out villain here, designed to suppress the truth, the film itself plays a little fast and loose with the facts as well. Former Chicago Bear Dave Duerson (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje) is portrayed as a corporate stooge – who turned his back on his fellow players problems, tried to discredit the research and then faced insurmountable health problems of his own. Duerson's own family has found fault with the characterization.



Alec Baldwin and Will Smith in 'Concussion'

Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

Smith is backed up by a solid-but-uneven supporting cast, with both the best of the bunch (the great Albert Brooks) and the worst (comedian Mike O'Malley) populating the Pittsburgh morgue. The film takes several narrative roads to nowhere along the way by adding in a pointless romance with a fellow African immigrant, which features him proposing to her in a vacant lot. This neither fleshes out the character much or adds much to the story.

Writer/director Peter Landesman spends the whole movie playing up the NFL as a bad guy, while offering a few crumbs of dialogue to attest to the artistry of the game – so the final scenes in this movie seem like an epic cop out to help the NFL. A very good movie could have been made about this topic, if Landesman had the courage to actually tackle the subject matter "head on." Instead, he kind of dances around it, and then seems to lose his nerve at the end. "Concussion" should have landed a solid hit, instead it only manages a glancing blow.

*"Concussion" opens everywhere December 25th. Featuring Will Smith, Albert Brooks, Alec Baldwin, Mike O'Malley, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Arliss Howard, Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje, Paul Reiser and Luke Wilson. Written and directed by Peter Landesman. Rated "PG-13"*



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