

review**movie review****Two for the Money (2005)**

Runtime: 122 minutes. Rated 14A (Canada) for pervasive language, sexuality, and a violent act. Currently available on DVD, approx. cost CA\$24.00. Production: United States: Universal Pictures; producer: Jay Cohen; director: D.J. Caruso; starring Matthew McConaughey as Brandon Lang (hotshot sports tout), Al Pacino as Walter Abrams (owner of the tout service), and Rene Russo as Toni Morrow (Walter's wife).

Nicely Nicely:

I got the horse right here, The name is Paul Revere
 And here's a guy that says that the weather's clear
 Can do, can do, this guy says the horse can do
 If he says the horse can do, can do, can do.

Benny:

I'm pickin' Valentine, 'cause on the morning line
 A guy has got him figured at five to nine
 Has chance, has chance, this guy says the horse has chance
 If he says the horse has chance, has chance, has chance.

Rusty:

But look at Epitaph, he wins it by a half
 According to this here in the Telegraph
 "Big Threat"—"Big Threat," this guy calls the horse "Big Threat"
 If he calls the horse "Big Threat," Big Threat, Big Threat.

"Fugue for the Tinhorns," from the musical *Guys and Dolls* by Frank Loesser, 1991, 1951.

Two for the Money (2005) is not the first movie about gambling, but it is perhaps the first movie to focus exclusively on the subject of sports touts. Touts are neither part of the gambling industry, nor gamblers per se, but they exist on the margins of the gambling industry selling advice on which teams or horses have the best chance of winning. As the quotes from the 1951 musical *Guys and Dolls* reveal, touts have been around for many years, selling information on which horses, sports teams, or even lottery numbers are allegedly likely to be winners. Although gambling on sports is illegal in most US states, running a tout service for sports gambling is completely legal.

In the film *Two for the Money* Brandon Lang (Matthew McConaughey) is a star college quarterback with great potential who suffers a career-ending injury. To make ends meet while he waits, fruitlessly, for his injury to heal, he takes on a job as a telemarketer and ends up selling advice to gamblers on which football teams to bet on. He is so successful that he attracts the interest of Walter Abrams (Al Pacino), who we are told is one of the most renowned professional sports touts. Brandon moves to New York City and rapidly makes his

way up the ladder in the sports tout business. Walter Abrams encourages Brandon to change his name to John Anderson and his image into something more confident, suave, and slick.

Brandon/John's magic touch with the numbers continues for a while and he consistently picks 80% winners. Walter pushes aside other experienced handicappers in favour of Brandon/John, including one man who uses a computer to pick winners. Over the course of the movie, Brandon gradually becomes John, but in the process loses himself and his ability to pick winners. In a pivotal scene John arrogantly asks an office co-worker at random which team he likes. John writes it down and claims that it will be the winner because he has picked it as the winner. The team wins, but as in a classic tragedy, this hubris leads to a great fall the next week, when he goes from picking 80% winners to picking 80% losers. Near the end of the film, in desperation, he makes picks by flipping a coin. The stages of Brandon's career are similar to Custer's classic phases of the development of a gambling pathology (Custer & Milt, 1985), but Brandon does not himself gamble; he advises other people what to gamble on. His clients, however, follow him through his rise and fall, gaining wealth and then losing severely in the process.

Throughout the movie Walter and the other touts seem completely unaware of the concept of outcome variance and place a huge emphasis on day-to-day results and, in the final showdown, on the outcome of a specific game.

Overall, I found the movie to be entertaining and well acted. Al Pacino's over-the-top performance as Walter, the head handicapper, reminded me of his role as John Milton in *The Devil's Advocate* (Hackford, 1997). He is the boss, he lures the young naïve Brandon into his organization, he changes his lifestyle, and so forth. However, unlike John Milton, Walter is not totally evil. But Walter comes close to pure evil when he takes Brandon to a Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meeting and hands out his business card to drum up new business. Underneath his aggression, manipulation, and fast lifestyle, Walter has a vulnerable side that makes the movie an interesting character study. At the same time, however, the movie suffers from a confused love triangle between Walter, Toni Morrow (Rene Russo), and Brandon. In addition the movie follows an annoying father figure theme throughout, and juxtaposition of this theme and the love triangle hints at Freudian issues. Neither the love triangle nor the father figure theme is satisfactorily resolved.

According to an article in *The Toronto Star*, the movie is based on a true story (Arpe, 2005), but in Hollywood the truth is often stretched. How realistic is this movie? A common trait in many films about gambling is to portray unrealistic outcomes of games (Fritz & Turner, 2002). Examples are the straight flush versus ace-high full house in the final showdown in the *Cincinnati Kid* (Ransohoff & Jewison, 1965) and the incredible winning streak in *Let It Ride* (Giler & Pytka, 1989).

Two for the Money is no exception. It is difficult to win 80% of sports bets because to win a bet, the team you choose doesn't merely have to win the game, it has to beat the point spread. The point spread is set by the bookie specifically to remove the differential skill of the two teams and make the outcome of the game as close to random as possible. For example, if the Green Bay Packers football team had a good record and were favoured by 6 points, for the gambler to win the bet, the team would have to exceed the point spread. If the Packers won by only 5 points, the bet would be a loss. Picking the winner 80% of the time is unrealistic. However, the DVD features an interview with the real-life Brandon, who claims to

have actually had the very winning streak depicted in the film. It is possible that such an outcome could have occurred by chance. The problem with the movie is that this sort of success will likely encourage punters to look for the mythical tout who is always right.

The movie briefly examines the downside of gambling. It presents touts as highly predatory. This particular group of touts tries to get people to bet larger sums of money than they initially planned, which leads to wild swings of success and then failure. This aspect of the business is revealed in the film by following the career of one particular punter, Amir (Craig Veroni). Near the beginning, we watch as Brandon encourages Amir to go from \$1000 a bet to \$10,000 a bet. At the height of Brandon's success Amir is shown standing in front of a brand new European sports car. After the fall, the sobbing man asks Brandon how he can live with himself. Walter mockingly suggests to Brandon that they keep the same number, but turn it into a suicide hotline.

According to Walter, the job of the sports tout is to sell a very rare commodity—"certainty" in a world where nothing is certain. But as Walter admits, it's all smoke and mirrors because there is no certainty. However, Brandon's winning streak gives him a good reputation for picking wins, which can guarantee one thing: continued profit for the tout. As with many movies about gambling, the film mainly depicts gamblers as problem gamblers. According to Walter, people who call the handicappers for advice are already desperate to win their money back. They are already on the hook and the tout's job is to reel them in. The assumption that all gamblers are addicts is again emphasized in the special feature interview with the real Brandon.

Another flaw with the movie is that it seems to confuse sports touts with bookies. Sports touts or handicappers sell information on which teams will win. They have no financial commitment to the outcome of the game other than the hope for repeat customers. Bookies take the bets, collect from the losers, and pay off the winners. Bookies and touts do not usually work together (unless the tout is a front for the bookie). Too many winners would undermine the bookie's profit margin or force the bookie to tighten up his or her estimation of the point spread. If Walter's business is to sell information, why does he want the players to make larger bets? The audience is told that this is because his company charges a commission on the wins. The logistics of how the touts can take a commission on a bet is not stated but hinted at in one scene where we see Brandon on the phone telling Amir to send him a \$75,000 commission if he wants any more advice. However, one is left wondering why the player would not simply lie and tell Brandon he only placed a \$1000 bet.

In the context of a drama, Brandon's fall from grace is quite similar to a classic tragedy, where the hero's hubris leads to his downfall. Brandon's arrogant belief in his invincibility leads to his fall. Although both the winning and subsequent losing streaks are improbable events, all things are possible when it comes to random chance. However, sports bets are not truly random, but rather chaotically unstable. The point spread is based on the team's previous performance and the betting habits of the public. A handicapper can theoretically gain an edge if he or she finds information that is not currently being factored into the bookies' estimates of the point spread. However, if a sports tout had an 80% success rate and was selling advice to million-dollar bettors, the bookies would be forced to tighten up their estimates to protect their profit margin. Perhaps Brandon's very success led to his fall by forcing the bookies to take notice of his picks.

One film reviewer wrote that the movie gives real insight into the mind of an addict. Indeed

the movie does bring up a number of important issues about problem gambling, including the link between excessive gambling and suicide, the fact that gambling leads to losses, the notion that the gambling industry is always the real winner, the fact that gambling results are unpredictable, the notion that touts are predators who do not necessarily give accurate advice to their customers, and the idea that drug abuse and gambling can be viewed as diseases. The film takes a highly disease-oriented view of gambling. In the GA scene Walter Abrams tells everyone that he has a disease, a "lemon" in his head that makes him gamble to lose. Pathological gamblers, he tells us, are defective and "f*** things up all the time." Ordinary gamblers, we are told, gamble to win, but pathological gamblers gamble to lose. Later he tells Brandon that the moment before the dice stop dancing is the greatest high in the world. In addition, his wife Toni Morrow tells us that Walter needs to lose to convince himself that he exists. As an example of his self-destructive need to bring himself to the brink of disaster he promises on his TV sports-betting channel to guarantee the gamblers' bets and so he sets up the climax of the film. He does this even though he has just been told by Brandon that this pick was selected by the flip of a coin.

Although the film is an interesting examination of the world of sports betting, there are numerous shortcomings in its portrayal of gambling addiction. The film ignores the roles played by psychology, financial needs, a need to escape stress, wins, erroneous beliefs, experience, and game availability, and even the role that the game itself may play in the development of a gambling pathology. Instead it promotes an outdated Freudian notion that the addict wants to hurt him or herself.

Is this film promoting or discouraging gambling? The movie might discourage gambling by leading people to question the legitimacy of the information offered by touts. The first half of the movie might lead people to believe in the tout as a legitimate prognosticator of future events. However, the film portrays touts as predatory, corrupt, sleazy, selfish, and inept. Brandon's fall from success suggests that the information offered by the tout service is no better than the flip of a coin. Even computer handicappers are targeted for ridicule in the movie. The negative message, however, is again undermined by an unlikely climax. The potential harm or benefit of the film for the average gambler depends on which part of the film the viewer pays more attention to.

It might be possible to use Brandon's career in this film as a model for the fundamental uncertainty of gambling and the ever-present potential for the fall. However, the film is so filled with images of the glamour of the sports tout (e.g., a Mercedes Benz) that the harmful messages likely overwhelm any helpful message.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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