

# Love, sports are genuine here

By Samuel McKewon  
Senior editor

Though it will probably get shoved under the rug, Gina Prince-Bythewood's "Love and Basketball" is the best writing/directing debut in years, a movie so nuanced and believable that it could serve as semi-documentary to women's sports.

This movie has every opportunity to take wrong steps in both its plotting and presentation and staves most of them off. The theatrics littering most sports movies have no role here.

Consider that "Love and Basketball" has one scene that shows a girl (Sanaa Latham) benched for taunts during a basketball game. She sits the rest of the game.

We do not see the game, only her, as scrub after scrub file past to enter the game. And the game ends. It does not matter to the girl. In most movies, the star gets one last shot to redeem herself in the game. Not here. She does, in fact, get a chance at redemption, but in a different context.

It's the quintessential portrait of an athlete who cares more for playing than sitting and winning. Yes, this is how it works.

Prince-Bythewood, who junked basketball for track at the University of California at Los Angeles, cuts right past the public relations jargon of the team-first mentality to the reality: The game is an athlete's oxygen. Winning is nice, but the competition is more.

It's only one plank of the script. The other involves a 13-year romance of two affluent, black basketball players in Los Angeles. It's fairly believable until the final moments, when it slightly descends into fairy tale. But no matter; by then, we get the point of the movie: There's the game, and there's everything else, and they have to be on equal footing, eventually. For much of the movie, they are not.

Especially for Monica, who guarantees she'll be the first girl to play in the NBA. When we meet her, she's 11 and a new neighbor to Quincy, Quincy's the son of a NBA player and has hoop dreams of his own. Quincy's good, but so is Monica, and when she doesn't back down from his prowess, he smacks her with an elbow that leaves a scar that never fades.

Quincy asks Monica to be his girl the next day. He wants her to ride on the handlebars of his bike. She wants to ride her own. And so they fight, the first of many.

Cut to seven years later, in the "second quarter" as the movie calls it. Monica (Latham) and Quincy (Omar Epps) are high school stars; not together, but friends. Quincy's guaranteed a scholarship. Monica has to work for it, along with the respect of her homemaking mother (Alfre Woodard), who always found her daughter a bit strange for her taste in hobbies.

It's here that Latham, who has smaller roles in "The Best Man" and "The Wood," begins to establish a vivid persona of a young woman unsure of everything but her game. Walking in heels, big problem. Another telling scene occurs at the prom when it appears evident she has never crossed her legs in a dress or even worn a dress before.

But it's also when Quincy, on a separate date, finally notices his next-door neighbor as something more than a playmate. A scene of their first sexual encounter follows, as Monica's insecurities about her body are in full bloom.

The third and fourth quarters deal

with their histories after high school. They come together, stray apart and eventually have to decide at the end of the movie whether they ought to be together, while Monica must choose between the game and the rest of her life. A subplot includes the infidelities of Quincy's father (Dennis Haysbert), who enjoyed the life of a professional beyond his marital vows.

But the movie's strength lies in the details of these quarters and Latham's characterization of Monica. It's a feminist-slanted movie. Monica accurately points out men are rewarded for the same passionate behavior women are punished for.

But Latham doesn't paint the portrait of a victim but one who discovers, over time, what the game is worth when nobody's watching.

She's sullen, angry and self-absorbed by nature. She thinks, as one character remarks, "that the world still revolves around your ass." But eminently, Monica is likable. Part of good acting is making the audience want what the character wants. Latham gets to that place. That she can't always get out of the way of her faults makes it easier to root for her.

These characters are what good scripts are made of - not persons who had the cards stacked against from the start or who ooze such goodness that it's impossible to identify with

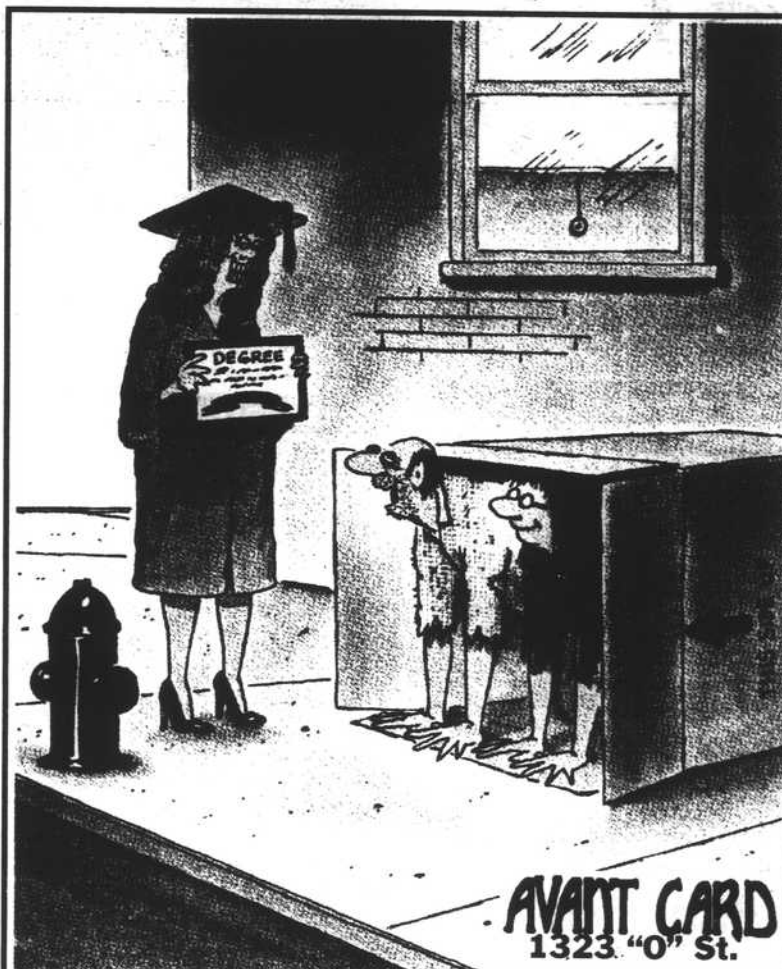
## REVIEW Love and Basketball

**STARS:** Sanaa Latham, Omar Epps  
**DIRECTOR:** Gina Prince-Bythewood  
**RATING:** PG - 13 (language)  
**GRADE:** A  
**FIVE WORDS:** Dead-on portrait of athletes.

them. Seeing another movie of different circumstances this weekend, "Where The Heart Is," I felt as if I were watching Natalie Portman's perfect character walk up a mountain of ridiculous odds, none of which were her fault. Not so with Monica, who constructs some of the obstacles on her own.

But she learns to sidestep them and even how to avoid creating them in the first place. "Love and Basketball" is first and foremost about its title, but it has a secondary focus on demons and facing up to them, even early in life.

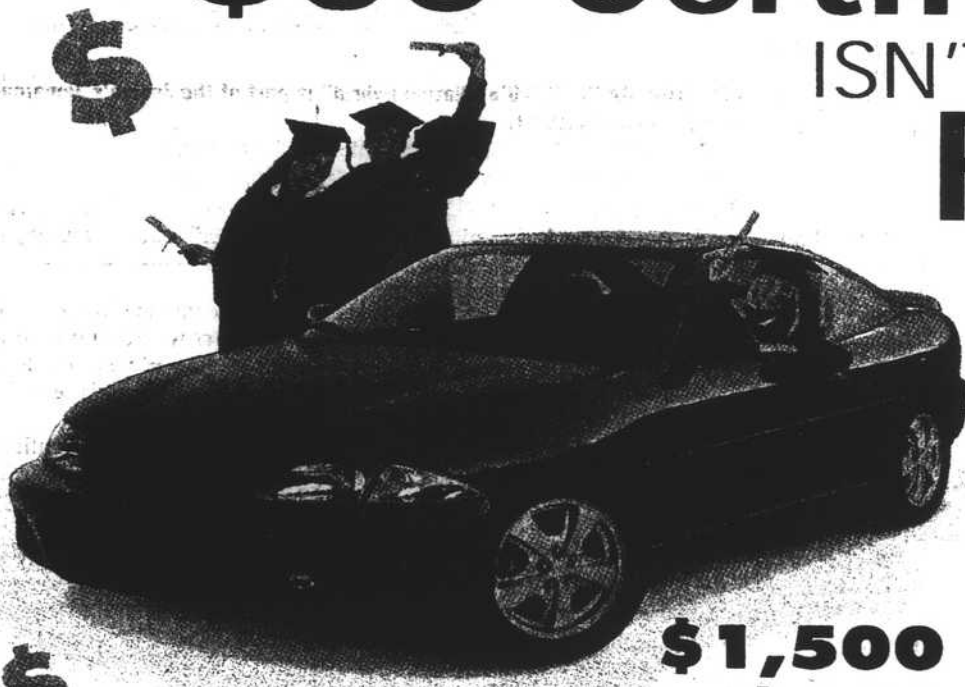
Prince-Bythewood constructs a woman on the first part of that life-long journey. And after the movie ends, we don't expect she will continue to battle away. That reality makes this one of the best movies of the year.



"Congratulations, Sweetheart...you now owe your mother and me \$550,000!"

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