Sports closer to art than science

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I won't be going to see "Moneyball." The movie celebrates the plague ruining sports: sabermetrics.

That is not intended as a shot at Bill James, Billy Beane or Michael Lewis.

James (the inventor of sabermetrics) and Beane (the most adept user of sabermetrics) are baseball visionaries worthy of glorification. Michael Lewis (the author of the book "Moneyball" that celebrated Beane's use of sabermetrics) is one of the most important writers of this era.

Wait. Hell, maybe it is a dis — an unintended one — of James, Beane and Lewis.

They unwittingly conspired to remove much of the magic and mystery from baseball. They reduced the game to a statistical bore. It's no longer enough to be down with OBP (on-base percentage). To talk the game, you now must understand OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging), VORP (value over replacement player), BABIP (batting average on balls in play) and on and on.

There's a stat for nearly every action in baseball. Little is left to the imagination. Sports were never intended to be a computer program, stripped to cold, hard, indisputable, statistical facts. Sports — particularly for fans — are not science. Sports, like art, are supposed to be interpreted.

It's difficult to interpret baseball these days. The stat geeks won't let you argue. They quote sabermetrics and end all discussion. Is so-and-so a Hall

of Famer? The sabermeticians will punch in the numbers and give you, in their mind, a definitive answer.

It's boring. It's ruining sports.

Sabermetrics or analytics are overrunning football, too. ESPN is pushing a new statistical way of analyzing NFL quarterbacks, Total Quarterback Rating.

The nerds are winning. They're stealing the game from those of us who enjoy examining the gray areas of sports. We're about 10 years away from a computer program that will write stats-based opinion pieces on sports.

Last season, the basketball analytics crowd was convinced that LeBron James and Dwight Howard deserved the MVP over Derrick Rose. The fact that Howard's whiny, immature crybaby-ass was even in the discussion tells you all you need to know about analyzing the game solely on statistics. The Orlando Magic were a joke last season in part because of the immature environment fostered by Howard.

As for James vs. Rose? Well, James devoured Rose in the Eastern Conference Finals. Rose's defenders — most notably ESPN's Ric Bucher — argued that Rose's inferior supporting cast is what allowed the Heat and James to get the best of Rose and the Bulls. And by the time James disappeared in the NBA Finals, it was easy to see the merit of Bucher's point.

It doesn't really matter who deserved the NBA's MVP award. What matters is that there was a fun, yearlong debate. As much as we enjoy watching the competition on the field or court, we take equal pleasure in interpreting and debating what we just saw.

Sabermetrics/analytics undermines the debate. They try to interject absolutes.

No one will ever convince me that John Elway isn't the greatest quarterback/football player in NFL history. I know what I saw. I don't care that Joe Montana won more Super Bowls. I don't care that Dan Marino threw for more yards. I don't care that Peyton Manning's completion percentage is eight points higher.

I can and have argued credibly and passionately that Elway is the best QB and player in the history of the league. You are free to disagree. I invite you to disagree. I'd love to refute your erroneous position. Just bring more than stats to the table.

The games are about more than stats.

That's what bothers me about this whole era of sports. In my lifetime, there have been two innovations that have significantly influenced sports fans: 1. fantasy leagues; 2. sabermetrics/analytics.

Again, the stat geeks are winning. Our perception of athletes and their value are primarily being dictated by statistics. Peyton Manning is the king of fantasy football; therefore, he is the king of real football. LeBron James is the king of fantasy basketball; therefore, he is the king of real basketball.

Is it a coincidence that James and Manning have both struggled in postseason play?

I don't know the answer. But I want to discuss and debate it. And I don't want to do it with people who simply want to quote stats. The answers and the questions that make sports special, unique, our collective national pastime, can't be found on a stat sheet. They're in our imaginations and our

individual interpretation of what we witness.

When the "Moneyball" movie hysteria subsides, I hope the sabermeticians STFU.