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Execution is DOWN in the NBA. The overall quality of play has been diluted (due to many factors). This is a major reason why the San Antonio Spurs won it all. They adapted to today’s *quantitative* style of play (three is greater than two) while still keeping the *qualitative* (strong fundamentals) of past eras. I feel that the following three steps can make a huge difference in wins and losses…..

* Slightly reduce team over-reliance on the three-point shot, a byproduct of front office over-reliance on analytics.
* Improve quality, positioning, and mentality of screeners.
* Coach the emotional aspect of the game *(separate document)*

Gregg Popovich (on 3-pt shot today): **“I hate it, but you gotta use it…I feel like it’s cheating**.” In my opinion, the three-point shot is a weapon - it should not be your ‘bread n butter’, much like analytics research. It is merely a piece of the overall puzzle to success.

Professional basketball today features more one-dimensional players (less all-around skilled players) than ever before. I fear this is tied to a analytics, which is all about filling in specific quantitative boxes. Just as front offices focus on filling in these ‘boxes’, players develop to just do one thing really well to fill such specific criteria. We scouts say it all the time: “a player must do one thing really well, something a coach can bank on.” While scouting is often evaluating that one great skill that can help a team down the road, the overall quality of basketball has gone down. The Spurs have won at such a high clip in recent years because ‘their sum is greater than the individual parts’. This is due to their all-around skilled players. The game is organic, and this interchangeability is a major strength.

The use of analytics, as well as three-point field goal attempts, is increasing every year. It poses a real ‘Chicken or the Egg?’ question. If history has shown us one thing, it’s that BOTH of these will inevitably come down one day. The teams that can anticipate this trend and stay ahead of the curve may find themselves on top of the standings.

Analysis of 3-pt shot usage today vs past eras (this trend is not as efficient nor will be as long-lived as many think). Here is a look at team usage of the three-point line in five-year increments since its inception (all 82-game seasons).

1980 - (22 teams) team avg: 227, making 64 (28%) – Fewest: Hawks (75), making 13, won Central Division at (50-32 record) - SD Clippers made the most (177) as they missed the playoffs (35-47 record) – Despite this, teams averaged 109.3 point per game. Fans were happy with the on-the-court product, even without the high volume of long-range shots. Turnovers: 1553; Personal Fouls: 1998.

1985 - (23 teams) team avg: 257, making 73 (28.2%) – Fewest: Pacers (155), missing playoffs (22-60 record). Bulls took 161, made playoffs (38-44 record). Teams averaged 110.8 ppg. Turnovers: 1465; Personal Fouls: 2045.

1990 - (27 teams) team avg: 541, making 179 (33.1%) – Fewest: Bullets (197) - only team under 200, making 37, missing playoffs at 31-51. Most: 851, making 346, made playoffs (42-40). Scoring: 107 ppg. Turnovers: 1317; Personal Fouls: 1907.

1995 - (27 teams) team avg: 1255, making 450 (35.9%) – Fewest: Jazz (801), made playoffs (60-22) – Most: Rockets (1757), making playoffs (47-35). Scoring: 101.4 ppg – Turnovers: 1308; Personal Fouls: 1924.

2000 - (29 teams) team avg: 1125, making 397 (35.3%) – Fewest: 76ers (643), made playoffs (49-33) ¬- Most: Kings (1656), made playoffs (44-38) - Scoring: 97.5 ppg – Turnovers: 1269; Personal Fouls: 1911 (both were improvements).

2005: (30 teams) team avg: 1292, making 459 (35.6%) – Fewest: Clippers (669), missed playoffs (37-45) – Most: Suns (2026), won division & made playoffs (62-20) DANTONI. Scoring 97.2 ppg – Turnovers: 1189, Personal Fouls: 1856 (continued improvement).

2010: (30 teams) team avg: 1487, making 527 (35.5%) - Fewest: Grizzlies (1020), missed playoffs (40-42) - Most: Magic (2241), won division, made playoffs, (59-23) – Scoring: 100.4 / Turnovers: 1166, Personal Fouls: 1710 (continued improvement).

2015: Could these trends revert next season? These three-point numbers have to come back down eventually…..

**What we see here is that, as the three-point shot became more and more common in offensive game plans, the overall quality of play did not improve. Also, teams that did not utilize the long-range shot as much as the league average did not fair any worse than those that embraced the trend. In the NBA’s lowest scoring period of the modern era, the late 1990s, teams that shot the three-point shot in an attempt to ‘loosen up the defense’ were no more/less successful overall. Even as the game became lessphysical and more up-tempo in the 2000s, the overall volume of turnovers and personal fouls (obvious signs of poor play) increased.**

A SIGN OF THE TIMES

In the 2013-14 season, the Minnesota Timberwolves led the NBA in both free throws taken and also in fewest free throws allowed. They also dominated opponents in rebounding, ranking 6th in the entire league. Decades ago, these statistics would have likely resulted in one of the better teams in the league and a serious championship contender. However, in today’s smallish and perimeter-happy NBA, the Timberwolves finished with a losing record (40-42) and did not even qualify for the postseason. Poor three-point shooting (34.1% - ranking 26th) and further inconsistent play on offense spelled doom for the Timberwolves in an era where long-range shooting has become crucial to success.

The recent back-to-back champion Miami Heat have been one of the worst rebounding teams in recent years (ranking LAST in total rebs/gm in 2013-14). Winning a championship despite this glaring weakness would have been unthinkable in the 1980s or 1990s. What makes this ironic is that current Heat President Pat Riley is famous for the phrase “no rebounds, no rings”, which he coined as head coach of the Los Angeles Lakers in the late 1980s. Miami’s small lineup which forced turnovers would have likely been looked at as a cheap gimmick back in those days, (despite the presence of superstar LeBron James) much as Don Nelson’s teams in Dallas and Golden State were. Today, spreading the floor and getting out in transition isn’t a way of desperately trying to ‘counter’ a strong rebounding and low-post scoring team; it is now a way of constructing a championship game plan. Times have drastically changed.

In 2013-14, the NBA set a record as teams averaged 21.5 three-point field goal attempts per game. This was the most in our league’s history. Some view this as a necessary counter to the increased athleticism in the league – there is a need to increase spacing on offense. However, this stat is alarming not only because it has no precedence but also because many of these league-high three-point shot attempts are low percentage shots. The overall efficiency of NBA offenses, even teams in the NBA playoffs, is lower than those of years’ past.

IT’S BASKETBALL NOT SKEEBALL

‘Money ball’ is a phrase created a decade ago to describe an analytics-driven front office strategy in professional baseball. When discussing this similar trend in professional basketball, a game where different points are assigned depending on where you are standing on the court, I have created another phrase: ‘Skeeball’. This name is derived from a game played by children at arcades where you roll a ball into predetermined holes of varying point values. You have to not only try and get the ball into a hole (just as in basketball) but also strategically decide which holes to shoot for (all of differing point value). Today’s growing front office trend of determining offensive efficiency by strictly numeric means, with an emphasis on shots that earn three points rather than two, is polarizing what has always been an organic game.

**I think ‘analytics’ is a valuable tool to evaluate one’s own team and what it does well/poorly. Also, it is a strong weapon when used to anticipate the trends of your opponents in preparation for a game or a playoff series. However, building a roster and style of play using primarily analytics as your method? I think this is the WRONG way to go…**

Some franchises have embraced the gameplan of attempting primarily either lay-ups or three-point attempts. Any long-range two-point field goals, no matter who the shooter is nor how open and in rhythm he is, are frowned upon. This is a glaring example of how judging a game by the numbers (quantitatively) is somewhat blind without the actual visual assessment (qualitative). The game is not about plotting numbers on a diagram and hitting ‘Enter’. While this numeric research does have its benefits, there should be more of an understanding on why things happened during the flow of a game and not just reviewing what happened on paper after the fact and punching in numbers to improve future results.

In 2013-14, the Indiana Pacers (56-26) and the Memphis Grizzlies (50-32) both played a style most similar to that of the 1980s and 1990s. They featured traditional post players (true centers and power forwards who do NOT shoot three-point shots) and also an offensive strategy that featured attacking teams from the inside-out (by feeding the mid- to low-post). In this season, Indiana shot 1542 three-point field goals (ranking 25th) while their opponents shot 1561 (5th lowest for opponents in the league). Memphis, shot only 1147 three-point shots (LAST in the league). They allowed 1731 (ranking relatively middle of the pack at 11th). These two teams did not struggle playing a style more suited to past eras of NBA basketball, yet still played solid defense against the three-point shot (a preferred weapon of the rest of the league).

This proves that playing a more traditional, ball-controlling, and halfcourt offense (one where three-point field goals are not a priority) can thrive even in today’s NBA. According to this data, it is reasonable to assume that this trend of voluminous three-point shooting and high screen-and-roll play is likely to decrease in the near future. Logically, the 21.5 3pt FG attempts in 2013-14 (a league record) cannot continue to increase forever - what comes up must come down. This number will eventually decrease. The teams that stay ahead of this trend may have the inside track to future success in an uncharted NBA landscape.

The following are recent examples of how the over-reliance on three-point shooting is not only hurting the overall quality of play but also lowering the efficiency of teams.

2014 NBA Playoffs - 1st round - Game 4 - Toronto Raptors at Brooklyn Nets - 1st play of 2nd quarter. Nets forward Mirza Teletovic sets ball screen for Deron Williams and pops out to wing. Teletovic, so concerned with standing behind the three-point line, catches the ball off balance (leaning forward) and heaves bad shot up (resulting in air ball). Had the line not been an issue, he would have caught the ball, taken a dribble to gain his balance, and shot a higher percentage shot. This is an example of a low-percentage shot resulting from the infatuation with getting THREE points rather than TWO. This SKEEBALL idea of a long two-point field goals being inefficient is lowering quality of play. This particular example happens numerous times during an NBA game these days.

2014 NBA Playoffs – 1st round – Game 1 – Portland Trail Blazers at Houston Rockets – 1st half. The Rockets led by a score of 49-48 at halftime despite shooting ZERO Free Throws in the first half. Portland, meanwhile, shot 17 FTs (making 13) and also had only TWO turnovers. 10-15 years ago, a team that shot so many more free throws and took care of the ball would have led by double digits. Houston’s three-point shooting in the half (5/15) allowed them to stay close as the Blazers shot only 1/12. The four fundamental keys to winning in basketball are 1) FIELD GOAL PERCENTAGE; 2) FREE THROW MADE/ATTEMPTED; 3) LIMITING TURNOVERS; and 4) REBOUNDING. With the last two also being relatively even in that first half, the fact that this playoff game was close at halftime speaks volumes to what the NBA game has become. In short, it is turning away from its fundamentals and become a gimmicky endeavor.

Execution is DOWN in the NBA

The Spurs were far from the most talented team in the NBA the past few years. However, they executed their gameplan to near perfection – setting screens the way they should be set, the way they *used to be* set in the pros. Years ago, MOST playoff teams executed as well as the Spurs do. Today, however, they are one of the exceptions.

The increased amount of on-ball screens today is lowering the quality of screens being set. Bigmen often hop through, not even stopping to get set. Also, hands are being used more frequently, resulting in more of a push-off than a roll-off of screens.

The most effective screens are when the screener has his back to the basket. This allows the player coming off the screen (with ball or even without) to be moving directly towards the basket, putting more pressure on the defense. The Spurs lead the league in screens being set in this manner, even high screen-n-roll plays. ‘Bigs’ can still pop-out or roll inside despite facing away from the basket. It’s about discipline and footwork, not speed.

Too many teams use what I call a TOOTHPICK N’ POP. Getting wide while setting a screen does help, but girth just can’t be taught. The wider a player is the better the screen he will set. This is why I thought the Clippers’ acquisition of Glen ‘Big Baby’ Davis was huge last season. Chris Paul, who already is a wizard in negotiating off of high screens, would potentially have an even wider window to work with. Unfortunately, Glen’s conditioning and perimeter shooting were not where they needed to be and Doc Rivers often went in another direction.

COACHING EMOTIONS – {see separate document}