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The Formation of the Modern NBA From Sports Analytics Research

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Professor Azfar and Professor Weinberg

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the modern NBA as a sports institution and entertainment business that has become increasingly entrenched in sports analytics as a means to understand and improve the game of basketball. It examines broader questions of race, spectacle and media in American history.

You or I may play a game of basketball. So does LeBron James. But Lebron James also plays a sport, a game that is played out as part of a multinational entertainment business composed of owners, players, media observers and fans. Basketball might have begun as just a game, but, like many other games, has become a modern day hydra of interests.

The first thirteen rules of basketball were put on paper in 1892 in a Massachusetts gymnasium by James Naismith. Whether someone had thrown a ball into a basket prior to this is up for debate, but the game as we know it — played on driveways, concrete or hardwood floors — came into being when Naismith was tasked with developing a game for Christian male youths to express themselves physically and cultivate themselves morally; namely, when a set of boundaries and rules were established on paper. This early version was far different from the televised NBA and WNBA finals that occurred in October 2020 for a litany of reasons ranging from technological advancement to creativity in play style. Since its formalization into these two professional institutions, the actual game of basketball has evolved in its style, method, audience, players; the list goes on. It wasn't until the 1930's that players jumped when shooting, the 1950's when the league was desegregated and 1996 when the WNBA was founded. In 1954 the NBA was 5% black, 95% white. Today the league is about 75% black, 23% white and 2% latino. The difference between any old game of basketball and the sport is how it is played.

It is hard to imagine a game having such depth, which is why it is important to differentiate basketball played at the professional and amateur levels. A game is defined as a form of competitive play involving a set of rules. But a sport is "an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for

entertainment."[1] A pick-up basketball game could be considered a form of entertainment for those watching. However, as sociology professor Francisco Vieyra points out in his study of pick-up basketball culture in New York City, the organized sport of basketball is focused around a "connection to larger institutions, abidance to written, uniform and externally-enforced rules, a formal system of coaching, and an overwhelming amount of matches played indoors."[2] He notes that in common basketball literature, pick-up basketball is often considered to be lacking in these categories, which results in the common trope of understanding that "institutional black players are those who are successfully decent, and pickup basketball players are those whose street ethic leads to conflict, drugs and difficulty."[3] An example of this stance in media coverage of the NBA can be found in an article written by Zach Lowe, one of the premier modern basketball sports journalists. Speaking on the growing amount of 3-point shots as a result of analytic driven strategy making, Lowe wrote, "The league does not want NBA basketball to look like a pickup game, and it is concerned that games with, say 70 combined 3-point attempts would take on a ragged, me-first open gym game."[4] This is but one of many examples of how the *organized* nature of NBA basketball adds another dimension of unspoken rules and difference to the game of basketball.

Keeping this academically imposed racial construct on pick-up players, primarily black players of how the game *should be and is* played will be crucial in understanding the developments of modern institutional basketball and its construction of race relations in America.

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[1] *The New Oxford American Dictionary,* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Apple Computer Application.
[2] Francisco Vieyra, "Pickup Basketball in the Production of Black Community," *Qualitative Sociology* 39 (2012): 102-103, doi: 10.1007/s11133-016-9324-9.
[3] Ibid, 103.
[4] Zach Lowe, "Life Beyond the Arc," *Grantland,* December 17th, 2013, https://grantland.com/features/the-reliance-3-pointer-whether-not-hurting-nba/.

There are two frameworks that I would like to explore in this essay in order to pick apart the role of analytics in the NBA, and the broader notions of sport, bodies and race as exemplified through a telescopic lens trained on NBA basketball. David Rowe, in his overview of the modern development of the sports/media complex, describes the process of 'sportization". "The 'sportization' of physical pastimes could be construed as a 'civilizing process' that helped diffuse violence, promote order and infuse sport with symbolic values of collective identity, structured competitiveness, and status acquisition."[5] The notion of civilized versus non civilized often plays into racial discriminatory discourse, and Rowe points out how this discourse can be prevalent in sports, in a manner similar to what Vieyra sees in the contrast between pick-up basketball and professional, the coding of values onto what are also simple physical actions like a jump-shot or a bounce pass.

The second frame I would like to place around this one is Todd Boyd's statement in his book *Young, Black, Rich and Famous: the Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture,* on the place of Black culture within the entertainment industry — an undeniable aspect of the NBA's existence in the modern world. "Black culture has always been positioned between the poles of fear and entertainment in its relationship to the White mainstream."[6] This polar relationship is especially important if we view the sportization process as the elaborate balancer of the game of basketball that allows it to be a viable NBA product. As this essay proceeds, we will see concretely how many black players are forced to exist between these two poles, as entertainment icons for the NBA organization, and subject to

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[5] David Rowe, "The Sports/Media Complex: Formation, Flowering, and Future," in *A Companion to Sport,* ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 62, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[6] Todd Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich and Famous: the Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 14, https://archive.org/details/youngblackrichfa00boyd.

media scrutiny and fear of aspects of their identity which contrast with the ideals of entertainment. The line they are forced to walk is the line of being a professional sports player, rather than simply a person who plays the game of basketball.

Furthering the aspects of organized, institutional sport put forth by Vieyra and Rowe, sports historian Allan Guttman posits that "the emergence of modern sports represents the slow development of an empirical, experimental, mathematical worldview."[7] Sport, as opposed to a game, takes on a layer composed of the science of management. And so I now have to rethink my original opening lines. Naismith invented basketball with the purposes of managing and educating his players to be men, not just basketball players. His goal was not simply to create a game, but to create a sport. Professor Santiago Colás writes on the need to study basketball as "a transnational corporate enterprise [rather] than as a game to be played, let alone as a form of art."[8] This is not to deny its existence as the latter, but more so to emphasize how its corporate identity complicates the style and relevance of the sport today.

Two recent development in the modern NBA has been the increased spending and research done in sports analytics. In a keynote speech at the 2017 Wharton People Analytics Conference, acting NBA commissioner, a role akin to a CEO of the league, Adam Silver noted that analytics is "central to scouting, playing time, biometrics, everything [basketball] is now tracked in terms of our players, not just during games but during practice… Every movement of every player is being tracked and anything they do that might be either spectacular or embracing

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[7] Douglas Booth, "Constructing Knowledge: Histories of Modern Sport" in *A Companion to Sport,* ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 25, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[8] Yago Colás, "What We Mean When We Say 'Play the Right Way': Strategic Fundamentals, Morality and Race in the Culture of Basketball," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 45, (2012): 121, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43150848.

is being tracked."[9] Analytics are becoming an important influencer in the NBA on all levels,

primarily with the purposes of maximizing financial efficiency in conjunction with playing

efficiency to guide professional teams towards two coinciding ultimate goals — winning an

NBA championship and yielding a profit. It is not just the NBA either; the analytics movement

has taken root across the American sports spectrum. Analytics has come to represent a necessary

roadmap for teams to enhance their front office, coaching and player abilities, while also

providing a cash crop of data to be disseminated amongst the sports media and fanbases to

promote interest and discussion around the game. While sports analytics are often treated as a

technologically modern development credited as a means of breaking through and radically

shifting how basketball is played, analytic sports research can actually be seen as the

continuation of the long-standing practice of sportization in basketball history: creating

spectacle, establishing institutional top-down control over the game and defining the unspoken

rule of what it takes "to win."

The NBA is in the business of entertainment, meaning it seeks to provide a spectacle for

its fans first and foremost. As historian Todd Boyd writes, "Basketball is revealed to be a sport

more akin to entertainment. The cult of the superstar is already embedded in the game's

possibilities… it is a celebrity centered entertainment venue."[10] This becomes immediately

apparent in the analytics world when we look at a panel held in 2018 during the annual *MIT

Sports Sloan Analytics Conference (SSAC),* founded in 2006, titled: "Basketball Analytics:

Hunting for Unicorns." A unicorn is a player of unique talent unlike anyone seen before, i.e. a

superstar. In this paper I hope to expand on pre-existing historical analysis of the NBA to show

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[9] Wharton People Analytics Conference, "Keynote Conversation with Adam Silver and Dan
Pink," May 15, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUSFAYslACQ&feature=emb_title.
[10] Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich and Famous,* 28.

how the analytic movement is a means of using what is often deemed as objective knowledge to reify the NBA as a place where the sport of basketball is played out, more than simply a game. I will seek to look at analytics from a variety of perspectives to investigate its purpose, shortcomings, and what it reflects about being a professional basketball player in America.

I will first begin with an overview of NBA and sports analytics history. The NBA was officially founded in 1949, prior to which professional basketball had mainly been a collegiate sport. Since its creation as a professional league, in many ways, according to sports historians, the league has become reflective of American race relations in a snow-globe atmosphere, meaning within the boundaries of the rules of the game. When David Stern took over in the 1980's as NBA commissioner, the league was at a low in profit and viewership, 80% black, and was perceived by popular media and sponsors, in a racist fashion, as a league of overpaid drug addicts. In an interview in *Lindy's Pro Basketball* magazine, Stern was quoted as saying, "sponsors were flocking out of the NBA because it was perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug sniffing black guys."[11] In a Reagan Era type response, Stern imposed a new drug policy as well as began aggressively marketing a colorblind ideology. He focused on the perception of blackness within the league, saying in the same interview, "It was our conviction that if everything else went right, race would not be an abiding issue to NBA fans, at least not as long as it was handled correctly."[12] The mid-1980's was a massive period of development for the league. Stern negotiated lucrative cable TV contracts that skyrocketed the financial standing of the league, and resolved anti-trust lawsuits which resulted in the creation of the regular NBA offseason cycle of free agency. Prior to free agency, players were often at the whim of their team or more specifically, the team's owner. Free agency allowed the players a greater degree of

[11] Gitanjali Maharaj, "Talking Trash: Late Capitalism, Black (Re)Productivity, and Professional Basketball," *Social Text* 50 (1997): 101, doi: 10.1080/714001660.
[12] Ibid, 101.

autonomy in their decisions, which drove up player salaries as teams competed for free agent talent, but in turn, increased the desire for teams to scrutinize and ensure their investments would pay off with success in the league. By the late 80's NBA players were the highest paid across all American sports, as well as the most marketed. However, along with this rise in monetary power and mass marketing, came the reflexive white mainstream response of fear as identified by Boyd.

David Stern recognized this potential loss of viewership and focused the league on rehabilitating its image in order to acquire lucrative television and media contracts. He began to market players as role models and upstanding members of society. According to Majaraj, the NBA became contingent on, "the production of professional basketball as an ideological site for the recuperation of black masculinity and black economic productivity under postindustrial conditions," in order to salvage its image. And that, "underpinning the recent success of the NBA: the recuperation of socially abject bodies and the inner city as commodities and objects of desire."[13] He bases this on the study of the Moynihan Report and its creation of a linked association between " the street" and black lawlessness. Maharaj studied the marketing of basketball by sports brands associated with the NBA who sold basketball as being from "the street", an ironic message considering it is also paradoxically upheld as coming from inside a YMCA gym in 1891. This brief overview of race relations and monetary interests in the league will allow us to understand the power that analytics holds in the league in NBA myth-making and maintenance of balance in its perception between entertainment and fear.

The increase of black men in the NBA, has brought positive and negative changes for the black players in the league, as well messages conveyed to American fan-base communities across the board. Todd Boyd writes, "Basketball is one of the only places in society where Blackness was the norm and Black people were in the majority. Therefore basketball, by the

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[13] Maharaj, 99.

mid-90's became a site where race and class distinctions were quite prevalent and ultimately

functioned very differently than they did anywhere else."[14] On the one hand, basketball has

become an opportunity for many black men to advance themselves and their families financially,

in many cases, discussed by various players as, literally saving the lives of their individual

families. There are multitudes of success stories that have become a part of the NBA narrative

surrounding blackness. Kendrick Lamar's song *Black Boy Fly* is about the inspiration he got

from watching a fellow Compton resident Arron Afflalo making the NBA and achieve success

under difficult circumstances. Or in the recent NBA Finals Miami Heat star Jimmy Butler was

profiled about it his going up homeless but then "finding basketball." On the other hand, as the

Journal of Blacks in Higher Education points out, professional basketball has in a sense created a

false promise for many young black males, being pitched as a viable career path, when the

chances of actually making the league are quite slim.[15] We can see this tense conflict in the

league's history, sparked by, as I pointed out earlier, the differences between basketball being

just a game for personal entertainment versus a heavily invested in sport to entertain others.

Technological advancements have also contributed to this "sportification" of the game,

particularly the formation of superstardom. They have gone hand-in-hand with the

transformation of basketball into an institutionalized, monetized, global sport. The radio allowed

the dissemination of live sport, and TV brought it into the folds of the entertainment industry.

"The amplificatory benefits of repeated slow-motion replays and analysis of exceptional plays in

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[14] Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich and Famous,* 135.
[15] The JBHE Foundation, "The False Promise of Basketball as Young Blacks' Best Route out of the Inner City," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 51 (2006): 16, http://www.jstor.org.proxy.swarthmore.edu/stable/25073409.

which Michael Jordan was involved,"[16] were key contributors to the NBA's ability to successfully market an image of their star player. Since the rise of the superstardom in basketball, the league has become an intense technologically mediated product to be disseminated across the globe. In a 2014 SSAC conversation between Adam Silver and Malcolm Gladwell, Silver was asked about the recent falling television ratings of the NBA, to which he responded that the league might have falling ratings, but has one of the biggest social media presences of any sport. Silver described the NBA as "the sport of the 21st century," saying, "the NBA is readymade for social media."[17] Much of this social media footprint is driven by clip-able moments of intense action, public access to players and locker rooms, and a massive quantity of statistics made available for public discussion. "These are the statistics fans grew up following when they were kids…A lot of it [fan attention] comes through access, having cameras in the locker room, data that draws people in, gambling,"[18] said Silver. He outlines how the statistics are meaningful to fans because of the access to the players that they provide. Players are deemed to be relatable and controllable in statistical form. The scientific capabilities of mathematical analysis have been a crucial technological advancement that has served to form the dominant culture of basketball consumership.

Sports analytics have been one way to separate the game played as a spectacle from the game played in someone's backyard. As Vieyra pointed out, scorekeeping falls under the organizational makeup of the institution. In a pick-up game the same statistics and moments are

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[16] Barry Smart, "Global Sporting Icons: Consuming Signs of Economic and Cultural Transformation" in *A Companion to Sport,* ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 521, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[17] MIT Sloan Sports Analytic Conference, "Commissioner's Perspective with Adam Silver and Malcolm Gladwell," March 11, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oH11hvq7uDU&t=1s&ab_channel=42Analytics.
[18] SSAC, "Commissioner's Perspective."

played out but not recorded to be studied. Basketball analytics represents a new stage in technological capacity for monitoring and observing the game of basketball. Monitoring that serves to simultaneously, protect owner investment, supposedly improve player intelligence and generate media narratives for fan consumption. As of 2012, sports analytics investments across American sports have been estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars, a number which has only grown since then. If Naismith's 13 rules are the mythic text of basketball, then Michael Lewis' book *Moneyball* is the sport analytics version for the discipline — telling the tale of the Oakland Athletics baseball team's innovative use of analytics to craft a winning baseball team despite being held back by a small market, minimally perceived talent, and a small budget. The analytics boom has since taken a hold of the NBA. In fact, 1 in 3 NBA owners can trace their fortune to the tech industry, and multiple owners have investments in Sportradar US, a data distributing firm that is partnered with FanDuel, one of the fastest growing fantasy sports betting companies.[19] During the 2009-10 season, SPORTSVU introduced a new catwalk camera system that analyzes the movement of each game, and records an approximate 800,000 data points per game.[20] Teams are now investing in biometric analysis and wearables, a means of tracking data ranging from sleep schedule to max heart rates during practices. Dallas Mavericks Mark Cuban is a major proponent of wearables and other health monitoring analysis, stating, "I think the smartest thing we do for health from a data perspective is take ongoing assessments and even blood tests so we have a baseline for each individual that we can monitor for any abnormalities. When someone is ill, we know what their numbers should be."[21]The goal to win a Larry O'Brien

[19] Pablo S. Torre and Tom Haberstroh, "New biometric tests invade the NBA," *ESPN,* October 2, 2014, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/11629773/new-nba-biometric-testing-less-michael-lewis-more-george-orwell.
[20] Yago Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie: New Adventures in Counting and What Counts in Basketball Analytics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 37-38.
[21] Torre, Haberstroh, "New Biometric Tests Invade the NBA".

trophy puts NBA teams in competition. But a greater goal unites them; to again quote Adam Silver, "our teams aren't true economic competitors."[22] The technology that makes these things possible does not appear out of a vacuum. In this case, it is inspired by desire.

Sports analytics research represents the increased desire by the league to quantify and *statify* the game. In 1990, 13 stat categories were recorded per game, rising to 33 in a present day basketball game.[23] Santiago Colás contextualizes the desire for stats in the assertion of labor rights by the NBA player union, writing in his book *Numbers Don't Lie,* "Professional athletes asserted such labor rights as free agency, which led to rising salaries in sports. This in turn made accurate assessments of player's value even more desirable to owners."[24] From a coach and player standpoint, analytics might represent the improvement of one's basketball ability, but from an owner standpoint, analytics also serve the purpose of justifying financial decisions. What is often left out of the conversation of sports analytics is its creation of a new set of unspoken rules to the game, and how the protection of financial decisions can be reinterpreted as a form of control over who is allowed to be deemed successfully in the NBA.

Dean Oliver is a statistician credited as the progenitor of modern basketball statistical analysis. In 2004 Oliver authored the book *Basketball on Paper* which detailed his research and theories on the statistical analysis and strategy of the game. Since then, he has served as an analytics consultant for various NBA teams, now currently serving in his most senior role as an assistant coach for the Washington Wizards. Oliver often describes himself as merely a fan who wants to find his own way of contributing to "the Game," with a capital G.[25] Most radically, Oliver redefined the path to winning a game of basketball, introducing new factors for analyzing

[22] MIT SSAC, "Commissioner's Perspective."
[23] Ibid.
[24] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie*, 2.
[25] Benjamin C. Alamar, *Sports Analytics: A Guide for Coaches, Managers, and Other Decision Makers,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), VII, doi:10.7312/alam16292.

player and team performance: pace, possession and efficiency. He also emphasized four statistical subsets deemed key to success: a high true shooting percentage (true because it provides weighted bonus to 3-point shots due to their being worth more points), a low turnover rate, a high offensive rebounding rate and shooting a high number of free throws per game. In *Sports Analytics: A Guide for Coaches, Managers and Other Decision Makers* by Benjamin C. Alamar, a protege of Oliver's and analyst for various NBA organizations, Dean Oliver summarizes in the foreword what he believes analytics is all about: "measuring, managing, and making the most of the people who get to play the game."[26] This oddly rings similar to what James Naismith himself had to say about the game, making the most out of people, — however its moral underpinnings have been stripped from the statement, or rather, cloaked by numbers.

The dichotomy Francisco Vieyra established between professional and pickup basketball, a decent-street dichotomy, comes forth in Oliver's own assessment of analytics origins. In an interview, Oliver said, *"It's funny, because if you were out in the playground in [previous decades], a lot of people were out there taking 3 pointers. It seemed like it took hold in the playgrounds before it did in the NBA."*[27] Oliver doesn't necessarily establish the dichotomy here, but does demonstrate how analytics in some ways, prove things which already exist. It is almost like a rebranding to make it seem palatable. A movement into the realm of acceptable entertainment and away from the perceived "ragged, me-first" type basketball that writer Zach Lowe had characterized the three-point shot as. Corporeally, the three-pointer shot in Madison Square Garden and the three-pointer shot in Central Park are the same shot. But spiritually, they have become very different. Oliver and other analysts, conceptualize the interconnected actions

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[26] Alamar, VIII.

[27] Zach Kram, "The 3-Point Boom Is Far From Over," *The Ringer,* February 27, 2019.https://www.theringer.com/nba/2019/2/27/18240583/3-point-boom-nba-daryl-morey.

of basketball players as dots on the court, moving in unison with one another. A block is no different from a rebound in that it can ultimately be boiled down into a dot on a graph. In the act of the conceptualization, actions which would normally be seen as part of any game of basketball are stripped of their context and imbued with a new context: being played out in a professional analytical setting.

Santiago Colás uses the phrase the "science of moving dots" to refer to the study of sports analytics. He parallels this science with the "culture of moving dots," the means by which the scientific findings are communicated and applied. A topic throughout the SSAC conferences I watched was how to communicate the findings from analytics from analyst to coach, and then from coach to player. The culture of moving dots is inculcated with rhetorical strategies.

"Alongside the dizzying proliferation of sophisticated quantifying technologies and techniques, basketball analytics has had to evolve an accompanying rhetoric to explain the value of its innovations… The rhetoric of moving dots assures us that the quantifying technologies and methods of the science of moving dots will sheer away our distorting biases… and draw forth from its depths reliable, efficient, objective knowledge of the true nature of the sport and its players."[28]

What exactly is this culture and its rhetoric? Is it the same type of black culture brought to the game that Todd Boyd spoke of? I would posit that it is not. Boyd parallels basketball to jazz music in that both showcase moments of incredible improvisation and individual style. Analytics brings a culture of control and order to the game. Analytics forces players into between the two poles of entertainment and fear. The entertainment of seeing an incredible basketball shot, and the fear that this shot was not the "best possible" most "team-oriented" one.

Coinciding with the rise of NBA analytics have been a number of rule changes which have served to alter how the game is played. While Oliver's quote about measurement might mirror Naismith's philosophies in that both seek to "make the most out of people", Oliver

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[28] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie*, 51.

operates within a very different set of rules to the game, rules of the sport, not just the game.

Assistant general manager, and then senior analyst, for the Boston Celtics Mike Zarren, said that

"the rule changes in the Modern NBA have created an offensive league."[29] Since the early

2000's, the league has upheld a series of rule changes which have increased the pace of the

game, also a metric pushed by Dean Oliver as crucial to winning.[30] One way this came about was

with the introduction of new defensive guidelines that enforced stricter regulations on allowable

defensive contact — what is called "hand-checking" — as well as adding a 3-seconds in the

paint rule, which had the effect of limiting a defensive big man's presence underneath the basket.

Another aspect of these rules changes was the concerted effort to decrease the physicality and

perceived roughness of the game. New designations of fouls such as "flagrant" or

"unsportsmanlike" were added as well as the "clear-path foul," which prevents a player from

intentionally fouling another player on a fast break if they have a "clear path" to the basket. All

of these types of fouls also award more free throws to the opposing team, another key to success

according to Oliver's analysis. The movement away from physicality is an ironic move,

considering the NBA heavily markets "posterization" on its homepage and youtube channel,

promoting a move which is perhaps the most violent in the whole game on a gladiatorial level.

When dunking was first enacted on the court in a moment of epic physical improvisation, many

critics claimed it would lay ruin to the game. It was banned in college basketball from 1967 to

1976, in a move many have claimed was a specific targeting of Kareem Adbul-Jabbar's

impressive dunking ability. But "dunking remains the single most important shot in the game in

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[29] MIT Sloan Sports Analytic Conference, "Basketball Analytics: Hunting For Unicorns," March 1, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ76ddgZmt0&ab_channel=42Analytics.
[30] Mahmoud M. Nourayi, "Strategically Driven Rule Changes in NBA: Causes and Consequences," *The Sport Journal* (2019), 1, https://thesportjournal.org/article/strategically-driven-rule-changes-in-nba-causes-and-consequences/.

part because of the identity politics that it enacts."[31] We must ask ourselves then, what sort of identity politics does the league want?

In David Rowe's study of the sports media complex he offered the analysis of these identity politics as the product of 'sportization," a process which we have also come to associate with analytics. The 'sportization' of dunking is the mediation of it. It went from something done by a player which transgressed the norms of the game, to something which was transformed into the norm by marketing strategies and promotion, such as the introduction of the NBA Dunk Contest, by David Stern. Dunking was accepted in a manner similar to what I previously touched upon with Stern looking to alter the perception of blackness to appeal to a wide fanbase. Adam Silver, when asked about these rule changes and physicality in the NBA noted, "It changes who you hire… We had diminished our product, it wasn't as aesthetically pleasing as a game." No more hand checking, "gave players the opportunity to celebrate their skills in a way they hadn't;" the little men, as Adam Silver affectionately refers to 6 foot 2 and below players, "could come in and showcase real basketball skills."[32] This is a prime example of the rhetoric Colás is referring to. Silver's quote is ripe with hidden meaning. If real basketball skills hadn't been showcased before then what had been?

12 years and counting NBA superstar DeMar DeRozan has come into conflict with his personal identity as a basketball player and the identity of a basketball player who is analytically sound. On fellow player J.J. Redick's podcast discussed his resistance to shooting 3-pointers, despite being urged by his coaching staff to take the more "analytically sound" shot in the modern NBA.

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[31] Davis W. Houck, "Attacking the Rim: The Cultural Politics of Dunking," in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim,* ed. Todd Boyd and Kenneth Shropshire, (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 157.
[32] Wharton People Analytics Conference, "Keynote Conversation with Adam Silver."

"They was trying to get me to shoot threes. Somebody told me you not goin' last long if you not shooting threes. I said no, you can't tell me I have to shoot threes to be a good player. I can be good, I don't have to shoot threes if I don't want to. That don't mean I can't or I don't know how. My whole issue with analytics is why are you dictating what shots I take."[33]

For him, his style of play is a personal decision inspired by what he loves about the game of

basketball. DeRozan goes on to talk about growing up watching now retired players take the long

range 2-pointers. His issue with analytics is its encroachment on his individuality and personal

relationship with the game. What matters to him is far different than what matters to the

coaching staff, analysts or NBA fans. In analytics, there is a forced rift between the desire of the

players and the desire of the fans or what Alamar calls "decision makers," the coaching and

managerial staff. The players themselves have their ability to make decisions stripped away from

them by the objectivity of the numbers. For DeRozan the creativity and joy he derives from the

game lies in finding what sort of shots and play style suit him and make him feel "unstoppable."

Todd Boyd offers a theoretical explanation of this stance against analytic oversight. "Black men

have used a calculated indifference as a strategic weapon against the constraining demands of an

unsympathetic society. This philosophy, in modern parlance, is known as, 'I don't give a fuck!'

In other words, the individuals in question have decided not to buy into the propaganda of

America"[34] Not surprisingly, the racial implications of analytics, particularly in regards to

encroaching on style in the game, is felt by players as much as it is perceived by the leagues

managers.

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[33] DeMar Derozan, "DeMar DeRozan on Playoff Lebron and Watching Toronto Win It All" interview with JJ Redick and Tommy Alter, *The Old Man & the Three,* podcast audio, October 8th, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0P4G2Fanjio&ab_channel=JJRedick.

[34] Todd Boyd, "Mo' Money Mo' Problems," in *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim,* ed. Todd Boyd and Kenneth Shropshire (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 65.

Returning to Adam Silver's comments on modern basketball, if "little men" hadn't been showcasing athletic skills, then what had a player like Allen Iverson been showcasing? Is it that Iverson's "identity" did not match that which the NBA wanted to market? The player who is most often credited with the infusion of hip-hop culture, by historians, media, fans, and players alike is Allen Iverson. What he is not credited as, but hopefully you will see him as after this paper, is being a philosopher. Nicknamed "The Answer", Iverson is an all time great, inducted into the NBA Hall of Fame in 2016. In a *New Yorker* article, Malcolm Gladwell, reviews a book titled *The Wages of Wins* which solves the "Iverson problem" — how to analyze Iverson's "individual statistics in the context of the team that they're on and the task that they're performing."[35] The problem being, apparently, that Iverson was not as great as everyone made him out to be, from a statistical standpoint. The problem being, that Iverson was not the poster boy that many desired in their superstar image.

In what is perhaps the most famous Allen Iverson clip on Youtube, the infamously titled "practice" interview, Iverson clashed with the media scrutinizing him for missing practice. Iverson plainly exposed the conflicting requirements of NBA stardom, when told by a reporter that he is focused on by the media because he is the reigning winner of the *Most Valuable Player* award (the MVP). "What does that mean? I'm the MVP… The best basketball player in the world and this is what I have to go through when I lose. I can't win them all. I'm human. I am just like you. You might be a little better than me in your eyes or from the people that love you but you're human just like me, right?… But I am Allen Iverson, I get paid to play basketball."[36] Iverson exposed the imposed responsibilities that separate him from others as just another

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[35] Malcolm Gladwell, "Game Theory," *New Yorker,* May 22, 2006. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/05/29/game-theory-2.

[36] NBA Media Interview, "Allen Iverson's legendary practice rant," *ESPN Archives,* May 7, 2002. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9ZQhyOZCNE&t=1065s&ab_channel=ESPN.

basketball player, but also the scrutiny he gets for it. The MVP award, one which is notably

bestowed by media votes, is not won based on any given metric. In the "practice" interview,

Iverson challenged the dominating logic that governs the desires of NBA fans and owners — the

unceasing urge to win — he did not fit the stereotypes or so called character requirements of a

player who had just won. Todd Boyd credits Iverson with what he calls the redefinition of the

American dream, "the refusal to conform and having the money to maintain this posture."[37]

Speaking out in this interview is certainly evidence of that. But if Iverson faced media scrutiny

as a result of not going along with the script, analytics has emerged as a recent, objective,

implicitly non-racial nail in the coffin for Allen Iverson's legacy in an effort to delegitimize that

awarding of the Most Valuable Player award.

Analytics stresses the singular team goal of winning, rather than any individual version of

personal success. What Iverson clashed with was the required sameness that constitutes a team

sport. On the one hand, he was part of an individual culture as inspired by Michael Jordan. This

is where he got his nickname from "the Answer," a response to who would assume the Jordan

throne, not the throne of the Chicago Bulls team, but of one individual player. On the other hand,

Iverson was a player who did not embody the traits which would make him palatable to the white

,dominant media groups. Historian James H. Campbell analyzes the NBA's ideological

underpinnings through a critical race theory framework in his piece *Djangos Unchained: The*

Struggle for Freedom:

> "Liberal formalism has required the application of sameness to individuals. This favoring of formal equality rather than substantive equality has led liberalism to proceed with the assumption that treating everyone as an individual unlinked from social positions, provides equal opportunity in life. this assumption,

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[37] Boyd, *Young, Black, Rich and Famous,* 6.

based on the principles of   meritocracy, has been claimed through the
repeated telling of success stories."[38]

The conflict then, was that Iverson was a success story, but not in the ways which had been

preordained for him to succeed in — the dominant theories of basketball success: visible yet

humble hard work, adherence to one's coach, a focus on ones teammates over the self, or the

unrelenting desire to ceaselessly practicing. One reporter asked Iverson if his failure to practice

was making his teammates worse, to which Iverson pointed out that reporters do not use this

logic in a reverse manner. As Iverson said in his interview, "We talking about practice. Not a

game. Practice. Not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game like it's my last,

not the game, we're talking about practice."[39]

Although Iverson achieved a symbolically American Dream, making it to the top of the

NBA, the racialized paradoxical logic of NBA media denies him this achievement on the basis

that his team didn't achieve the dream, but also focuses its scrutiny on him. "I lost. I mean me,

my coaching staff, my teammates, this organization lost. You don't hear about any one of my

teammates going through this. It's me. It's just me… It's about Allen Iverson. The ball is in his

corner."[40] Because of his individuality as opposed to a team-oriented mindset clamored for by

media pundits, one which was also full of double standards, Iverson embodied something

antithetical to the quintessential American team sport. As race studies scholar David J Leonard

points out, "An awareness of this dialectic between good and bad is crucial for understanding

both the role race has placed in the NBA historically and within the media and public

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[38] James H. Campbell, "Djangos Chained: The Struggle for Freedom," *The Handbook of Research on Black Males: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Multidisciplinary* (2020), 270.
[39] NBA Media Interview, "Allen Iverson."
[40] NBA Media Interview, "Allen Iverson."

discourse… illustrating the impetus for regimes of regulation, surveillance, and disciplines."[41] The most recent and rapidly growing regime being analytical documentation. The NBA does not want another player like Allen Iverson. Billy Beane, the former general manager of the Oakland Athletics featured in *Moneyball* said, "The important thing is not to recreate the individual. The important thing is to recreate the aggregate."[42] This is surely true in regards to Iverson. Analytics are used as a way to discredit his individuality and assess his status as a member of a team.

Gladwell opens his article, "When it comes to athletic prowess, don't believe your eyes."[43] For Gladwell, analytics expose the limitations of seeing, "all we learn is to appreciate twisting and turning and writhing. We become dance critics, blind to Iverson's dismal shooting percentage and his excessive turnovers, blind to the reality that the Philadelphia 76ers would be better off without him."[44] Gladwell juxtaposes Iverson's physical prowess with the intellectual characterization of his abilities. In the hierarchy of analytic rhetoric, data holds more weight according to Gladwell. Gamel Abdul-Shehid, professor of sports kinesiology at York University, also recognizes this dichotomy that Gladwell employs. He, however, sheds light on how this dichotomy in sports holds racial undertones. "In sport, this dichotomy is mapped onto black and white bodies such that black bodies are seen as athletically superior and therefore less rational."[45] Iverson has become stereo-typified as the hip-hop baller, who can therefore be broken down and limited to two forms — physicality and mentality, which analytics has caused to be defined by his statistics.

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[41] David J, Leonard, *After Artest: The NBA and the Assault on Blackness,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 12.

[42] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie,* 216.

[44] Gladwell, "Game Theory."

[45] Gamal Abdel-Shehid, "Who Da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures," (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2005), 48, EBSCO Host Academic EBOOK Collection.

But even Naismith himself spoke on the importance of aesthetic skill and grace — "the twisting and turning" — in the game. "It is indeed a narrow mind that puts goals before grace, scores before skill."[46] This reassessment of playing style on the basis of quantitative analysis is a means of re-establishing what is accepted and desired in the mainstream. It employs a rhetoric similar to that which David Stern used when dealing with the perception of race in the league in the 1980's. The culture of dots moves and masks the main racial contradiction that caused Iverson to be a so-called "problem" for the league: the contradiction between the image of him putting the ball in the basket after a wicked crossover, and the image of a confident black man with tattoos, braided hair and earrings.

Another well known image of Allen Iverson is him stepping over Lakers player Tyronn Lue after making him fall with a crossover dribble. To the media, it was blatant taunting. But, in 2014, the newly appointed commissioner Adam Silver made some interesting remarks about taunting. He said that he had a conversation with Sacramento Kings owner Vivek Ranadivé about the recent levying of fines for taunting. Ranadivé suggested that taunting was a highly entertaining act and therefore beneficial to the entertainment aspect of NBA basketball. Adam Silver however, responded, "Taunting is a violation of the rules of civilized behavior," adding that it sets a bad example for children who follow these players and "doesn't lead to being a good citizen or a good sportsman."[47] This interaction is fascinating because it speaks almost directly to the two frameworks I introduced earlier. Sports institutions have become microcosms that deal with issues which reach much farther than the game itself. A player like Iverson was forced between being entertaining, and the fear that he is encouraging "uncivilized behavior." Iverson

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[46] Santiago Colás, "The Culture of Moving Dots: Towards a History of Counting and of What Counts in Basketball," *Journal of Sport History* 44 (2017): 343, doi: 10.5406/jsporthistory.44.2.0336.

[47] MIT SSAC, "Commissioner's Perspective."

himself has stated that he didn't realize what had happened on the court until he saw the picture in the newspaper the next day, to him it was a non-event.

We can also see Francisco Vieyra's study of pickup versus institutional basketball come forth in this conflict between Silver and Randivé's comments. The sportification of basketball in the professional sphere, means that acts like taunting aren't simply diffused after the game, something which Vieyra observed in his own study. Vieyra found that in pick-up basketball, although there were moments of taunting,

"players usually quickly defused the situation and re-focused everyone on the match and the fun of it. The same was true of the occasional rough play. As Michael DeLand accurately puts it, '[Pickup basketball players] treat physically violent fouls as stemming from the game's situation rather than as indicating hostility.' And 'although players may become quite heated, when the games end, tempers cool.'"

The nature of the NBA being an entertainment sport, mediated and broadcast across the globe adds layers of social complexity which make the diffusing of tempers and necessary context of actions difficult to parse out. The underpinnings of pickup basketball are entertaining, ergo, can be marketed to a greater degree, just like Nike did with the series of street basketball ad campaigns. In his piece *Selling Streetball,* Thomas Oates outlines the polar nature of this commodification. "While racially segregated urban ghettos are places most white people seek to avoid at all costs, they are nevertheless environments familiar to the mainstream through the narratives and frameworks creature by commercial entertainment companies."[48] The NBA's marketing viability is reliant on these taunting images not being defused, but rather being replicated and rebranded continually, so that they might contribute to forming an "iconic ghetto" that exists between Boyd's poles of fear and entertainment.

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[48] Thomas P. Oates "Selling Streetball: Racialized Space, Commercialized Spectacle, and Playground Basketball," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, (January 1, 2017): 95-6.

There is no stat for taunting. Although if we were to assign one, it might be measured in amount of dollars based on the fine a player receives. Professor of sports sociology Jennifer Hargreaves stresses the importance to "identify those features specific to sports which may enable them to contribute to the process whereby class rule and class power are translated into 'commonsense-ness' and legitimated."[49] With this in mind, we can see how the analytical attempt to discredit Iverson as one of the greats is in accordance with a greater attempt at establishing clear lines of legitimacy in who is allowed to be called an NBA great and who is not, what is called proper basketball and what is not. Iverson was a player who forced the media to label him a superstar with his electric play, but subsequently paid the price that comes with being measured as a superstar player.

In the book *After Artest: The NBA Assault on Blackness,* professor David J. Leonard details the events of an NBA brawl between players and fans that took place in 2004, a perceived moment of NBA play at a new low. In response to these perceptions, Leonard studies how the brawl impacted a series of rule changes and those changes impact on race in the NBA. If we consider the NBA as a designed spectacle, this event was a total shattering of preconceived notions about what it meant to be a player or fan, when the two sides met face-to-face in violent conflict. The stadium became a site of a surrogate race war, but as opposed to the media narratives of the past NBA, where it was often between two players (the battles of Magic Johnson against the so-called "Great White Hope" Larry Bird), this battle was between the black players of the Indiana Pacers and the white Detroit Pistons fans.

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[49] Joshua Newman, and Mark Falcous, "Political Theories of Social Class, Sport and the Body," in *A Companion to Sport,* ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 84, ProQuest Ebook Central.

The "Malice at the Palace" as it has come to be called, took place in 2004 during a Pistons home game against the Pacers. In the final seconds of the game, a hard foul committed by the Pacer's Ron Artest, who has since changed his name to Metta Sandiford-Artest, on Piston player Ben Wallace started a scuffle on the court between multiple players from either team. Meanwhile, Artest, a player with documented mental health issues recused himself from the scuffle and lay down on the scorer's table. While doing so, a fan in the stands threw a drink at him, causing Artest to enter the stands and fight the fan, joined by a few of his teammates. Eventually, the players were all led out of the building safely, despite at that point having a multitude of concessions and even a chair thrown at them by the now anonymous, mostly white, mob of fans. What made this a racially charged incident was not primarily the brawl itself, but its aftermath. The coverage by the media and David Stern's responses were both indicative of an ongoing racial narrative in the NBA and began to pave the way for the necessity of a new coded means of control by the league, sports analytics.

Media pundits called for the punishment of players, and reformation of the league. What received little coverage, was that the fan who had provoked Artest later admitted to alcoholism and checked into a rehab program. Stern suspended Artest for the remainder of the season, as well as suspending other players for shorter periods and levying out heavy fines against all involved players. The reformations that followed were, on paper, an NBA dress code, a new age restriction banning players from entering the league straight out of high school, an increased ability for the league to levy fines upon its players, and a series of harsher rules in regards to hand-checking. Leonard details how these new rules were a response to a perceived decrease in playing ability, which was actually a thinly veiled connection between blackness and a physical play style which threatened the white imaginary. The media perceived young players in the

league as, "endanger[ing] the quality of play," and claimed that specifically Black youth, represented "the absence of fundamentals… and coupled with their immaturity and aesthetic performance, were systematically destroying the league."[50] However, no comments were made on the multitude of teenage European professional players who were coming into the league. The new age limit was a means of asserting control over what play-styles would be accepted in the league. In between the lines, Leonard writes that the call for these reformations, and their subsequent approval

> "was a revolt against a culture that was slowly ruining the NBA, along with the promising future of America's black youth. Its destructiveness and pathology was clear to many of these commentators on that fateful November night. It wasn't simply the racial dimensions or the racial tensions that fueled both the backlash and the "corrective" actions that began with suspensions and moved forward with dress codes and age restrictions, but white supremacist logic, anti-black racism, that the league would not challenge. The threats to the league emanated from the players' refusal to adhere to their role as entertainers, as commodities."[51]

And so now I am getting closer to answering my question; what kind of basketball player is desired by the league? The "culture of moving dots" is a similar culture of opposition to the so-called "Hip-Hop" culture that had begun to ruin the NBA and the same perception problem that David Stern had sought to dispel in the 1980's. A similar culture to the individualism that supposedly roots itself in pick-up basketball. But Vieyra found pickup basketball to be "a productive node in the Black community's greater web of social relations."[52] If we can link the rise of NBA analytics to a means of asserting control, satisfying fan/media desires and de-physicalizing the game, then we can see its accordance with the controlling method which the league has historically used to maintain, as Campbell writes, a "paradigm of black man as athlete or entertainer further perpetuates the dynamics of White supremacy in that the Black man

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[50] Leonard, 81.
[51] Ibid, 35.
[52] Vieyra, 115.

as athlete is viewed as a safe individual if he can be controlled by the White man."[53] A method of control, which in the bigger picture of American history, has resulted in economic subordination of black Americans underneath a system of scrutiny and ordering. In many ways, the NBA is influenced by and mirrors broader aspects of systemic American racism.

Analytics defines a set of rules as to what constitutes a good player. In accordance with the desire of the league, Catapult, one of the main third party analytics companies hired by the NBA, say on their website, "What you can measure you can manage."[54] Management is representative of the coaches, measurements of the players. One must adhere to the rules before they can simply play the game. It is a rewriting of rules that quantify and control the game on a cultural level as well as a physical level. Colás questions the notion put forth by Gladwell and analytics as a whole, that there is a "right way" to play basketball, or more specifically a right way to win it. If there is such a thing as a "right way", then why does it bear repeating, and why do teams not achieve it with ease? A phrase like this "confuses likely effectiveness with absolute propriety."[55]

Analytics seek to achieve objectivity in sports quantification. Quantification is nothing new to a sport like basketball. Since its beginnings, the sport has had numbers assigned to its physical performance. The founding document of basketball, the rules put forth by Naismith, served to create a hierarchy in the sport of intellectual labor over physical labor. The scorebook was originally used to keep an accurate record of player performance. In his book *Numbers Don't Lie,* Santiago Colás places this early desire for physical quantification in a similar vein as the popular scientific movement of the late 19th century, anthropometry, the measurement of the human body. Baron Quetelet, often referred to as the father of anthropometry said, "All the

[53] Campbell, 269.
[54] Colás, "Culture of Moving Dots," 340.
[55] Colás, *Play the Right Way*, 112.

qualities of the average man, would at the same time represent all which is grand, beautiful and excellent."[56] From basketball's invention as means of promoting "Muscular Christianity", it was linked to a desired aesthetic; an aesthetic which was hoped to be discovered not just in moral cultivation, but in physical measurement.

Basketball's history, and its ability to be analyzed, corresponds with developments made in mathematical analysis. Let's flashback again to 1891. Along with the desire to mathematically quantify physicality came a rising economic theory pushed by Irving Fisher, a student at Yale, who hoped to discover "value" using mathematical analysis. In many ways, Fisher laid the theoretical building blocks that modern sports analytics rests upon. In Lisa Gitelman's collection of essays titled *Raw Data is an Oxymoron,* Mary Pooney and Kevin Brine offer a study of Fisher's theories. "In marrying theory to empirical data in a quantitative form — Fisher created a framework that could fit the theory to the data."[57] In the case of modern sports analytics, the theory which is married to the data is that the ultimate goal of any one involved in basketball is to win.

Basketball began to gain collegiate popularity in the early 1900's, "competitive success began to displace the older values and purposes the sport had been designed to serve,"[58] otherwise categorized in this essay as sportification. As the sport became more about winning due to its national and commercial success, so did discovering and publicizing a path to this victory. The 1920's saw a boom of published manuals on basketball coaching. This desire for a certain aestheticism began to be enmeshed and equivocated with the achievement of victory. The incorporation of economic concepts and financial data eventually entered the discussion as the

[56] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie,* 100-101
[57] Kevin R. Brine and Mary Poovey, "From Measuring Data to Quantifying Expectations: A Late Nineteenth-Century Effort to Marry Economic Theory and Data," in '*Raw Data' is an Oxymoron,* ed. Lisa Gitelman, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 72, doi: https://doi-org.proxy.swarthmore.edu/10.7551/mitpress/9302.001.0001.
[58] Brine and Poovey, "Economic Theory and Data," 142.

investments in the league grew exponentially, adding yet another layer of definition onto what was desired aesthetically in a player.

Benjamin C. Alamar says in *Introduction to Sports Analytics,* his book is to be used for "implementing an analytics program to gain a competitive edge."[59] If the desire to win is predicated on unspoken requirements like attendance of practice, rather than simply the moment in which a team wins the game, then in a similar fashion, analytics, numbers based on games, end up painting a picture far more expansive than the moment they are extracted from. Based on a player's numbers, we should be able to assess their character traits. Do their numbers reflect an adequate desire or ability to win? This is certainly what much of modern analytics is focused on discovering, the quantification of psychological traits, particularly for the scouting process and NBA draft. During an SSAC panel in 2018 titled "Inventing Modern Basketball," Daryl Morey, the co-founder of the conference, president of basketball operations for the Philadelphia 76ers, and, as dubbed by sports journalist Bill Simmons, "Dork Elvis," (We can pick apart the racial overtones and irony of this nickname later), gave his opinion on what he'd like personal evaluation analytics to be able to discern. "What will they [the player] do the minute they get a lot of money? Do they have the self awareness of where they're not as good as they need to be? And what are their habits in narrowing that gap?"[60] While Morey does not offer a method to quantifying these qualities, his answer is indicative of the implicit biases and assumptions that lie within the analysis of basketball, biases which are driven by the sportification of basketball and its existence as a game reformed within a business framework. Morey's desire is to understand how his players will act in the future.

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[59] Alamar, 1.

[60] MIT Sloan Sports Analytic Conference, "Inventing Modern Basketball," February 24, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kolSvuMdkck&ab_channel=42Analytics.

.Returning to Irving Fisher and 1891 once more, "Fisher realized what economists need to quantify was not the force of desire, but expectations about the future."[61] These ideas were the economic precursors to financial modeling. Sacramento Kings owner Vivek Ranadive would agree, "Amazingly, what banks and trading floors were doing 20 years ago, sports is now."[62] Data has become a feedback mechanism, both recorded in a game, and used to justify what happens on the floor. In Lisa Gitelman's collection of essays *Raw Data is an Oxymoron,* Daniel Rosenberg notes that data, while often considered to be fact, actually serves a semantic function that is "specifically rhetorical," meaning data is "that which is given prior to an argument. As a consequence, the meaning of data must always shift with the argumentative stage and context… [to form] the reality that data helps us to construct."[63] In this sense, we can see how the rhetoric that Colás calls the "culture of moving dots" in many ways dictates its scientific counterpart. The idea that data analysis of basketball is objective can be viewed not as a truth, but as a self-proving cyclical argument. Analysis is done with a theoretical goal done in mind, with a purpose of proving one thing or another, like for example, how "good" was Allen Iverson, from a perspective which discounts his own input and cultural context.

New York Times sports writer Leonard Koppet wrote in 1973 on the box score, "the statistics, no matter how elaborate, leave out the things that count: when and how." Namely, the statistics could not measure the hustle of a player. One of the major racist stereotypes n basketball history has been the rhetorical comparisons between white and black players. White players are often praised for their intelligence, fundamentals and "intangibles" which compensate for their perceived lack of athletic prowess in the face of the "athletically superior" black players.

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[61] Brine and Pooney, "Economic Theory and Data," 73
[62] Torre, Haberstroh, "New Biometric Tests Invade the NBA."
[63] Daniel Rosenberg, "Data Before the Fact" in '*Raw Data' is an Oxymoron,* ed. Lisa Gitelman, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013), 36-37, doi: https://doi-org.proxy.swarthmore.edu/10.7551/mitpress/9302.001.0001.

Styles of play have become codified within systems of work. Sports analytics are often praised as being able to reveal these intangibles and quantify things previously unquantifiable. However, in a reverse manner, modern day analytics do not even apprise the hustle of a player like LeBron James.

In a 2018 playoff game, LeBron was tracked by a camera which revealed him to be averaging the second slowest average speed out of any player in that series. When questioned about it, LeBron responded, "That's the dumbest shit I've ever heard. That tracking bullshit can kiss my ass. The slowest guy? Get out of here. Tell them to track how tired I am after the game, track that shit. I am number one in the NBA in how tired I am after the game."[64] These comments on LeBron's lack of speed speak to one of the problematic aspects Colás identifies with sports analytics: "The science of moving dots manifests both a profound underlying dissatisfaction with these bodies' limitations and a relentless utilitarian drive to transcend them by perfecting the body as an instrument for making both baskets and dollars."[65] LeBron's comments show how sports analysis, especially in its tie to media commentary, has in fact failed to measure intangibles, in favor of the preferred rhetoric of winning and reinforcing the dichotomy of good and bad in the sport of basketball. It entraps LeBron between the creation of an entertaining media storyline — that LeBron is the slowest on the court, and the displeasure that comes with this story, that LeBron is no longer the "King."

Benjamin Alamar describes the purpose of a team's analytic program is "to aid an organization's decision makers."[66] What is notable about this terminology is the stripping of

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[64] Omar Guerrero, "LeBron's Response to Tracking Data Saying He's Slowing Down: 'That Tracking B—— - Can Kiss My A—'" *Cavaliers Nation,* May 22, 2018. https://cavaliersnation.com/2018/05/22/lebrons-response-to-tracking-data-saying-hes-slowing-down-that-tracking-b-can-kiss-my-a/.
[65] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie,* 262.
[66] Alamar, 4.

agency from the players, as they are the ones who are being studied. While Alamar is generally discussing organizational decisions, it is telling that the real decisions which count, those made on the court, are often considered to be in accordance with the data set's predictions. LeBron James might have the slowest average speed in a game, but when he accelerated the length of the court to make a game-saving block against Andre Iguodala in Game 7 of the 2016 NBA Finals, there was no doubt in any spectators mind that LeBron James had made the decision to accelerate and block that shot. The question of who is in control of the ball on the court seems like it should have an easy answer — the player who is dribbling it, but when analytics claims to predict what *will* happen to the ball, does it usurp this control?

Data, before it is packaged and narrated, is often referred to as "raw." The data points picked up on LeBron during a given game, before they are analyzed are presumed to be "raw" and objectively recorded. However, Lisa Gitelman contests the notion that there is such a thing as "raw data". The "misperception that data are ever raw seems to be one way in which data are forever contextualized — that is, framed — according to a mythology of their own supposed decontextualization," because ultimately, "data requires our participation."[67] There is a conflict in who owns and controls the data used in analytics. For analysts and decision makers, the data and its orientation towards the future, places its usage and the subsequent data in their hands. However, for players, they are the participants, the data creators. According to now retired Pistons superstar point guard Isiah Thomas, "We [Himself and the other NBA players] can all manipulate the stat sheet at any time we want."[68] This quote points to the significant conflict that

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[67] Gitelman, 5-6.
[68] Open Court**,** "Impact of Analytics in the NBA," *NBA TV,* Feb 4th, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tbp9P32lyCk&t=1s&ab_channel=OC.

arises between players and analytics departments in NBA organizations, namely the inability of

analytics to properly measure or assess the value, ability, mentality and style of a player.

Many players feel that there are things which analytics cannot measure, and that many

aspects of the game do not show up in the given statistics of a game, primarily in what is called

"crunch-time," the final minutes of a close basketball game. Ex-NBA executive for the Memphis

Grizzlies, John Hollinger said in an SSAC panel in 2012 that "crunch-time data is too small for

trying to determine actual skill."[69] However, players and fans would beg to differ. In an article

penned by NBA player Dion Waiters, he described a game-winning shot he made in a crunch-

time. "I got the ball in my hands with the game on the line, and I already knew what was gonna

happen. Fuck an overtime, let's get up outta here. What's the analytics on that? That's a W. Then

I hit 'em with the pose."[70] Dion Waiters questions what counts and how it is counted.

Analytically, he took a low percentage shot but it went in. Can his decision making truly be

quantified, as well as the emotional sentiment that accompanies it? Colás writes that the "process

of making data presupposes interpretation and imagination."[71] Reflecting on Waiters shot from a

statistical viewpoint, it would lose its context and strip Waiters of the clout that comes with

making a game winning shot. Waiter's contends that his shot is not allowed to exist as a pure

moment of basketball entertainment because of the analytical checking it will become subject to.

The final aspect of sports analytics that I would like to touch on is its relationship with

journalism and NBA fanbases, the primary consumers of the NBA product, and therefore its

economic lifeblood. Without fans, the league would not exist, it would not be the lucrative

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[69] MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference, "Basketball Analytics," March 12, 2012,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2vC6NLRH6U&feature=emb_title.
[70] Dion Waiters, "The NBA is Lucky I'm Home Doing Damn Articles," *The Players Tribune,*
April 26th, 2017, https://www.theplayerstribune.com/articles/dion-waiters-miami-heat-nba-is-
lucky.
[71] Colás, *Numbers Don't Lie*, 244.

source of financial gain for its owners, or players for that matter. Without media journalists,

fanbases would not be the widespread net of allegiances that they are today. Fans would be

limited to the local. Statistical analysis appeals to fans and journalists because of the agency and

interpretive power it gives them. The NBA's success as a product is contingent on its marketing

and fan engagement. In Sam Duncan's study of sports media, *the Digital World of Sport,* he

describes a major historical change in sports writing. With the introduction of televised sports

events, came in a shift in the content of sports journalism from game summaries to off-field

matters. The focus became on the why and the how. Statistics play directly into these categories

of inquiry. As news cycles have become 24-hour affairs in search of constant news, the wealth of

data available to sports writers allows the creation of narratives separate from their specific

location in time and space. One can write an article completely re-assessing Iverson's play in the

2001 NBA finals.

The self proclaimed "fan-journalist" Bill Simmons, wrote in an ESPN article covering the

annual MIT Sloan Analytics Conference, that analytic data appeals to him because he "wants to

know." "In my mind, basketball lends itself to the perfect blend of objectivity and subjectivity.

Statistics only help so much; we still have to interpret what we see…. It's valuable data that

would give us all a better understanding of what we're watching."[72] What is notable about

Simmons' perspective is that he recognizes the impossibility of objectivity, but finds the

subjectivity of statistics in his own interpretation of the data, rather than the creative agency of

the players who are being measured. He understands that data is not the tell all be all, but still

maintains his own control over what they tell, rather than taking the final step towards

recognizing that the data is controlled by the player. The data provides Simmons with the agency

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[72] Bill Simmons, "The Sports Guys," *ESPN,* March 24th, 2009,
https://www.espn.com/espnmag/story?id=4011524.

in the story. Simmons even goes as far as to rename certain stats after players saying, "I want 'Unselds' (a long outlet pass that leads to an assist for a lay-up or a dunk) and 'Russels' (a blocked shot directed to a teammate."[73] By doing this, Simmons is defines players by solely their actions on the basketball court, and limiting their personhood to their outstanding stats. Simmons is enacting Colás' fear of the culture of moving dots, the stripping of players of their bodily form, and transforming them into dots to be studied.

Noah Cohan, writer of the book *We Average Unbeautiful Watchers,* studies the relationship between fan culture and American sports. In chapter three, he studies the memoirs of multiple sports writers including Bill Simmons. "In constructing 'selves' on which to build their memoirs, they [Simmons etc…] bend the NBA's malleable on- and off-court narratives to render the athletes they admire radicalized fan-objects — characters they can ventriloquize — that aid in their self-articulation."[74] Simmons' desire to know stats as a means of formulating his own opinions on NBA basketball, and subsequently publishing articles for a living, shows how his and other journalists relationship with statistics is one which attributes them narrative agency and control over something that they in actuality, have very little effect on. Simmons himself does not prevent a player from scoring.

Another influential sports historian, John Hoberman, writes that the NBA is a "theater of pseudo-reconciliation [which] serves to mitigate the pathos of American segregation…. by creating one-sided relationships between white fans and the black athletes they admire from afar."[75] Simmons offers up the desired fan perspective, in which he, the watcher, is centered, but

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[73] Ibid.

[74] Noah Cohan, *"We Average Unbeautiful Watchers: Fan Narratives and the Reading of American Sports,"* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019,) 78, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvgs0c0q.

[75] Ibid, 91.

also brought into a relationship with the player, as being the interpreter of their play. Cohan describes this act of reinterpretation of player agency through statical analysis as a moment of "aspirational homosocial ventriloquism."[76] Analytics have changed the narrative of the sport, from one where the unknown actions on the court are centered, to where the outside observers assessment of the spectacle is what counts, fiscally for the owner, and personally for the fan. The money that NBA teams make primarily rests upon consumers of the product and their performance as fans of a given team, whether that performativity comes through in articles of statistical analysis, purchasing of a Knicks hat or attending a game and splurging on extremely pricey concessions.

One such method of relationship to players that fans can achieve through statistics is playing what are called "fantasy sports." The name itself is indicative of the desired reality of fandom. Fantasy sports is a booming business where fans can "draft" players onto their own imaginary team and compete against each other based on the statistical performance of their individual players each week. The fantasy form first emerged in the 1960's in a baseball card game called Strat-o-Matic, which was a game based on stats that would allow fans to replay events "the right way."[77] Fantasy sports is similar to the desire Colás identified in the dominant NBA culture of analytics, that there is indeed a right way. This right way is both established by analytics, and sold to fans as something for them to achieve and perform. The sportification of the game has meant the creation of a type of "fan-game" as well.

Another type of fantasy basketball game is NBA 2K, the popular annual basketball video game. In 2K, fans can live out a similar experience of taking control of their team and making

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[76] Cohan, 98.

[77] Michael Bérubé, "The Realities of Fantasy," in *A Companion to Sport,* ed. David L. Andrews and Ben Carrington, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013) 251, ProQuest Ebook Central.

decisions. Reggie Miller, another NBA great, relates the growing trend in statistical analysis to the popularity of video game culture and desire for fan puppetry of players. "It's all about fantasy sports. Joe Blow playing video games, sitting at home, that really doesn't have that basketball knowledge or schooling and saying how can I be a part of the conversation."[78] Miller contrasts analytics with the lived experience and knowledge that is cultivated in NBA players like himself or DeMar DeRozan. Fantasy sports engendered by massive amounts of data, this is what player ratings are based on in the 2K game, are representative of the insertion of the fan self onto the player through the interpretation and performance of the players actions. In Albert Chen's piece "Blessed are the Geeks," published in 2012, he wrote, "There was a time, not so long ago, when teams were smarter than everyone else… before the rise of fans who began to rethink the conventional wisdom; before those fans began tracking every play with such high levels of precision that teams began asking them for data."[79] Numbers, and the forms they can take in fan controlled games, represent a repositioning of fans, specifically "informed fans", at the top of ta perceived hierarchy of control. These games create a firm re-establishment of sportification as a process of commodification. Looking at the accumulation of data from the league, and its subsequent application to media narratives, we can see how basketball has a dual existence as both a game to be played and a sport to be bought, sold and analyzed.

The development of basketball analytics are a link in the long chain of basketball's beginnings as an amateur game to a professionally played sport. At the start of this project, my professor had me distinguish between two types of basketball history: the history of sport, and sports history. The former establishes sport as something that has always existed in its modern

[78] Open Court, "Impact of Analytics."
[79] Albert Chen, "Blessed Are the Geeks," *Sports Illustrated,* December 10, 2012, https://vault.si.com/vault/2012/12/10/blessed-are-the-geeks-.

form, as a competitive game in society for the purpose of entertainment and spectacle. The former looks beyond the insularity that so often encapsulates the sports world and seeks to examine how the development in sport can often mirror societal aspects that have little to or no relation to the actual game of basketball. But I would like to conclude this paper with a favorite quote that I encountered in my research. From the mouth of one of the greatest basketball players ever, Shaquille O'Neal:

<div align="center">"Analytics, shmamalytics."[80]</div>

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[80] Open Court, "Impact of Analytics."

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