Hack-a-Shaq

Thinking about Games
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Bubba Wells chuckled as he ran on to the court in a late December game against the Chicago Bulls. Wells, a 6' 5" small forward out of Tennessee, was a rookie in the league used sparingly off the bench by the struggling Dallas Mavericks. Seconds after running out onto the floor, he grabbed Bulls forward Dennis Rodman, prompting a whistle and a foul call, sending Rodman to the free throw line. After the subsequent Mavericks possession, the same thing happens: Wells runs into Rodman, stopping play and sending him to the line. "You know what? This is the intentional foul rule to get them back in the game!...His job is to foul Dennis to try and get them back in this game," remarked Bulls TV announcer Tom Dore "John, I don't know of anybody who has ever come up with a plan to do something like that before." Wells, under orders by Dallas coach Don Nelson, smashed the record for fastest foul out in NBA history clocking in around 3 minutes of floor time. Rodman, an historically horrible free throw shooter, actually made 9 of the 12 foul shots, negating any of the advantage this strategy might have given the Mavericks.

Two years later, Nelson, now coaching the Portland Trail Blazers, attempted an almost identical strategy against Shaquille O'Neal of the Lakers (a 52% free throw shooter.) As it became widespread during the 1999-2000 NBA season, the sports media affectionately named this strategy "Hack-A-Shaq". Nelson, whether he knew it or not, invented a now notorious defensive strategy widespread in the NBA today.

Late game fouling is for better or worse a part of the professional game. Within the last 24 seconds of a ball game, after the shot clock has been turned off, the only way to stop the clock and attempt to get the ball back is to intentionally foul the other team. Hack-a-Shaq amplifies this strategy to extend past the very end of the game, not so much as a clock management system but more of an attempt to play the numbers and reduce, as much as possible, the chance of the other team scoring. The Hack strategy slows games to a halt, while also ideally giving one team a major advantage, creating this strange dilemma that involves strategy, pace of play, player efficiency and of course enjoyment, for players and spectators. Would a rule banning the Hack strategy serve to enhance the game, much like the introduction of the shot clock in 1954 or the later reversed banning of zone defense in the 1940s? Or would it serve as another rule that attempts to unnaturally micromanage and govern play?

What is the Hack?

On average, an NBA team will score about 1.12 points per possession. Intentionally fouling during the course of a game usually is not a viable strategy because the average NBA team will make around 75% of their foul shots. Even the weaker foul shooters will usually make over 50% of their shots, effectively meeting the average and negating any advantage.

In order to engage the Hack-a-Shaq, the team that is being hacked must first be in the bonus, which kicks in after 4 total fouls are committed against them by the other team. Whenever a player on the team in the bonus is fouled, the fouled player goes to shoot foul shots, even if that player is not fouled in the act of shooting. If a player is fouled away from the ball they automatically shoot as well, as a punishment to the fouling team. The Hack strategy attempts to leverage this rule by instead giving an advantage to the fouling team.

Hack-a-Shaq only really works when a player is so bad at shooting foul shots that they average below that 1.12 points per possession (i.e consistently make less than 50% of their shots), but are also effective enough in other areas of the game that their coach will keep them on the floor for an extended period of time.

Once the team with one of those players is in the bonus, the opposing coach will begin to intentionally foul that specific terrible free throw shooter. This gets really interesting when you consider players like Shaquille O'Neal or Wilt Chamberlain, horrible foul shooters who were arguably the best two players of their respective eras. Pulling them from important games does more damage to the team than leaving them in to get intentionally fouled.

Alternative Defense

Writing for SBNation, Rodger Sherman argues that Hack strategy is not akin to, for example, having a shortstop pitch in a baseball game or a wide receiver attempting field goal kicks in a football game. "Almost all recreational basketball players can hit half their free throws. And then you get an NBA guy who can't. Their shot is no harder... It's a strategy that takes the worst players in a sport at a specific thing and makes them do that thing. The only person who can cause them to succeed or fail is themselves." Some basketball players are better at particular aspects of the game than others, but when it comes to taking foul shots, every player is put in the same position at the line. The mental and tactical battle that is the foul shot could be argued as being a totally separate thing from the actual game of basketball. Much is made over the flow of basketball; shooters want to get into a rhythm, defensive players want to disrupt that rhythm. Intentionally starting up the metagame that is foul shooting is a detriment to one of the key facets of the game.

In the late 1980's and through the 90's, a popular defensive strategy intended solely to combat shooting flow and rhythm was the "Jordan Rules." In Jordan Rules, the opposing team (famously the Pistons and later the Knicks) would do whatever they could to stop superstar player Michael Jordan from having the opportunity to shoot the ball. Pistons coach Chuck Daly explained: "If Michael was at the point, we forced him left and doubled him. If he was on the left wing, we went immediately to a double team from the top. If he was on the right wing, we went to a slow double team...The other rule was, any time he went by you, you had to nail him." When a player is double teamed (has two defensive players assigned to him), especially with the zone defense being banned, there is of course another offensive player open. Daly and later Knicks head coach Pat Reilly knew that because of his otherworldly scoring ability, leaving that other player open and overplaying Jordan would be more effective than playing a standard man to man defensive scheme.

So what does this have to do with foul shooting and the Hack strategy? Well, even when using an alternative strategy like Jordan Rules, there is very little disruption to the flow of the game. Fouling Jordan was the worst possible thing you could do in this situation, he was almost automatic at the line. The whole point of Jordan Rules was to force him to either pass or shoot a really awkward shot. No one really complained about this strategy being detrimental to the game as it felt natural. The players were playing basketball, not standing stationary shooting with the clock stopped.

The Rules: Governance Vs. Liberation

In *The Heresy of Zone Defense*, Thomas Cummins discusses rule changes in basketball, focusing on the illegal defense rule, which banned zone defense in the NBA. His comments on rules and the creation of rules within basketball are particularly important in his piece.

> "it has always seemed to me that the trick of civilization lies in recognizing the moment when a rule ceases to liberate and begins to govern...basketball has been supreme in recognizing this moment of portending government and in deflecting it, by changing the rules when they threaten to make the game less beautiful and less visible, when the game stops liberating and begins to educate."

In his opinion, the removal of zone defense was a rule change that was made, not to govern and restrict play, but rather to liberate and allow the players to express their talents in a rule system that encourages them to do so.

He uses the illegal defense rule, or the rule that banned zone defense, as his main example. He argues that, "It moved professional basketball into the fluid complexity of post-industrial culture." In other words, it allowed plays such as the "Dr J Scoop Basket" in the 1980s finals or "The Shot" by Michael Jordan in 1989. Instead of having players adhere rigidly to a system where they are instructed to stand and guard a certain piece of the court, they are instead playing the "'match-up game' in which both teams run patterns, picks, and switches in order to create advantageous situations for the offense or the defense." While zone defense is certainly more dynamic than Cummins would have you believe, his point is more about maintaining the freedom and flow of the game, rather than ZONE IS BAD.

As an aside, Cummins brushes on the implementation of the shot clock in his piece. I would argue that the implementation of the shot clock in 1954 was the single most important rule change in terms of preserving the fluid complexity of a ball game. Before the implementation of the 24 second shot clock, many games would devolve into a huge stalling match: the team that was ahead would hold onto the ball and stand around for as long as possible. This led to edge of your seat thrillers such as the 1950 contest between the Fort Wayne Pistons and Minneapolis Lakers, with a final score of 19-18. And yes, this was a standard 48 minute basketball game. With the shot clock, players are encouraged to execute strategy and score more points at a fluid, entertaining pace. Simply put, it created modern basketball as we know it.

What controls the game?

Another important topic when it comes to the Hack and rule changes is the question of what interests take priority in a professional sports league. Are they the interests of active participants in the game? Or those of the paying spectators in the arenas and watching on TV? Professor Eric Dunning in *The Dynamics of Modern Sport* discusses the GP Stone opinion that, "Display for spectators is 'dis-play'...whenever large numbers of spectators attend a sports

event it is transformed into a spectacle, played for the spectators and not the direct participants. The interests of the former take precedence over the interests of the latter." Stone would argue that whether you like it or not, once a massive amount of spectators enter the picture, the interests of the spectator, and not the active game participants take extreme priority. When Stone argued his position in the early 1970s, the focus was mostly on the enjoyment of the spectator live in the venue. TV was a way that fans enjoyed the game, but was not the priority. Today, with massive multi billion dollar TV deals, it is all about making it so that the spectators at home have as enjoyable an experience as possible. Stone's view still applies, and even is amplified because not only are thousands in attendance at the event, but millions are watching remotely as well. We can use the aforementioned implementation of the shot clock as an example. Fans were simply not going to see games because of lack of a rule that defined the pace of play. After the implementation of the clock due to lobbying by Syracuse Nationals owner Danny Biasone, the league's popularity skyrocketed, essentially saving the league and the game.

   The NBA itself has shown that, on multiple occasions the TV audience trumps all. A recent example is an incident in November of 2012, when Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich gave his 5 starters the night off in a nationally televised game. This is a frequently employed tactic for Popovich throughout the season, as he has one of the oldest teams in the league by average player age. His team also has not missed the playoffs since the 96-97 season, and assumes (so far, correctly) that maybe losing a random game in November will not heavily impact his team later in the year. NBA commissioner David Stern responded by handing the Spurs a $250,000 fine and calling the tactic, "a disservice to the league and the fans" threatening "substantial sanctions." Arguing that this fine is anything but a move to appease the TV audience and live spectators is silly. The league obviously wants its best players on display during a nationally televised game, and also wants to make the most money possible off the game. The commissioner has an obligation to the team owners first, which I think is part of the problem Dunning is commenting on. Even if the fan experience is arguably damaged by these players having a night off, (which in this case it wasn't, the game ended 105-100 and was close right up to the end), Lebron James summed things up nicely: "it's not in the rules to tell you you can't send your guys home."

   When looking at statements from coaches like Popovitch and Nelson, and the Stone/Dunning argument, an interesting conflict arises. The head coach's job is very simply to win ball games and championships. Winning games and championships generates revenue for the team and the league. However, employing something like the Hack strategy, or the rest your star players strategy, slows down and lessens the excitement of the individual games. This could lead fans, especially casual ones, to simply stop watching.

   I agree with Stone to a large extent. When making rule changes to a major game such as pro basketball, more often than not it is to improve the spectator experience. As much as I would like to say that NBA officials, like Cummins argues, make rule changes to liberate and advance the game, most of the time it is with the mindset of "how does this improve the spectator experience?"

The Hack in action

For better or for worse, the Hack has been in full force on display in the '14-'15 playoffs. In the May 6th contest between the Houston Rockets and Los Angeles Clippers, Rockets players attempted 64 foul shots over the course of the 48 minute game, the 4th most ever in a non-overtime playoff game. Do the Rockets have an abhorrently bad free throw shooter who is also an extremely effective player in other aspects? You betcha. Dwight Howard is a career 57% from the line, while being 52% from the stripe in the '14-'15 season. Their opponents, the Clippers, have DeAndre Jordan, one of the all time worst free throw shooters in NBA history, who averaged an abysmal 40% during the '14-'15 season. Statistically speaking, fouling him at all times is a solid strategy; he is way under the magic 1.12 number. At this point, the Clippers are employing the only countermeasure that they can: simply not playing Jordan for a majority of the game.

If you think that this makes for a less than thrilling experience watching the game on TV, then I would be hard pressed to argue. It would be extremely difficult to find someone who enjoys watching the Hack strategy over the standard back and forth of a normally coached NBA game.

On the other side of the debate there exist critics who argue that those who miss free throws at such a high rate, simply need to get better at shooting them. They are professionals after all, and if they cannot make the shots, tough.

Hack-a-Shaq enthusiast and master tactician Gregg Popovich has been coaching the San Antonio Spurs for almost 20 years. He is known for his "don't care" demeanor, especially when it comes to grey area tactics such as intentional fouling. "If someone can't shoot free throws, that's their problem. As I've said before, if we're not allowed to do something to take advantage of a team's weakness, a trade should be made before each game. 'We won't foul your guy, but you promise not to block any of our shots.' Or, 'We won't foul your guy, and you allow us to shoot all uncontested shots.'" In his eyes, he is taking advantage of a currently legal strategy for winning. While also being facetious, Popovich knows that using this strategy directly contributed to his team reaching the NBA Conference Finals in 2008, where he intentionally fouled his way to a series win over the Shaq lead Phoenix Suns.

While it's true that making foul shots is an important part of the game, "getting better" at shooting them is not an easy task. The New York Times' John Branch wrote a piece in which he argued that one of the reasons for the plateaued foul shooting percentage in the NBA is that the key aspects of improvement in sports (or even any game, really) do not apply to the foul shot. Ray Stefani, professor emeritus at California State broke down improvement into four areas "physiological (size and fitness), technology/innovation (the invention of the "Fosbury Flop"), coaching (strategy), and equipment (fiberglass pole vaulting poles, composite hockey sticks.) Branch correctly postulates that foul shooting has been (aside from a few outliers) generally the same throughout the history of the game, and that no increase in strength, advances in tech, coaching or equipment would help the shooter. We saw an example of this first hand when the Lakers brought in one of the all time best free throw shooters, Ed Palubinskas to help Shaq improve his then 38% foul shooting percentage in the 2000-2001

season. And while this extra coaching did help to improve his foul shooting for the next few seasons, his numbers plummeted back down below 50% in 2003.

Changing the rules

This brings us to the main question that the NBA will have all summer to think about. Does the use and abuse of the Hack strategy prompt a rule change? If it does prompt a rule change, who does it really benefit? and will the new rule, as Cummins would say, "liberate" instead of "govern?" During the Chamberlain days of Hack, the league instituted a rule that negated the strategy within the last 2 minutes of a contest. "A personal foul and team foul shall be assessed and one free throw attempt shall be awarded. The free throw may be attempted by any player in the game at the time the personal foul was committed." Since anyone on the floor can attempt the shot within the last 2 minutes, there is no reason to Hack a player.

The problem with Hack outside of it being a boring spectator experience is that it is taking advantage of a set of rules that are supposed to deter this kind of play. When a team is in the bonus, it is supposed to be an advantage for that team, not their opponent. Taking free throws from an off the ball foul is supposed to punish the fouling team as well as reward the shooting team, as they get the opportunity to score points with the clock turned off. Tom Ziller of SBNation lays it out nicely "It's called *the bonus* for a reason. You can't get more efficient on offense than a trip to the foul line for a typical player."

The NFL has a great example of a rule that could, if not implemented correctly, have a positive effect for the offending team. If you are on defense and hold an offensive player, not only does the other team gain 5 yards, but also gets a first down. If they didn't award the offended team a first down, the defense could intentionally hold a player if they didn't like the way the play was going, and would only be penalized a meager 5 yards. Holding would become a strategy for the offending team, which is exactly what the rule prevents.

On a recent episode of *Mike's On* on WFAN radio in New York*, sports commentator Mike Francesa called the aforementioned May 6th playoff game, to paraphrase: boring, slow and not compelling basketball. He recommended a rule change in which, if at any point outside the last two minutes there is an away from the ball foul, the fouled team would get their shots, plus possession of the ball. Ziller, as well as others have recommended simply letting a team choose what to do, either take the shots, or pass the ball in from out of bounds to run a play.

A rule change would set out to accomplish two main goals, 1) to make it so that a rule that is intended to punish the offending team does not actually benefit them and 2) to make the game more enjoyable to watch. The NBA, and all other sports are in a constant battle for viewers, especially during the fall when all four major US sports are going on at the same time. If the pace of play in the NBA grinds to a halt, the casual fan will not continue to watch a constant clock stopping foul fest of a game. This is not to say that Hack is used in every game, just as not every game in the pre shot clock era was a low scoring race to the bottom. However, when marquee matchups, especially during the playoffs, break down into a game where one team shoots 64 foul shots, there is clearly a problem that needs to be addressed. In the overall scheme of things, I usually am against changing rules for solely the sake of the TV

audience. I've watched more boring games than I can count, but in this case there is clearly a loophole in the rules that needs to be closed.

If we go back to Cummins' example of liberation Vs. governance, we are in a strange situation with Hack where the lack of a rule is bringing about governance. Case and point is Clippers head coach Doc Rivers not playing DeAndre Jordan nearly as much as he would like. He knows that Popovitch in the first round and potentially Rockets head coach Kevin McHale in the second round will swarm Jordan with bench players whose only roles are to foul him. Rivers is almost forced to employ the same strategy against Howard and the Rockets. Because both teams have a horrible foul shooter on their roster, they are locked into this very strange style of play, where games move at a snail's pace and take almost three hours to play.

Changing the Hack rule during the Chamberlain days was a move that made the ends of games more competitive and more exciting, it only makes sense to expand it out to cover the entirety of a contest. Instituting a rule change like that suggested by Francesa and Ziller would effectively end the Hack strategy. It would also fall perfectly in line with Cummins' liberation argument. Having a system where a coach has to choose between playing and allowing one of his best players to be fouled over and over again or simply not playing him at all is not a liberating decision. Both outcomes are bad, for the teams on the floor, as well as the spectators.

As much as I would love to say "just get better at shooting foul shots" to players like Shaq and Deandre Jordan, history, science and math have shown us that this is not something that will happen any time soon. A rule change will certainly liberate coaches and players from the existing paradigm allowing for play that not only allows players to showcase their best abilities but also creates an intensely more exciting game for the spectator.

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