

# Incorporating High School Recruiting Ratings and Statistics in Predictive Models for Collegiate Basketball Success

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## Introduction

Predicting collegiate win shares from ESPN recruiting ratings [1] and high school statistics provided by PrepCircuit [2] and AAUStats [3] could yield a competitive advantage for collegiate and professional basketball organizations. As it stands, there is little research on predicting individual player's collegiate performance. In 2010, Jamie McNeilly used recruiting ranking quartiles to predict Player Efficiency Rating (PER) and other metrics [3]; however, the models presented did not consider high school statistics as an input, nor did they consider predicting win shares, which is a more authentic measurement of a player's contribution to team success.

In addition to benefiting collegiate programs, the methods presented could benefit NBA front office decision making. The “one and done” climate has evolved into a “none and done” climate. Some high-profile recruits have hardly any collegiate data due to injuries, opting to play overseas, or simply preparing for the draft, and are still selected in the first round based on their high school evaluations. As NBA teams are investing millions of dollars on players with little to no collegiate data, the methods and data presented could be used to model NBA performance in conjunction with their collegiate performance.

How are players currently evaluated and chosen for scholarships? Coaches and staff members conduct video analysis, go on the road to watch and interview players, learn about their mental makeup through developing a relationship, and keep track of their performance in high school and American Athletic Union (AAU) circuits. AAU is a highly competitive and nationwide basketball league. AAU hosts tournaments sponsored by Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour, among others. Geico hosts the national high school tournament and is broadcasted by ESPN. High school and AAU basketball are amateur leagues, but there is a lot of money involved in apparel sponsorships and TV contracts. Coaches and scouts are already evaluating these sources of information in their raw form. This analysis seeks to incorporate some of that information into predictive models.

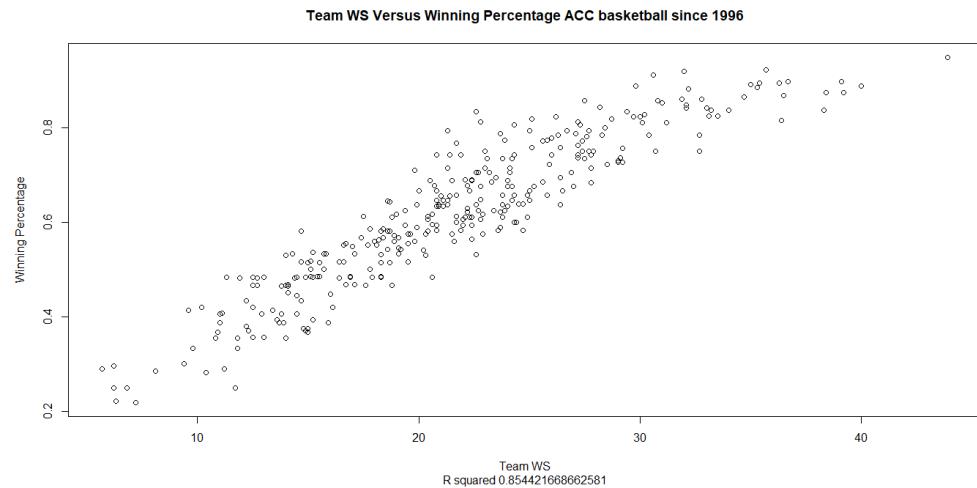
The model with the best out-of-sample performance incorporated ESPN ratings and the two sources of high school statistics. This is a significant result as the data has only existed for a few years whereas the ESPN rating has been developing for over a decade. Future research adjusting for player's strength of schedule and teammates could significantly improve the models.

## Data

### Basketball Reference

A single basketball metric must be chosen or created in order to evaluate a player's collegiate success through predictive models. Every statistic listed on a player's college basketball reference page was collected; however, only a player's first season playing in the NCAA was used in the modeling process in order to fairly evaluate a player's true production out of high school. Due to its all-encompassing nature, win shares represents the barometer of collegiate success. Win shares is calculated by taking the points produced by a player, and reduced on the defensive end, adjusting based on their teammates, and normalizing for the

value of marginal points per win so 1 win share equals 1 added win. This statistic is akin to the Wins Above Replacement (WAR) metric seen in baseball and the NBA. Other basic metrics such as points per game do not encapsulate the full impact of a player and can be highly influenced by the surrounding players. Below is a graph of ACC teams' sums of player win shares plotted against their season winning percentage.



College win shares have a weaker relationship with wins than WAR in baseball and in the NBA partially due to large differences in league competition; nonetheless, it is a strong predictor of team success as shown by the above R-squared. Other popular basketball metrics such as PER, a per minute efficiency rating, and Box Plus Minus (BPM), a box score estimate of the points contributed by a player per 100 possessions on an average team, were considered as dependent variables; however, they had a much lower correlation value with wins than win shares. Additionally, the top players in terms of win shares aligned with the consensus best players over the past few seasons more so than those with the top PER or BPM. Calculations and analyses for win shares, PER, and BPM can be found on basketball reference [5, 6, 7]. Below are the top 10 players in terms of win shares in the data.

Group	Player	Win Shares	College Season
Prep and AAU	Zion Williamson	8.3	2019
Prep and AAU	Deandre Ayton	7.6	2018
Only Prep	Marvin Bagley III	6.9	2018
Only Prep	Lonzo Ball	6.8	2017
Prep and AAU	Wendell Carter Jr	5.9	2018
Only Prep	Malik Monk	5.8	2017
Only Prep	TJ Leaf	5.8	2017
Prep and AAU	Trae Young	5.7	2018
Prep and AAU	Tyler Herro	5.4	2019
Neither	Omari Spellman	5.2	2018

From a basketball perspective, these players had some of the best freshman seasons over the past few years. Zion in particular has been widely regarded as having the best season from a statistical and basketball perspective in decades. This gives more confidence and validity to win shares as an overall barometer of success.

## ESPN

In order to judge the value of the high school data, it must be compared to the conventional approach. ESPN's recruiting ratings were used as a proxy for the evaluations of coaches and scouts. There are many services that offer recruiting grades. ESPN was chosen as it has existed for many years and it had an important element on their web page: a player's college. This was used to gather the basketball reference data and verify it was the correct player. Other recruiting sites such as 247 sports and Rivals had this information, but it was more difficult to web scrape. All of these services have similar processes for rating playes. In the future one could incorporate ratings from more services to improve prediction.

The ESPN data gathered contained players' overall ratings from 55 to 100. There is no information about how the final grade is calculated, but they offer a scouting report. It is generally understood that these scouting grades are formed through video analysis and watching players in high school and AAU circuits. Also gathered from ESPN were player's

height, weight, and position. Player's height and weight were not very predictive so they were left out of the modeling process.

Do the ESPN ratings reflect the evaluations of coaches and scouts? Year after year, the top programs recruit and secure the players most highly rated by these recruiting services. These players also usually become first round NBA draft picks. For example, in 2018 Duke secured the top 3 ESPN rated players: R.J. Barrett, Zion Williamson, and Cam Reddish. It is reasonable to conclude that they were some of the top players on Duke's board. In addition, all 5 of the top 5 ESPN rated players in 2018 were one and done players, 4 were 1st round NBA draft picks (the 3 Duke players and Romeo Langford) and 1 was a 2nd round pick mostly due to injury concerns (Bol Bol). These ratings mirror how college and professional programs rate players; moreover, many people believe that the evaluators also weigh which and how many college programs have offered scholarships to the player. Not only do these grades reflect consensus opinion, but the consensus opinion of coaches and scouts may even be embedded into the ratings.

## **PrepCircuit**

PrepCircuit was chosen to gather high school statistics. There are very few services that collect this data. The other service, MaxPreps, had data that was sparse. PrepCircuit has data going back to 2016. This data had to be web scraped. It was very difficult to scrape since it was a dynamic web page: the web address did not change when clicking on a new tab. Selenium webdriver was used to have the computer robotically click through the page when necessary.

The high school statistics gathered from PrepCircuit contained regular season averages and totals from box score statistics such as points, points per game, assists, etc. The data is fairly encompassing; however, there appear to be some inaccuracies in the data. For example,

Lonzo Ball had 31 games where points were tracked, 4 games for minutes, 22 games for assists, steals, and turnovers, and 21 games for rebounds. One explanation is that PrepCircuit does not keep track of all statistics for every game. This causes problems because it is unknown whether a player did not log a statistic in a table or if it was not tracked by the data enterer. Even when they were logged, the statistics were not always accurate. According to PrepCircuit, Zion Williamson had 0 assists per game in his senior high school season. This is almost certainly inaccurate, but there were other cases where it was difficult to conclude.

There were also many cases where the data was missing all together. Here is a table of the number of players that had PrepCircuit points per game but were missing other per game statistics.

Per Game Statistic	Number of Players with Missing Values
Minutes	126
Rebounds	147
Blocks	58
Steals	58
Turnovers	58

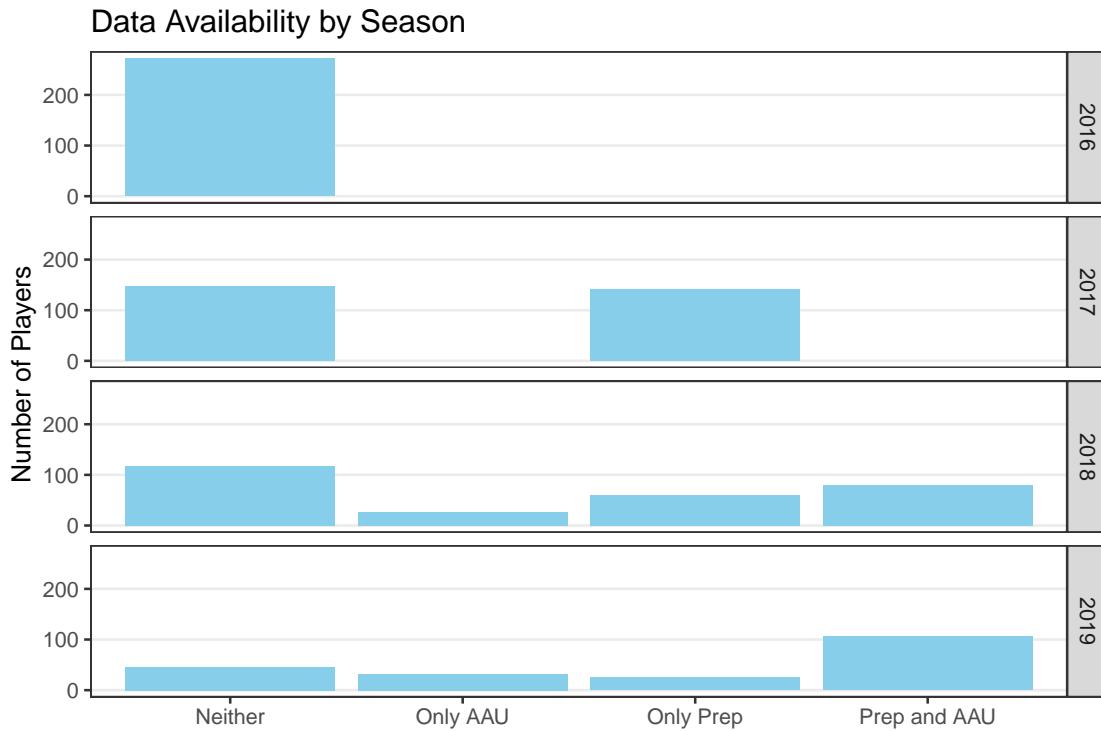
Modeling with this kind of data is very challenging. Prior analyses used k nearest neighbor imputation to deal with players missing a given statistic, but this decreased interpretability significantly. Models were built with and without a variety of these statistics to test their accuracy and predictive power. The only way to be cautious and predictive was to only use a players points per game and the number of games they played (the max of games played in all tables). This completely disregards a large portion of basketball, but the data for the other variables was too poor, inconsistent, and unpredictable.

## AAUStats

Prio analyses only used PrepCircuit data. It was still predictive, but there are many problems with the data and it only encapsulates high school basketball where the level of competition varies from player to player. Both issues led to seeking out AAU data. As discussed previously, the AAU circuits put on by Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour are loaded with the top talent across the country. A lot of recruiting and evaluation happens at these events.

AAU data was gathered from AAUStats.com [3]. Selenium webdriver was used in a similar fashion here as well to scrape the data. The data contained box scores from Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour circuits from the 2017 to 2019 seasons. There is potential to create more advanced metrics with these box scores, or scaling based on the quality of a player's team or opponent; however, for this analysis, common per game box score statistics akin to PrepCircuit's data were created based on player's final season in all AAU circuits. There were no issues with missing data or any obvious inaccuracies, but the lack of predictability of some of the variables leads one to believe they are not completely accurate. For example, in one game a team had 6 assists and 0 blocks. It is feasible to have 6 assists and 0 blocks in a game, but it seems unlikely. It is tough to trust the data whole heartedly, especially with the obvious problems with the PrepCircuit data. The problems in this data could simply be more hidden. The AAU statistics that were used in modeling were points, blocks, steals, rebounds, and minutes, all on a per game basis.

If decision makers are already evaluating players during their high school and AAU careers through scouting methods, then there is reason to believe that predictive models built on the statistics of these games could assist decision makers. Despite the many problems with the data, the amount and quality of data has improved drastically over the past few years. Below is a histogram of the number of players that have each of our data sources by college season.



As shown by the graph above, in 2016, the data sources presented did not even exist. By 2019, most ESPN rated players had both AAU and PrepCircuit statistics. This includes players that are rated poorly. The data appears to be improving in its robustness and reliability for 2020 high school seniors and 2020 NCAA freshman. Both of these classes could be incorporated into the training set or held out as a test set in the future. The 2020 NCAA freshman were not included in the analysis as it was an incomplete season due to the COVID-19 virus. The quality and robustness of the high school data will improve over time and with the future emphasis on high school evaluations brought on by the new ‘none and done’ climate. Histograms and scatter plots of all numeric variables in the data are shown in the appendix.

## Methods

In order to assess the predictive value of high school statistics, models will be constructed using all possible input combinations. Not every model can be considered on every player as not all players have each data source. Using all possible players does not make sense as the amount of players with all sources of information has increased every year. Therefore, only players with complete information will be considered as that will be most representative of the future. In total, there were 185 players used in the models. The models are the following:

$$M_{ESPN} : \hat{ws} = f_{ESPN}(ESPN.Rating) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{PREP} : \hat{ws} = f_{PREP}(X_{PREP}, Position) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{AAU} : \hat{ws} = f_{AAU}(X_{AAU}, Position) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{FULL} : \hat{ws} = f_{FULL}(X_{AAU}, X_{PREP}, ESPN.Rating, Position) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{AAU.ESPN} : \hat{ws} = f_{AAU.ESPN}(X_{AAU}, ESPN.Rating, Position) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{PREP.ESPN} : \hat{ws} = f_{PREP.ESPN}(X_{PREP}, ESPN.Rating, Position) + \epsilon$$

$$M_{AAU.PREP} : \hat{ws} = f_{AAU.PREP}(X_{AAU}, X_{PREP}, Position) + \epsilon$$

where

- $\hat{ws}$  is the predicted win shares of a given player,
- ESPN.rating is the ESPN recruiting rating,
- $X_{PREP}$  contains PrepCircuit points per game and games played,
- $X_{AAU}$  contains AAU games played and points, blocks, steals, rebounds, and minutes all on a per game basis,

- Position is a player's five factor position: point guard, shooting guard, small forward, power forward, or center,
- each  $f$  is a unique function that outputs predicted win shares,
- $\epsilon$  is a random error

All models were built through leave one out cross validation. For a given player, the model,  $f$ , was trained on all other players. Each  $f$  then generated a prediction for the left-out player. There is no overfitting because no information about the player's win shares is known during the prediction. It should be noted that a player's position was used in all models aside from the ESPN model. The position was not included in the ESPN models because the grading scale is the same across positions. The ESPN model is meant to be viewed as the null model, not the best possible scouting model. The choices for  $f$ , and subsequent hyper parameters will be discussed briefly below.

- Lasso
  - Fits a standard linear regression, but shrinks the sum of the absolute value of the coefficients by a value,  $\lambda$ , chosen through cross validation.
- Ridge
  - Fits a standard linear regression, but shrinks the sum of squares of the coefficients by a value,  $\lambda$ , chosen through cross validation.
- Averaged Neural Network
  - Assigns one or more linear weights to each of the variables depending on the number of input layers (number of predictor variables). The hidden layers are comprised of a linear combination of the input variables. The number of hidden

layers is arbitrarily chosen, in this case,  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the number of input layers. The final output is a linear combination of the hidden layers, and is then converted into a predicted value through some function. In this case a linear weight was chosen. 200 networks were constructed as such. The final prediction for a player was an average of all such networks.

- Earth

- Models non linearities and interactions by creating one or more hinge functions constructed as  $h(x-a)$ , where  $a$  is the "knot", a cutoff value for the variable  $x$ . When  $x$  is below  $a$ , it is multiplied by a weight  $b_1$ . When  $x$  is greater than  $a$ , it is multiplied by a separate weight  $b_2$ . The number of these hinge functions is controlled by a hyper parameter as is the degree (number of interactions and higher order terms).

- Support Vector Machine

- Builds a hyper plane, a plane or line with dimension of our predictor matrix, that attempts to minimize the distance from the response value. Rather than minimize the total sum of the errors, the hyper plane is fit so that all errors are less than a specified hyper parameter  $\epsilon$ . If an error is greater than  $\epsilon$ , it is penalized proportionally to a cost value,  $C$ , found through cross validation. In this case, the non linear hyper plane had a lower out of sample error.

- Random Forest

- Builds " $n$ " regression trees, in this case  $n$  was 200, and creates a prediction based on the average of all of the trees. To reduce correlation between the trees, " $m$ "

random predictors are chosen when constructing each tree. M is found through cross validation.

- Gradient Boosted Trees
  - Builds n "weak" regression trees and creates a prediction based on the average of all of the "weak" trees. The trees are pruned by cutting them at a specified "max depth" found through cross validation. For the boosted trees, these hyperparameters were chosen through 10 fold cross validation as leave one out lead to over fitting.
- Stacked
  - The stacked model creates a combined prediction for each player from the predictions of each of the other methods discussed above. A linear regression on the predictions of the other methods is run for each player with leave one out cross validation. The linear weights assigned to each method for the full model can be found in the appendix. Note that some methods were not used for ESPN as they are tailored to data sets with many predictor variables. In this case the ESPN dataset is only one variable, ESPN rating.

## Results

A full linear regression on all variables used in the models is shown in the appendix. The most interesting result was that the AAU points per game was not highly significant, but blocks and steals were. This may seem surprising, but many AAU teams are strong teams which may lead to individual star players sharing the ball more. In contrast, these same star players may be the only capable scorer on their school teams, leading to a predictive

PrepCircuit points per game. Although the full linear regression performed close to the other methods after implementing leave one out cross validation, it was not used in the stacked model as it was highly correlated with the lasso and ridge models. Below are the cross validated  $R^2$ s for the different models.

## Percentage of Variation Explained by the Models

Method	ESPN (n=185)	PREP (n=185)	AAU (n=185)	FULL (n=185)
Linear	23.4%	<b>23.2%</b>	21.1%	27.9%
Averaged Neural Network		19.3%	18.2%	23.9%
Lasso		23%	21.2%	27.7%
Ridge		22.9%	21.4%	29.5%
Random Forest		16.7%	16.5%	24.4%
Earth	28.9%	20.8%	15%	30.1%
Support Vector Machine	<b>33.1%</b>	18.1%	<b>21.6%</b>	24.9%
Gradient Boosted Trees		6.9%	6.8%	14.8%
Stacked	32%	15.8%	17.7%	<b>37.4%</b>

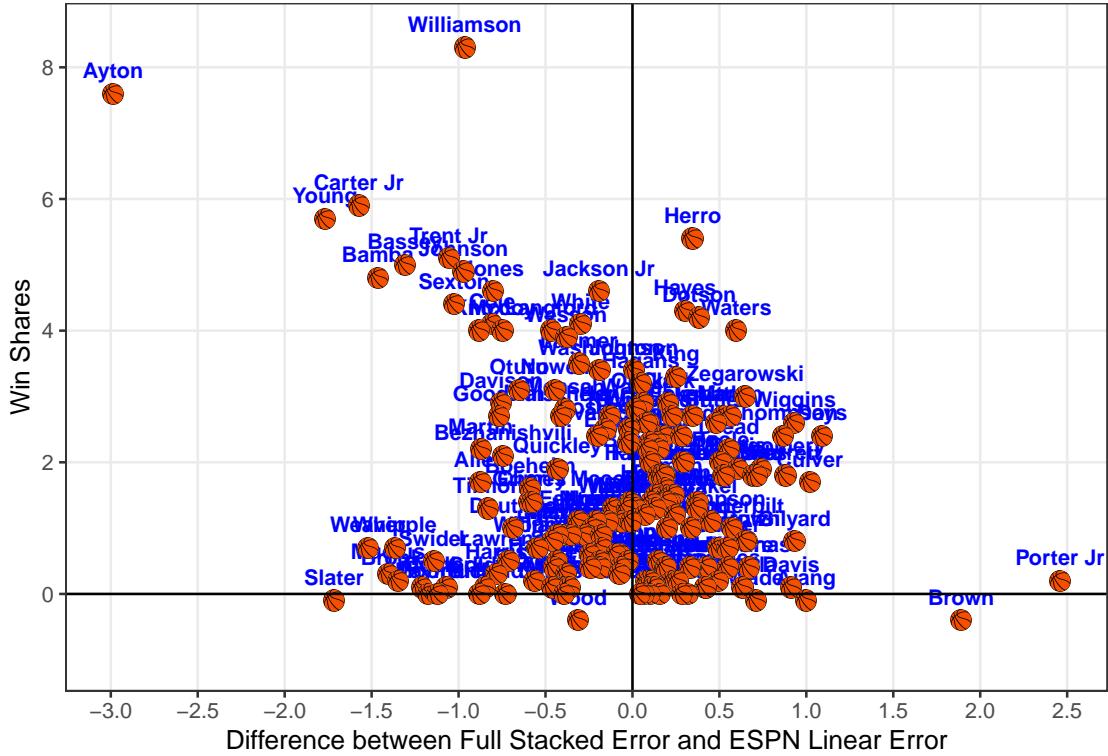
Method	AAU.ESPN (n=185)	PREP.ESPN (n=185)	AAU.PREP (n=185)
Linear	25.3%	27.3%	26.7%
Averaged Neural Network	14.8%	18.7%	22.8%
Lasso	24.6%	27%	26.6%
Ridge	26.2%	27.3%	<b>27.7%</b>
Random Forest	23.2%	25.6%	21.7%
Earth	28.5%	30.1%	14.4%
Support Vector Machine	27.7%	28.7%	23%
Gradient Boosted Trees	14.7%	8.8%	13.4%
Stacked	<b>31%</b>	<b>36.4%</b>	21.4%

Based on these results, the ESPN models performed better than the PrepCircuit and AAU models. The best ESPN model explains almost 10% more variation than the best PrepCircuit model. When forecasting prospect performance, 10% is a huge performance boost. It should be noted, that the best ESPN model is a radial support vector machine, indicating the presence of non linearities. A player rated 10 points higher than another player

generates a larger increase in expected wins at the higher end of the rating scale. Scouting and projecting players more accurately at the higher end of the talent spectrum may yield a greater expected number of wins than at the lower end.

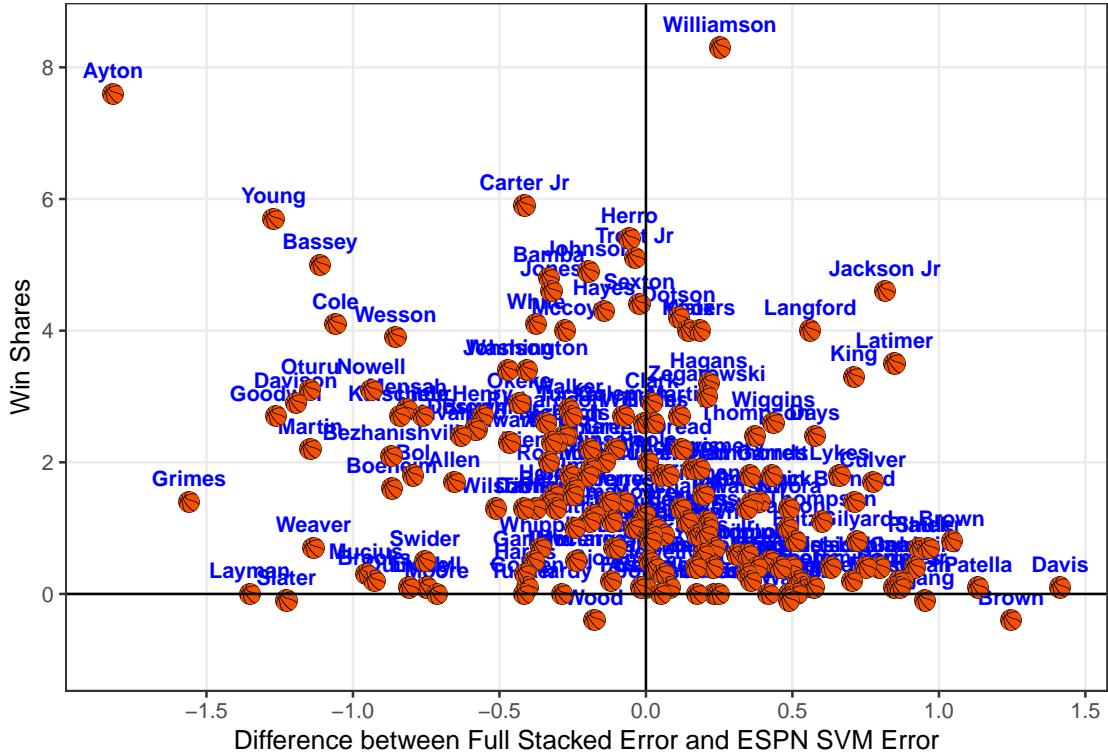
However, this difference between the ESPN and high school models should not discount the usefulness of the high school statistics. On their own, the PrepCircuit and AAU models were able to explain 23% and 21% of the variation respectively, on par with the linear ESPN model; moreover, models incorporating the ESPN ratings and high school statistics performed even better, with the best model explaining 37.4% of the variation, 4% better than the non linear ESPN model, and 14% better than the basic linear ESPN model which could be viewed as the conventional approach. One could argue the non linear ESPN model should be the null model since it is well established that a star can have a disproportionate effect on the game; however, if it is so inherent to the game, than the ratings should be scaled accordingly. This does not discount the predictive power of the ESPN rating. It is currently the single best predictor.

To illustrate how this predictive advantage could be used, the plot below shows the difference in absolute error between the best full model and the linear ESPN model. Negative values mean the full model had a smaller error compared to the ESPN model and positive values mean the ESPN model performed better. In the graph below, values to the left of the vertical line indicate negative values, where the full models performed better. The y axis is the actual win shares.



The plot shows there were several players that the full model out projected the ESPN model by one or more win shares. In the most extreme example, the full model out projected Deandre Ayton by almost 3 win shares compared to the ESPN model. Other large differences favoring the full model are Trae Young, Brandon Slater, and Wendell Carter Jr.

The ESPN model predicted best on Michael Porter Jr. who only played in only 1 college game due to an injury. The ESPN model only predicted better by 1 win share on 3 other players. To further justify the use of the high school data and statistical methods, the best full model will be compared to the support vector ESPN model.



The players favoring the full model were similar here as well, but to a slightly lesser degree: Deandre Ayton, Quentin Grimes, Ryan Layman, and Trae Young. Most of the players that the ESPN model predicted substantially better on (more than 1 win share) ended up having very low win shares and a low ESPN rating as shown by the downward to the right slope of the graph. The three players favoring the ESPN model the most: KJ Davis, Shandon Brown, and Bailey Patella all had an ESPN rating of 64. Only 4 players were out predicted by more than 1 win share by this ESPN model, compared to 12 by the full model.

## Conclusion

It is important to judge the data and its predictive accuracy with some perspective. Original modeling with relatively new high school statistics improved upon a rating system that has been bettering itself for 13 years. The information used was only box score statistics which does not paint the full picture of the game. Even in baseball where statistical modeling

in sports is an integral part of the process, the best projection systems incorporate scouting and statistics, and the pure statistics based models rarely beat the combined models despite the individual aspect to baseball.

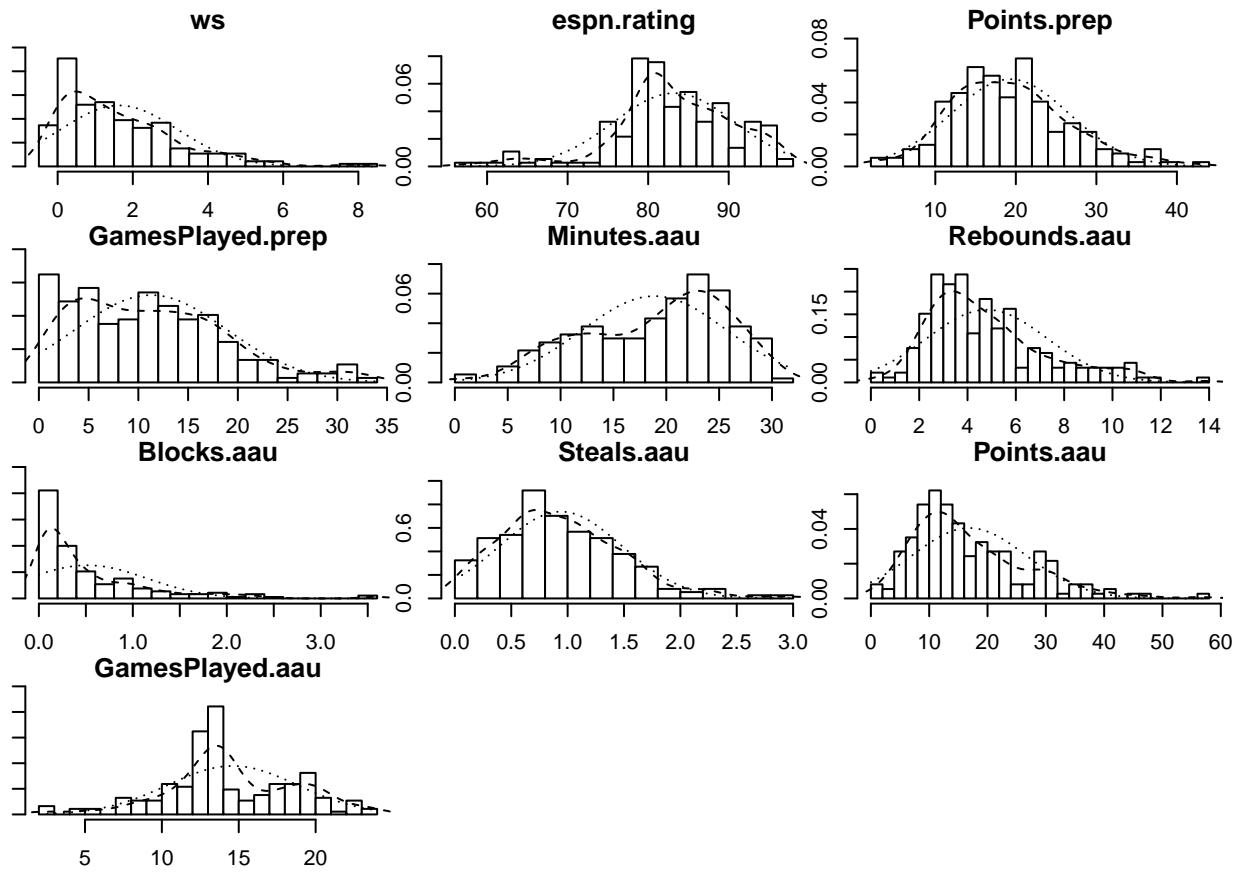
This finding should encourage more analysis and collection of high school data not only for the collegiate level, but at the professional level, where one draft pick can change a franchise for decades. If this data holds predictive value at the collegiate level, there is reason to believe it can assist an NBA projection system, particularly in cases where a high school superstar underperforms, gets injured, or does not play in college. These analyses could also help evaluate NBA or collegiate potential when a low rated prospect has a phenomenal high school or college career. Although the improvements shown by the models and data are small relative to the amount of statistical analysis, in 13 years the reliability and robustness of the data will improve the models substantially.

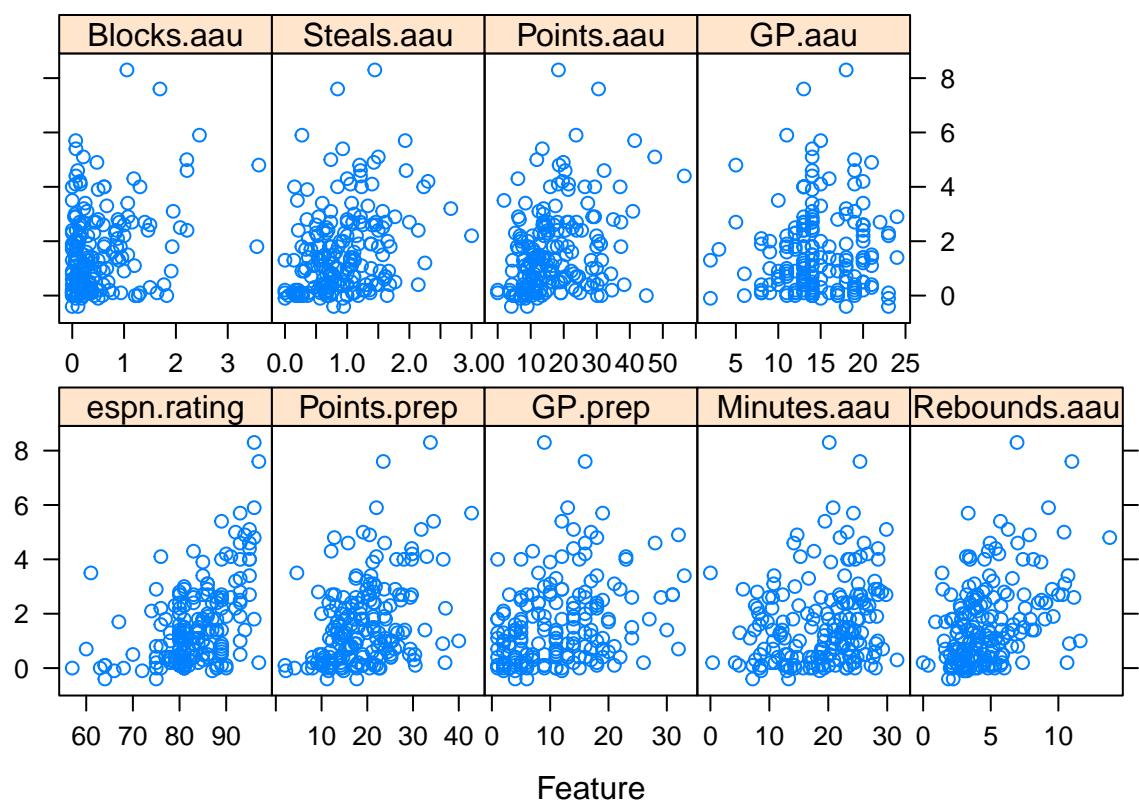
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# Appendix

## Histograms and Scatter Plots of Variables





## Full Linear Regression Coefficients

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	-2.7482430	1.3179819	-2.0851903	0.0385373
espn.rating	0.0379628	0.0181221	2.0948334	0.0376594
Points.prep	0.0485737	0.0174540	2.7829494	0.0059927
GamesPlayed.prep	0.0365939	0.0144797	2.5272483	0.0124029
Minutes.aaau	-0.0297244	0.0196943	-1.5092884	0.1330706
Rebounds.aaau	0.0985618	0.0711822	1.3846403	0.1679665
Blocks.aaau	0.3359496	0.2459050	1.3661763	0.1736776
Steals.aaau	0.4462566	0.2367293	1.8850922	0.0611137
Points.aaau	0.0109654	0.0139632	0.7853101	0.4333585
GamesPlayed.aaau	-0.0270764	0.0259706	-1.0425793	0.2986149
Position.BasicPF	-0.5590865	0.3582525	-1.5605934	0.1204685
Position.BasicPG	-0.3308614	0.5234688	-0.6320556	0.5281947
Position.BasicSF	-0.7849094	0.4020491	-1.9522724	0.0525388
Position.BasicSG	-0.3777551	0.4560155	-0.8283821	0.4086089

## Full Stacked Model Linear Weights

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(> t )
(Intercept)	-1.2432768	0.4691364	-2.6501393	0.0087747
nnet	0.9665427	0.4177753	2.3135466	0.0218420
lasso	-1.4765924	0.8689065	-1.6993686	0.0910065
ridge	2.5443861	0.9436695	2.6962683	0.0076891
rf	-1.2867831	0.4415991	-2.9139173	0.0040300
earth	1.2093529	0.1827830	6.6163326	0.0000000
svm.radial	0.0952975	0.2643152	0.3605449	0.7188696
xgboost	-0.2605762	0.1645476	-1.5835914	0.1150718