Which Professional Sports League Suffers Most from Dominant Sports Franchises?

Everyone knows about historically dominant sports franchises that just seem to win every year. The New England Patriots, the Boston Red Sox, the New York Yankees, and the Los Angeles Lakers (among many others) come to mind. Unlike college sports, for which turnover is rampant, professional sports teams can form so-called dynasties, staying at the top of the standings for years. Some people argue that this lack of competitiveness is bad for each league, lowering attendance and revenues; when fans can easily predict the outcome of each game and season, there is less incentive to watch.

Thus, a question naturally arises: Which leagues actually have a lack of competitiveness?

Lack of competitiveness is a subjective term, but I settled on the following criteria for measuring it:

1) How many different teams have won a title?
2) How typically do teams make playoffs across a substantial number of consecutive seasons??
3) How typically do teams *not* make the playoffs for a substantial period of time?
4) How many different teams have won a playoff game/series[1]?

I set out to formulate an index (measured 0 to 100) to measure the competitiveness of each league relative to one another. I wanted to see how far each league deviates from what perfect competition would look like in that sport. In order to evaluate the extent to which each league does—and to compare this across leagues—I formulated a Competitiveness Index, whereby a value of 100 would be perfect competition and 0 would indicate absolute domination by one team. In order to derive values for each component of my index, I defined my competitiveness criteria above and combined them in a meaningful way. I considered data from four professional American sports leagues (the NFL, the NBA, the NHL[2], and the MLB) over the past 20 years.[3, 4] Here are my findings.

1) How many different teams won a title? *Examine the percentage of teams that have won at least one title over the past 20 years.*
    a) NFL: 13/32
    b) NBA: 8/30
    c) MLB: 12/30
    d) NHL: 12/30

[1] For this metric, I just measured this based on postseason advancement (i.e., winning a series in the NBA, the NHL, and the MLB vs. winning a single game in the NFL).

[2] For the NHL, I disregarded the Las Vegas Golden Knights because they were a recent expansion team.

[3] Obviously, leagues finish their seasons at different times. If the league is currently in season as of the date this article is published, I used the last 20 years starting with the last season of that league (i.e., the 20 most recently completed seasons).

[4] I added an extra year of data in compensation for the 2004-2005 NHL lockout that caused teams to cease play for the whole season.

Ideally, in perfect competition, 20 different teams will have won the title in each league over the past two decades. For the NFL, this would amount to 62.5% of the league, and for the NBA, NHL, and MLB, it would be 67%.

2) How typically do teams make playoffs across a substantial number of consecutive seasons? *Examine the percentage of teams that have made the playoffs for five or more consecutive years over the 20 year period*.
    a) NFL: 8/32
    b) NBA: 24/30
    c) MLB: 8/30
    d) NHL: 22/30

    Ideally, in perfect competition, no team will have made playoffs in five back-to-back seasons. This amounts to 0% of the teams in each league.
3) How typically do teams *not* make the playoffs for a substantial period of time? *Examine the percentage of teams that have missed the playoffs for five or more straight seasons*.
    a) NFL: 4/30
    b) NBA: 6/30
    c) MLB: 9/30
    d) NHL: 3/30

    Ideally, in perfect competition, no team will have missed out on playoffs every year for more than five seasons. This amounts to 0% of the teams in each league.
4) How many different teams have won a playoff game/series? *Examine the percentage of teams have won a playoff series*.[5]
    a) NFL: 28/32
    b) NBA: 30/30
    c) MLB 29/30 (only the San Diego Padres have not)
    d) NHL: 29/30 (only the Florida Panthers have not)

    Ideally, in perfect competition, all of the teams in each league will have advanced past the first round of playoffs at least once over the past two decades. This would amount to 100% of the teams in each league.

Once I found this data, I subtracted the measured value of each league from its ideal value (for each of the four metrics). I then averaged the absolute value of these differences and multiplied this average by 100 to find the Competitiveness Index value for each league. My final results are as follows:

NFL: 18.2
NBA: 35.0
MLB: 21.7
NHL: 28.3

Here are some of my takeaways from these results:

[5] Once again, since the NFL does not employ playoff series but plays just one playoff game, I based this metric off postseason advancement.

1) **The NBA is the least competitive major North American sports league.**

Given that the Warriors and Cavaliers have met in the finals each of the past four seasons, this result came as no surprise. With basketball being such a high scoring sport, there is less variance in results, which means the same teams will likely come out on top over and over again. If you look at a sport like tennis — where players are playing hundreds of points in each tournament — you will see the same names winning over and over again; over time, the results are pretty accurate in indicating which players are better. By contrast, in hockey or baseball (where goals/runs are scarce), there is a bit more variance.

2) **The NFL and MLB are similarly competitive despite drastically different rules.**

Football and baseball are obviously very different in the nature of how the games are played, but even the leagues themselves are structured very differently. Baseball has no salary cap, a season that is ten times longer than the NFL's season, and a fewer portion of the teams that can qualify for the playoffs each year. As a result, one might assume that the MLB would be significantly more lopsided, but in reality it a has similar level of competitiveness as the NFL.

3) **The NFL is the most competitive major North American sports league.**

Of the four leagues analyzed, the NFL has the most variance in the teams that compete for a title each year. A number of factors could explain this. The NFL's playoff games are just one game while all other sports leagues have a series of games; as such, a team having an off-day or an exceptionally good performance could make or break their season (whereas series-structured playoffs often allow for things to balance out, having the better team come out on top). Also, the NFL features 22 players on the field at once — more than any other sport; this means that having a superstar in the NBA, for example, is more advantageous than it would be in the NFL (implying that the NBA can be much more lopsided than the NFL). Because of this, it's often more difficult for bottom-feeder NFL teams to reach the playoffs after bad seasons because, even if they find a star in the draft, it doesn't have as much of an effect. Additionally, the NFL is more high-scoring than the MLB and the NHL, but this is misleading — the frequency of scoring is similar for all three sports.

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