

Coaching Experience, Playing Experience and Coaching Tenure:

A Commentary

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INTRODUCTION

Danny Mielke's paper attempts to examine how head coaching experience, assistant coaching experience and playing experience impact on coaching tenure in four major team sport leagues, i.e., the English Premier League (EPL) in soccer, and three North American Leagues, namely baseball (MLB), basketball (NBA) and football (NFL). Descriptive statistics are provided for each of these leagues, which show that head coaching experience ranges from 5.0 years in the NFL to 12.3 years in the EPL. However, these statistics are for total experience in the league rather than tenure with individual clubs, which is the relevant statistic if we are interested in coach turnover.

EXPECTED LENGTH OF CAREER IN DIFFERENT SPORTS

Assistant coaching experience varies between 4.4 years in the EPL to 14.5 years in the NFL, suggestive of an inverse relationship between these two variables. Likewise, previous experience as a player varies between 1.6 years in the NFL to 8.5 years in MLB. Here some adjustment seems to be required for differences in average career length among the different sports. Hence, Mielke's observation that baseball seems to be distinctive compared to other sports may be explained by longer expected career length in the sport.

PROFIT MAXIMIZATION

Mielke's main conclusion is that economic success of a team plays a major role in coach retention. In order to explain such relationships, however, we need to consider the objectives of the participants. Clearly the fans are interested in the playing success of a team, but this may be constrained by the population size of a club's catchment area and the willingness of management to procure the best players in order to achieve this objective. Profit maximization might imply that small city clubs pursue a lesser degree of playing success than bigger city clubs. Further technical efficiency in terms of coach performance implies the maximization of team performance for a given quality of playing resources. This suggests that the best coaches may not always be the most successful in terms of playing performance.

COACHING EFFICIENCY

In order to understand these relationships better, multivariate analysis of sporting production functions is required – as first suggested by Rottenberg [1] and subsequently estimated by sports economists in North America and Europe. Thus, Scully [2] showed that coach

efficiency is positively related to career length, i.e, the most efficient coaches survive. Evidence was also found that in baseball and basketball, player managers were less efficient than their non-playing counterparts and that average efficiency increased over time in these sports. The decision to terminate a coach's contract was highly sensitive to league position. In soccer, Dawson et al. [3] used stochastic frontier analysis to estimate technical efficiency for a panel of managers in the English Premier League over the period 1992 to 1998. They found that the three most efficient managers over this period were Arsene Wenger (Arsenal), Kevin Keegan (Newcastle United) and John Gregory (Aston Villa), but efficiency was not highly correlated with playing performance. Dobson and Goddard [4] found that within-season managerial departures were disruptive in the short-run, i.e., a team that changes its coach (or manager) tends to under perform in the next few games. However, in the longer term, playing performance tends to improve.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that tenure is precarious in all professional team sports. However, this is not surprising given the zero-sum nature of sports leagues. Success for one club implies failure for another club. Unlike conventional industries, it is simply not possible for all teams to be successful at any one time. Given financial inequality among clubs, hiring and firing decisions based simply on playing success (or lack of it) are unlikely to be optimal. Some questions, however, remain unanswered. Why are some coaches more successful than others or why are some coaches more successful with some clubs than with others? How do we measure the human capital embodied in individual coaches? To what extent does luck (e.g., injuries to key players) impact on a coach's job tenure? What is clear is that descriptive analysis cannot provide clear answers to such questions. That is why it is necessary to model coaching performance by formal empirical analysis.

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