

I wrote the article below in 2004. Almost 6 1/2 years ago. I went back to read it because I wanted to know if the science has changed at all or if the building of an NBA team has changed due to the science. The answer is no and no. The science is the same and in fact, the input of numbers into building a team is diminishing and being displaced by non traditional qualitative factors

Sure many of us across the NBA have spent a boatload of money on "sabremetrics". It has not been valueless. We are better able to coach the teams we have because of all the information. But the reality is, we can not put together teams based on stats. You can take all the PER, WS48, WP48, Adv plus/minus and the rest and when you add them together the day before the season starts you still know nothing more than the minute before you added them all together. They are meaningless when it comes to putting together a team.

Why is this the case ? Two reasons: coaching and chemistry.

Each coach has a different style and each player contributes differently depending on the players around them and the style of play and coaching. How a player on another team will fit into the coaching environment and system of your team can not be answered by stats.

Add to that the material impact chemistry has on a team, where one nucklehead hurts, two nuckleheads kill and bad chemistry ruins a season and the numbers and analysis quickly become meaningless. You can try to understand both coaching and chemistry, and we continue to experiment with new ways to do so, but you can't quantify either.

Until you can quantify coaching and chemistry, you can not use the numbers to build a team. Period end of story. You can use them as partial input along with scouting and other elements, but there ain't no Moneyball solution or the NBA and I don't see Bill James walking through that door with a solution. Stats will continue to play a role in lineups, matchups and trends, but teambuilding, not so much.

Of course there are other elements that we are rapidly expanding at the Mavs that go into our team-building methodology, but I'm keeping all that to myself ■

But for shits and grins, here is my article from April 2004

The question comes up all the time. What is the NBA equivalent of MLB's Moneyball approach? Are there stats that can be used to come up with a better model for building an NBA team? The answers are Yes and No.

Yes, there are stats that are out there that could be used to better build an NBA team, but No, they can't be used for building an NBA team, because the stats that most likely most correlate to a player and team's success are not being collected.

I'm not here to say I know exactly which variables independently, or collectively equate to getting a competitive and financial advantage. Only actual testing will determine what works. I will say which stats I think are most important, and let you know that its more than just a little bit of a logistics challenge to try to accumulate accurate data.

Here are the stats I think the Mavs will need to figure out how to collect as a first effort towards determining which have the greatest impact on success:

1. Deflections, Deflections for turnovers
2. Defensive Penetrations Allowed, Defensive Penetrations stopped (did you stop your man from penetrating in the paint before he shot or gave up his dribble)
3. Assists in paint, Assists outside of paint, within each, assists leading to jumpshots, assists leading to layups, assists leading to foulshots, and within each of these, are they part of fastbreak or not.
4. Rebounds in traffic, Rebounds from free throws
5. Shot percentages – location zone of shot, and within each, whether guarded or open
6. Turnovers – forced, unforced, rule violation turnovers by type (traveling, palming, etc.)
7. Touches – How often, where, duration in seconds, conclusion (pass, assist, shot, turnover as a percentage of total touches)
8. Charges taken, blocks given
9. Blocks above head, blocks that were strips, fouls on block attempts by each
10. Turnovers caused – steals, forced by defense (i.e., preventing your man from crossing 8 sec line, or guarding your man for more than x seconds leading to 24 sec clock violation)

There are obviously more, but these are a good starting point to see what works. Unfortunately, this data is not always available just from tape, so it would be necessary to have multiple people at the scorers table at the game to see it, confirm it and get help on it. That's what makes all this so difficult to collect. It may well be that we need to add cameras to each gym that can cover all the action and then go back and determine the information. Either way is expensive, which means it could be along time in coming to the NBA.