The Impact of Sports Analytics on Playstyle Evolution and Audience Engagement in the NBA

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science

University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

Grant Costello

Spring 2025

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

Karina Rider, Department of Engineering and Society

Introduction

I made my high school freshman basketball team during my first year of high school. We were an odd group and would practice at 6am before school. Despite being on a lower-level team, my coach was a basketball savant. He knew how to win. The team went undefeated the year before ours. He leveraged a range of numbers and statistics and that shaped our team's playstyle. We pressed every possession because we had so many substitutes and the turnover percentage goes way up for the other team when you press because the more players that play mean more energized play. Also, we shot no midrange or 3-point shots. By the numbers and analytics that my coach had accumulated over his many years of coaching, he noticed that it only made sense to have us shoot from inside the paint. Our chance of making a shot from inside the paint was exponentially higher than the chance we would make a 3-point shot. As a player who loves to take 3-point and midrange shots, this playstyle was hard to adjust to, but I did, and we ended up going almost undefeated that year.

What my coach was doing wasn't abnormal. He was acting as a part of a broader movement in sports to integrate data analytics to make decisions. This emergence of data analytics has been caused by advancements in technology and affected major sports first. The first mainstream example was *Moneyball*. The book turned movie was based on the 2002 Major League Baseball season, where Oakland Athletics manager Billy Beane put together a successful baseball team despite budget restraints by analyzing player data (Lewis, 2003). Moneyball started the idea that data analytics could be used in major league sports. I grew up watching teams like Kobe Bryant's Lakers but watching teams now is very different. The Lakers would

run an offense and usually Kobe would get the ball and shoot a highly difficult midrange shot. Today, teams play with lots of pace and shoot more 3-point shots than ever before.

I want to specifically look at the case of the National Basketball Association (NBA). How has an increase in sports analytics shaped the NBA's style of play to be more entertaining? Who benefits? Who loses?

Although it is largely common-sense that playstyle change in the NBA has made the NBA more popular, my research shows that, counterintuitively, an increased use of sports analytics has caused the NBA's popularity to stay the same or, in some cases, decline.

To prove this argument, I conducted a meta review of existing data on how the NBA's playstyle has changed over time and who the playstyle change has affected. Then I will do a discourse analysis of how different groups of people feel about, and have been affected by, the playstyle change.

Background on the NBA

Overview of the NBA and Rule Changes

The NBA has had a long history, consistently growing and evolving its rules to make the game more entertaining for the fans. The NBA was formed in 1949 when two different leagues merged (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, 2025). In the 1950s, The NBA had 11 teams but then went down to eight teams by the end of the decade, not having enough popularity to support all 11 teams (Joseph, 2022). During this decade, the NBA introduced the 24-second shot clock so that teams couldn't stall while having the ball, creating more possessions and speeding up the game (Sorensen, 2023). This rule change is still in effect today.

In the 1960s, Bill Russell's Boston Celtics won nine of the ten championships that decade. In 1964, the NBA instituted a rule that widened the lane which meant that the painted area between the free throw line and the basket became wider (Sorensen, 2023). Rules state that players can't stand in this area for more than three seconds at a time. This rule change primarily effected Wilt Chamberlain, a superstar at the time, so that he couldn't dominate on offense and stand close to the basket the entire game. This was the first rule change that was specifically targeted to stop a player that was dominating the game. In 1968, the NBA added six teams, making the NBA 14 teams total (Joseph, 2022). During this period, the American Basketball Association (ABA) formed in the United States, which was a competitor with the NBA for the next ten years.

In the 1970s, the NBA and ABA competed for players to join their league. Kareem Abdul Jabbar joined the NBA in the 70s, and Julius Erving joined the ABA. The NBA and the ABA competed for a while but in 1976, the ABA merged with the NBA, so the NBA absorbed teams and players from the former ABA. This merger was more like a takeover in the sense that the NBA kept their name, governing system, and teams. This move was advantageous for both leagues because the smaller ABA league was struggling financially, so owners could move their teams to a bigger, more profitable league in the NBA. For the NBA, this was an easy move because they could take out their main competitor and expand their league with the ABA teams at half the cost it would take to expand by founding new teams (James, 2024). This is where the league boomed, going from 14 to 23 teams by 1979 (Joseph, 2022). The NBA implemented the 3-point line in 1979 (Sorensen, 2023), which was something first implemented by the ABA before they merged with the NBA.

In the 1980s, the NBA started growing in popularity. Magic Johnson and Larry Bird were drafted and had a rivalry, playing in multiple finals against each other. They combined for eight championships during the 80s, which started driving viewership up. Then Michael Jordan got drafted and did the same, being a star from his rookie season. No big rule changes happened during this decade, but the NBA expanded to 25 teams (Joseph, 2022).

The 1990s were ruled by Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls. They won three straight championships two different times. Then Michael Jordan and the other superstars of the NBA united for the first time to play in the 1992 Paris Olympics, which put the NBA on a global stage, and the USA won gold. In the NBA, they moved the 3-point line to 22 feet, which is closer to the basket, but then regretted it three years later and switched it back to the original 23.75 ft (Sorensen, 2023). The NBA wanted to encourage more players to shoot 3-pointers as a solution to the declining points per game average for the previous decade. However, they found that this didn't solve that problem and only made things worse by allowing teams to "chuck up" 3-pointers instead of running a coherent offense (Quinn, 2020).

In the 2000s, all 30 teams that currently exist were established, although some would move or relocate to different cities (Joseph, 2022). The Los Angeles Lakers, led by Kobe Bryant, were a major team that won multiple championships, and LeBron James was drafted, marketed as the next Michael Jordan. The NBA implemented some more rules. The first of which was not allowing a defender to stay in the lane for more than three seconds, and they allowed NBA teams to play zone defense (Sorensen, 2023).

The 2010s were full of "superteam" dynasties. The first was the Big Three Miami Heat. Then came the San Antonio Spurs and then the Golden State Warriors. This era was all about having three- or four-star players and building around them. Teams that had three or more star

players were coined “a superteam”. There were no notable rule changes during this period. The NBA, from a rules standpoint, has remained consistent.

An Overview of the NBA on TV

Before 1990, the TV and broadcasting rights for the NBA were changed every few years. In 1987, the NBA started airing on TNT, which has stayed consistent until today. In 2002, the NBA signed a contract with the Disney-owned ABC and ESPN and have been airing games ever since. The contracts for the broadcasting rights have been renewed every couple of years for Disney and TNT, and the prices have gone up every time. The NBA is making more and more money as time goes on from broadcasting rights. In the 1990s, the NBA made close to 3 billion dollars, but in the 2010s, the NBA exploded to around 24 billion dollars (Fischer, 2024). The NBA also implemented the NBA League Pass in 1995 (Marshall, 2020), which allows fans to watch a variety of games, not just the nationally televised games. As a user on the east coast, I could watch local west coast games. This increased the accessibility of the NBA to the fans, allowing fans to watch more and more games. Since 1990, the exposure of the NBA has been much better.

An Overview of NBA statistics

After the influence of Moneyball in the early 2000s, the NBA started developing advanced statistics. These statistics went beyond simple things such as points, rebounds, and assists. One big statistic that was developed was Player Efficiency Rating (PER). PER was a single number that accounted for a player’s contribution on the court. It made it easier for coaches to compare players that normally couldn’t be easily compared because they play different positions and have different playstyles, but now there is one statistic that describes how

efficient a player really is (Sean, 2024). Then other statistics such as True Shooting Percentage tried to improve measurements of how efficient a player was at shooting compared to Field Goal Percentage (shots made divided by shots taken). Box Plus/Minus calculated the overall impact of a player on offense and defense compared to other players. Another advanced metric that developed during the 2000s was Win Shares. This statistic produced a number that represented the amount of each win a player contributed to (Sean, 2024). By the end of the 2000s, coaches and general managers had statistics to compare players with each other besides the surface level statistics like points. This gave coaches and general managers the ability to make data driven decisions starting in the 2010s.

Methodology

Actor-Network Theory can be used as a framework for understanding what is going on in the NBA (Latour, 1992). Coaches used to determine the playstyle of teams and control who gets playing time, but that has now been delegated to advanced statistics and data science models that provide coaches with the optimal lineups and the most efficient players and playstyles. Part of the coach's job has been displaced, but new roles have been created within NBA team organizations for developing models that process data to provide coaches with the best available decisions to impact winning.

Institutional Isomorphism is another concept that can be used to describe the NBA's change in playstyle (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This can be looked at from two different mechanics within Institutional Isomorphism. The first of which is "mimetic processes", the idea of modeling practices off of other organizations. Mimetic processes could apply because NBA teams could look at other successful NBA teams and mimic their playstyles. This can also be

applied to the NBA organization as a whole. DiMaggio and Powell (1983: 152) state that "organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful." The NBA could model itself after other major sports organizations such as the MLB. The MLB was the first professional sports organizations to use sports statistics to make decisions in the Moneyball example (Lewis, 2003). The second mechanic is "normative pressures", the idea that organizations make decisions like each other because it has become the normal way of doing things. This can explain the NBA's decisions because teams using advanced statistics are doing it because it is common practice, instead of asking the why behind it.

I conducted a meta-review of existing research on the NBA and the playstyle changes. I specifically looked at statistical studies on how NBA statistics have changed over time. Then I looked at data about the NBA's viewership ratings to get a sense of how these changes affected the NBA's viewership. I will also do a discourse analysis on what stakeholders of the NBA are saying. I specifically looked at Reddit posts under the r/nba thread. I searched under these threads for the terms "hate", "dislike", and "playstyle". Then I looked for quotes from coaches, players, and sports announcers on the playstyle of the NBA in a meta review on how they feel about it.

Findings & Analysis

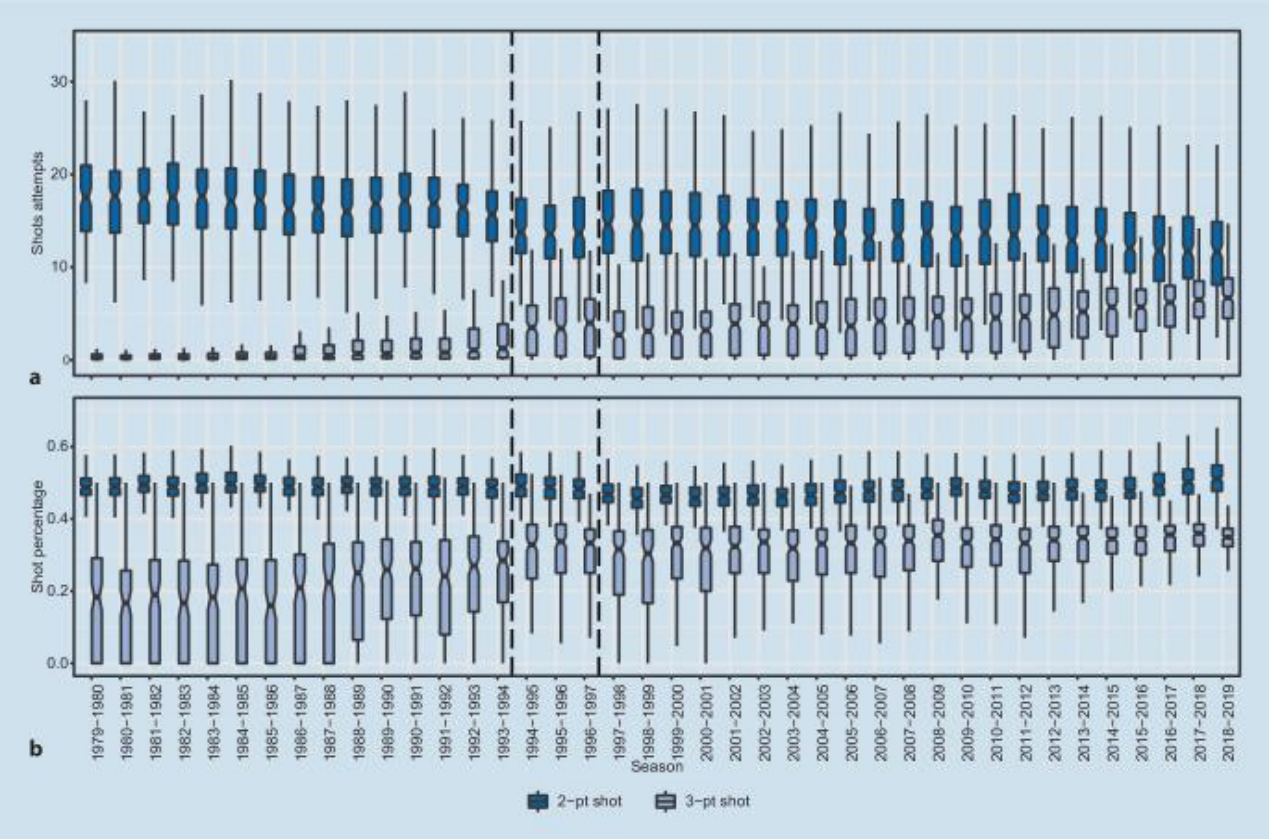
The Pace & Space Playstyle

The NBA playstyle has changed. The game played today is vastly different from that of 20 years ago. Today teams are shooting more and more 3-point shots. In a study done on the 2011-12 to 2020-21 NBA seasons, researchers proved that there has been a statistically

significant increase of the 3-point shot rate (Wang & Zheng, 2022). To do this, the researchers collected data on all shots taken between those two seasons and put them into five different groups based on shot distance. They ran a Mann-Kendall test on this data and found that there was a statistically significant increase of 3-point shot attempts between the two seasons. The 3-point shot rate, which is the percent of 3-point shots taken out of all field goals, went from 22% to 39% which isn't just an increase, but is significant enough to say it is a change in the NBA playstyle (Wang & Zheng, 2022). Over the 2010s, teams increased their percentage of 3-point shots compared to all other shot locations by 17%.

Figure 1

Distribution of Shot Attempts and Percentage per NBA Season



Note. This figure shows the distribution of shot attempts (a) and shot percentage (b) through 1979–1980 and 2018–

2019 seasons. From German Journal of Exercise and Sport Research, 51(2), 237–240 “Shot distribution in the NBA: did we see when 3-point shots became popular?” by Lucas Freitas, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-020-00690-7

Another study investigates when 3-point shots became popular and when the “3-point revolution” first happened (Freitas, 2021). The “3-point revolution” is a common term used for the point in time when NBA teams decided to shoot more 3-point shots. In the study, the researchers gathered data on each player from the first NBA season with a 3-point line. They took players that played more than 35 games that season and more than 20 minutes per game. To make the data normalized, they found the per 100 possessions data, which means that they calculated each player’s stats based on if they played 100 possessions a game. They found that there weren’t any season-to-season differences in the popularity of the 3-point shot, but gradually over time it has increased. In the last two seasons of data, the researchers had found that the Houston Rockets had broken a record and shot more 3-point shots compared to 2-point shots. During the last season of available data in 2018-19, the number of 3-point shot attempts was the highest it had ever been. NBA players had taken a combined 78,742 3-point shots. We can visually see the gradually increasing number of 3-point shot attempts players are taking (Figure 1). The 3-point shot boxplot continues to get higher and higher, showing how the NBA’s playstyle has changed in recent years to bring in high usage of the 3-point shot.

Euroleague is a basketball league located in Europe that is widely considered the second most competitive league in the world. Most of the players who don’t quite make it to the NBA that play oversees try to go play in Euroleague. Compared to the NBA, Euroleague is more of a team-oriented playstyle, but overall it is very similar in many aspects. The only differences are that Euroleague has a shorter 3-point line and 40-minute game time, whereas the NBA’s games

are 48 minutes long. Research was done looking at trends of the NBA and Euroleague and looking at comparison between the two leagues. The researchers looked at box score data from the 2000-01 to 2016-17. The trends found were similar for both the NBA and Euroleague; however, the one big difference in the trend data was pace (Mandic et al., 2019). Pace is a statistic that describes the number of possessions per game. The NBA's pace is numerically much higher than Euroleague because of the extra eight minutes longer the NBA's games are. However, the change in pace is different for both leagues. The pace in the Euroleague year to year is decreasing, meaning the game is getting slower and there are less possessions overall, most likely resulting in less points per game. On the other hand, the NBA's pace continues to rise. The NBA playstyle is getting faster and faster. There are more possessions, which results in more scoring opportunities, which leads to more points per game. The changes to playstyle aren't happening to all leagues, just the NBA.

The playstyle changes in the NBA can be seen when looking at Kevin Love. Love didn't come into the NBA known as a shooter. At UCLA, he played primarily in the paint shooting 2-point shots. He shot some 3-pointers but wasn't very accurate. After one year in college, he was drafted in the NBA in 2008 as the 5th overall pick. Upon making it to the NBA, he made an immediate impact and played the center position. His 3-point shot rate was 2.8%, meaning every 100 shots he took, 2.8 of them were 3-point shots (Foster et al., 2021). After his rookie season, his coaches decided to move him to the power forward position. With that change, Love was asked to shoot more 3-point shots. That next season, his 3-point shot rate was 16.4%. Love had to adapt to what his coaches asked of him, which aligned with the what the advanced statistics told them specifically how 3-point shots are more efficient than the midrange 2-point shots Love was taking prior. 3-point shots are a more efficient shot, and so six seasons later in 2015-16,

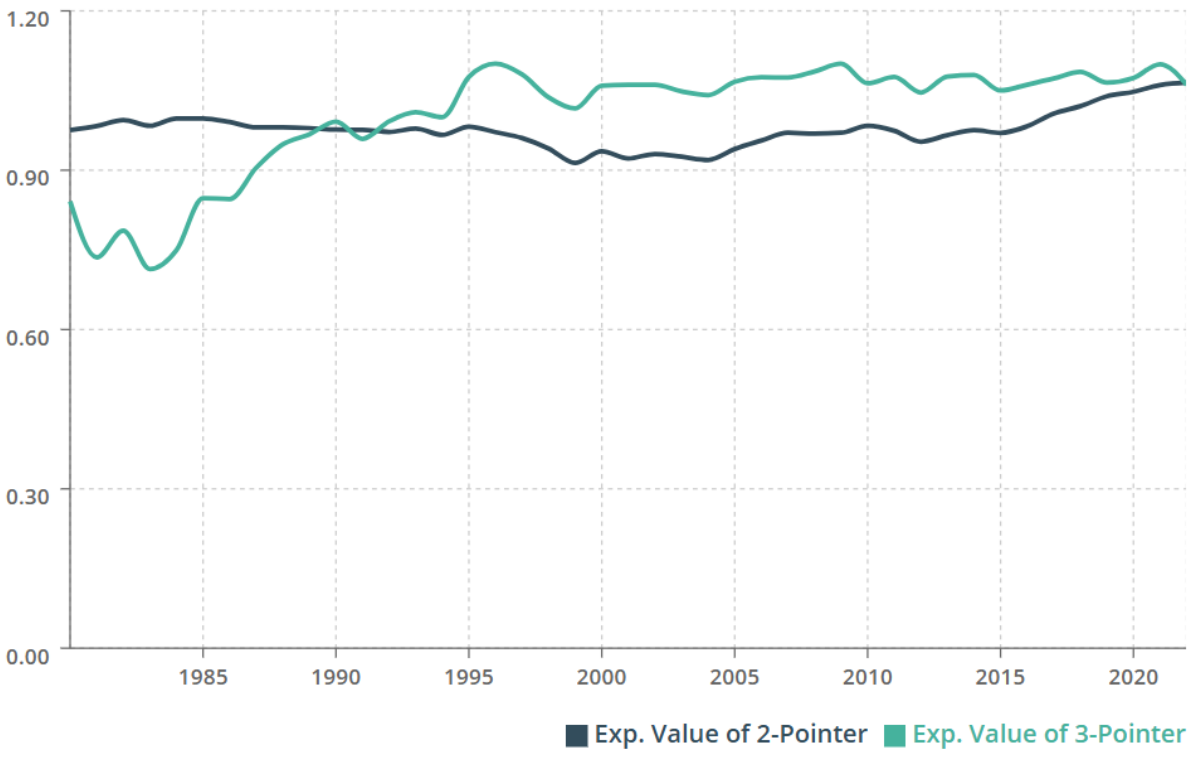
Love's 3-point shot rate was 44.9%, meaning almost half of his shots were 3 pointers. Kevin Love is an example of how sports analytics shaped his playstyle to go from an inside player to primarily a 3-point specialist.

From these studies we find the so called "pace & space" playstyle has taken over the NBA and continues to be the primary playstyle adopted by the NBA. It calls for an increased pace, or speed of play, and everyone spacing out by the 3-point line ready to shoot.

Sport Analytics as the Root Cause

Figure 2

Expected Shot Value in the NBA from 1980-2022



Note. Shows the Shot Percentage * Shot Value for 2-pointer and 3-pointer per season. From The Hoops Geek "The History and Evolution of the Three-Point Shot," by Andy, 2022, https://www.thehoopsgeek.com/history-three-pointer/

The NBA's playstyle change to the "pace & space" playstyle has been primarily caused by the increase in the use of sports analytics in recent years by the NBA. A study done by researchers at MIT looked at the correlation between the number of analysts on staff versus the amount of winning an NBA team does. They found that during the 2009-10 season, only 11 sports analysts were on staff on NBA teams, but by the 2022-23 season, there were 132 sports analysts on staff across all 30 teams (Wang, Sarker, & Hosoi, 2025). This shows the increase of the importance of sports analytics to NBA teams. Added on to that, the researchers found that the number of sports analysts on a team positively affected the number of wins that team got in the regular season (Wang, Sarker, & Hosoi, 2025). This effect is statistically significant, showing that teams that have hired sports analysts to tell coaches, general managers, and other leaders in the NBA organization what the data says in order to make better decisions on how to win. Sports analytics is a driving factor for NBA teams to make decisions.

Sports analytics has been a factor in teams changing their playstyle to shoot more 3-point shots. An independent researcher named Andy, founder of The Hoop Geek website, looked at the expected value of 2-point shots and 3-point shots from 1980, around the time when the 3-point line was first put into the NBA, to the modern era of the NBA in the 2021-22 season. Andy calculated the expected points value for both 2-point and 3-point shots every year. This calculation comes from the expected value of a random variable formula for probability. Expected value of a shot is equal to the probability of making the shot multiplied by the value of the shot. Andy ran this formula for every year the 3-point line existed in the NBA. The results are

shown in Figure 2. The results showed that for every season since the early 1990s, the expected value of a 3-point shot is greater than the expected value of a 2-point shot (Andy, 2022). This means that based on the expected value, it is better to shoot a 3-point shot compared to a 2-point shot. The sports analytics shows exactly what is happening in the NBA, where teams are realizing that the 3-point shot is statistically better to shoot than the 2-point shot. Teams like the 2017-18 Houston Rockets used data like this to decide only to shoot layups, dunks, and 3-point shots because those are the most efficient shots in basketball by the data. Sports analytics have caused the NBA to change playstyles to shoot more 3-point shots because the data shows it is the efficient shot to take.

The Change to a more "Entertaining" Playstyle

The NBA is a business, so their goal is to maximize their revenue. A big way they make money is through TV rights, so they must make the game as entertaining as possible to maximize the number of people watching. For the NBA, scoring is entertaining, especially flashy scoring like dunks and 3-point shots. People usually pay to watch good offense, not good defense. The NBA in theory should profit from the increase in scoring that has occurred in the last two decades. Between the 2003-04 season and the current 2023-24 season, the points per game (ppg) average increased from 93.4 ppg to 114.2 ppg (*NBA League Averages - Per Game,* 2025). Some possible factors to the big points per game increase are that pace and 3-point shots, both taken and made, have also increased significantly. During the 2003-04 season, the pace was 90.1 and teams shot 14.9 3-point shots, making 5.4 of them. The 2023-24 season saw a pace of 98.5 and teams shot 35.1 3-point shots making 12.8 of them (*NBA League Averages - Per Game,* 2025). The playstyle change of pace and 3-point shooting in the last twenty years has resulted in a

significant increase in scoring during NBA games, which the league expected to make the NBA more entertaining and desirable to watch.

However, this idea that the NBA should be "more entertaining" because of the scoring leap isn't supported by viewership data. In reality, the viewership of the NBA has stayed close to the same as it was 20 years ago (Lewis, 2023). Since Michael Jordan's retirement, the NBA's viewership has stayed in the same 1.5 to 2 million range despite a diminishing audience of primetime television. The NBA is more accessible than ever to watch, but that has only combatted the decrease of primetime viewers, making the NBA's viewership stay steady for the last twenty years. According to Lewis, The NBA's viewership has fluctuated but stayed resilient partially because of the more entertaining games because of the playstyle change.

When Michael Jordan retired, there was a drop in viewership because the NBA lost their most marketable player. They had to do something to keep ratings up, so one could argue that the NBA as an organization played a part in the playstyle change. It wouldn't be the first time that the NBA tried to increase their viewership. In the ten seasons before the 1994-95 season, points per game decreased (Quinn, 2020). As an attempted fix, the NBA moved the 3-point line forward closer to the basket. Unfortunately, it only made things worse as teams would just shoot 3-point shots instead of running a coherent offense. As a result, the NBA moved the 3-point line back to its original place at 23.75 ft away from the basket. The NBA tried to use its power to increase scoring to increase viewership, but it didn't work. Today's playstyle change could be a result of the NBA trying to push sports analytics to make teams play faster and shoot more 3-point shots to increase points per game to keep their viewership at a steady level.

Whether the NBA is involved or not, their viewership isn't going up at all. NBA legend and analyst Shaquille O'Neal blames the modern playstyle of shooting a lot of 3-point shots and

teams all running similar plays for the decrease in interest for the NBA. He said about the playstyle, “I think viewership will continue to go down unless we switch things up.” Nick Wright, a popular sports analyst and host of Fox Sports 1 said, “And I love the league, I love it. But this s**t is not sustainable” when referring to the playstyle the NBA is on currently (Kleen, 2024). He said further, “A bunch of finesse guys hanging out at the 3-point line, hoisting 30-footers is not good TV. And everybody is damaged if the TV numbers, if the ratings, if the interest goes down”. These sports media personalities seem concerned about the path the NBA is on because of this playstyle change. It is important that the NBA keeps its product, the games, entertaining enough so that people keep watching. It’s not working with the current playstyle the NBA has adopted.

Effects of the Playstyle Change

The playstyle change of the NBA has affected groups differently. Players are now signed or cut based on their ability to shoot 3-point shots. Players who are successful in college don’t always fit in the NBA and are forced to play overseas, far from family and make much less than NBA players with the NBA average salary being 7 million dollars and overseas being 1-2 million dollars (Mykegen, 2023). General managers now look for players that fit a prototype. This prototype is called the “3 & D Wing”. This type of player is long, athletic, above average defender, while also being able to shoot the 3-point shot at an above average rate. It is considered the perfect role player and teams will give a lot to get a player of this type. However, if you are a wing player and you can’t play defense very well or shoot the 3-point shot well, it is viewed as a big liability. There are plenty of great basketball players that don’t excel in those two particular categories that get left out. These players, because they don’t fit in exactly with the current playstyle, are forced to either adapt and change their game similar to Kevin Love or move to an

overseas league where their game is valued. Unlike NBA teams, overseas teams play a variety of playstyles, so it is easier for an overseas player to find a team that fits their playstyle.

Similarly, we can see how much different players are valued by looking at how much different players are paid. Researchers looked at the top 10 highest paid players by position in two groups of NBA seasons. The first group was from the 2011-12 to 2015-16 seasons and the second being 2016-17 to 2021-22 seasons. The study found that the percentage of compensation for the point guard, shooting guard, and small forward positions went up 22%, 4%, and 4% respectfully and the percentage of compensation for the power forward and center positions decreased 20% and 10% respectfully between the two time periods (Foster et al., 2021). The writers of this paper attributes this change to teams valuing the positions that shoot more 3-point shots more than the positions that don't shoot the 3-point shot as regularly. These types of players aren't valued as much by the NBA.

Another group that has been affected is the fans. The fans are a huge part of the NBA because without them and their viewership, the NBA would be able to exist. Sports fans, and particularly the NBA fans, have lots of bold takes and beliefs. I gathered quotes from comments on an r/nba thread titled "What do you love and hate about the modern NBA?". This thread was posted in 2023. There was consensus of the fans commenting that the thing they hated most was on the offensive side of the game. The comments like: "Hate: the lack of variation in playstyles and offensive schemes. Now that teams have figured out the "meta," they all play pretty similarly", attribute bad offense to the playstyle being the same for all teams. Then there were many comments on specifically 3-point shooting. Some examples being: "[In reference to what they hate about the NBA] How much 3 everyone is chucking up. For goodness sake, go inside instead of chucking up 3 with a defender hand in your face.", "Too many threes, not enough

defense", "Hate the 3-point circus [the NBA] has become", and one fan seemed to suggest that they loved watching the NBA, but now it has "digressed" and they no longer like the way the NBA plays: "well not to much i love about it tbh. i watch a little cus i love the sport so much but it has digressed so bad most the time i cant even tell im watching basketball. its just a run up and down and shoot a 3 ball, even players that have no business shooting it". However, not all fans hate the 3-point shooting. One fan commented: "Love: Absolute space mutant freak athletes, extreme positional size outliers, quick decision-makers, 30-foot-plus three point shooters". Even though some fans love the playstyle of the NBA, consensus from the thread on r/nba is that most fans dislike it. A comment on the thread talked about sports analytics as the cause for the change in playstyle saying, "I do not love that the game can basically be solved by a quantitative perspective, which is leading to the same problems that baseball had". They cite that the NBA's game has been solved by numbers or sports analytics and that it causes problems. Most fans today don't enjoy the "3-point circus" the NBA is today.

Conclusion

The NBA's playstyle has changed to a more fast-paced, 3-point shot heavy game. Compared to twenty years ago, teams are shooting around twenty more 3-point shots and are playing at a faster speed that allows teams to have close to eight extra possessions per game (*NBA League Averages - Per Game,* 2025).

Since 2009-10, NBA teams have continued to hire sports analysts onto their staff to look at data to figure out how to make the most out of their playstyle and roster in order to win (Wang, Sarker, & Hosoi, 2025). These analysts report to the coaches, general managers, and owners of the NBA teams, which has driven recent decisions. One of the biggest decisions has been the

decision to shoot more 3-point shots. Since the early 1990s, the data shows that the 3-point shot is a “better shot” because the expected points per shot is higher than that of a 2-point shot (Andy, 2022). This data has changed the game and caused the “pace & space” playstyle we see today in the NBA.

This playstyle has changed the game to allow for more scoring seemingly making the NBA more entertaining to watch as a fan. However, this isn’t the case because viewership is at best steady and at worst slightly declining. Sports media personalities like Shaquille O’Neal cite the playstyle change to this viewership decline. Some fans enjoy the game today, but most fans say that the NBA’s playstyle isn’t entertaining and something needs to be fixed about it.

This puts this problem in the hands of the NBA. Sports analytics has taken over and every team knows that the data says that in order to win, they must build a team that can shoot 3-point shots at a very efficient percentage. However, with every team and every game essentially the same, viewership will seemingly continue to decline. At some point the NBA must act, but the solution to this problem isn’t clear. I believe the NBA needs to do something to make games more exciting again. There isn’t much interest among fans to watch a random game on a Tuesday night in January that has seemingly no importance. The NBA needs to make the game matter, which I think they’ve tried to do by implementing the “Play-in Tournament” and “Mid-Season Tournament”, however more needs to be done to make NBA games unique enough, so fans are excited about watching them, and part of that is mixing up playstyles so that not every team plays exactly like the advanced statistics tells them to. Further research must be done by the NBA to determine the exact reason for the viewership decline and see how much it is actually tied to the playstyle change to more “pace & space”. With this data, the NBA could determine how to act if necessary.

References

Andy. (2022, April 12). *The history and evolution of the three-point shot*. The Hoops Geek. https://www.thehoopsgeek.com/history-three-pointer/

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/209510

Fischer, A. (2024, June 25). *History of the NBA on television*. GiveMeSport. https://www.givemesport.com/history-nba-on-television/

Foster, G., O'Reilly, N., & Naidu, Z. (2021). Playing-Side Analytics in Team Sports: Multiple Directions, Opportunities, and Challenges. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, *3*, 671601. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2021.671601

Freitas L. (2021). Shot distribution in the NBA: did we see when 3-point shots became popular? [Schussverteilung in der NBA: Haben wir gesehen, wann 3-Punkt-Schüsse populär wurden?]. *German Journal of Exercise and Sport Research*, *51*(2), 237–240. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12662-020-00690-7

James, A. (2024, November 24). *Why did the ABA merge with the NBA?*. Basketball Noise. https://basketballnoise.com/why-did-the-aba-merge-with-the-nba/

Joseph. (2022, December 9). *How many teams in the NBA by year?*. Sports Day Now. https://sportsdaynow.com/how-many-teams-in-the-nba-by-year/

Kleen, B. (2024, October 25). *Nick Wright sounds the alarm on NBA popularity: "this S*** is not sustainable."* Awful Announcing. https://awfulannouncing.com/nba/nick-wright-sounds-alarm-popularity-sustainable.html

Latour, B. (1992). Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts. In W. E. Bijker (Ed.), *Shaping technology/building society: Studies in sociotechnical change* (pp. 225–258). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Lewis, J. (2023, April 14). *NBA ratings deep-dive: Where does the league stand?*. Sports Media Watch. https://www.sportsmediawatch.com/2023/04/nba-ratings-viewership-past-30-years-analysis-where-league-stands/

Lewis, M. (2003). *Moneyball the art of winning an unfair game Michael Lewis*. W.W. Norton.

Mandic, R., Jakovljevic, S., Erculj, F., & Strumbelj, E. (2019). Trends in NBA and Euroleague basketball: Analysis and comparison of statistical data from 2000 to 2017. *Plos One*, *14*(10). https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0223524

Marshall, A. (2020, December 21). *NBA League pass: What is it, price, apps and all you need to know*. TechRadar. https://www.techradar.com/news/nba-league-pass

Mykegen. (2023, July 4). *How much do overseas basketball players make?*. MykeGen Fit. https://mykegenfit.com/how-much-do-overseas-basketball-players-make-a-comprehensive-guide/

Quinn, S. (2020, June 1). *What the shortened NBA 3-point line of the mid-1990s says about the future of long-range shooting*. CBSSports.com.

https://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/what-the-shortened-nba-3-point-line-of-the-mid-1990s-says-about-the-future-of-long-range-shooting/

Sean, B. &. (2024, March 8). *The evolution of analytics in the NBA*. The Jumper Journal. https://thejumperjournal.substack.com/p/the-evolution-of-analytics-in-the

Sorensen, M. (2023, December 23). *NBA rules have adapted over the years to make the game more fun for players, fans*. Deseret News. https://www.deseret.com/2019/2/21/20666425/nba-rules-have-adapted-over-the-years-to-make-the-game-more-fun-for-players-fans/

The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. (2025, March 2). *National Basketball Association*. Encyclopædia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Basketball-Association

Wang, F., & Zheng, G. (2022). What are the changes in basketball shooting pattern and accuracy in National Basketball Association in the past decade? *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*. https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.917980/full

Wang, H., Sarker, A., & Hosoi, A. (2025). The Effect of Basketball Analytics Investment on National Basketball Association (NBA) Team Performance. Journal of Sports Economics, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/15270025251328264

Werle, L. (2024a, November 8). *Shaquille O'Neal shares his theory on why NBA viewership is declining*. OpenCourt Basketball. https://www.opencourt-basketball.com/2024/11/08/shaquille-oneal-shares-his-theory-on-why-nba-viewership-is-declining/

NBA League Averages - Per Game. Basketball Reference. (n.d.). https://www.basketball-reference.com/leagues/NBA_stats_per_game.html