GAMESMANSHP

Position

Gamesmanship, like it or not, has become a part of sport. Whether it is right or wrong in the eyes of the players, coaches, fans, and leagues, it still occurs and has become highly accepted. It is due to the fact that it is generally accepted that I support gamesmanship.

Just as leagues have adapted the written rules over the years to account for changes in the way the game is played, so too should they in the case of the unwritten rules. The height of the pitchers mound was adjusted following the 1968 season, because it was believed that the height gave the pitchers too much of an advantage is just one example (Leggett, 1969).

The NFL is discussing widening the field in reaction to the number of injuries on kick returns. It is theorized that, “a wider field would mean fewer hard hits in the middle of the field, where a majority of hard collisions take place” (Mitchell, 2013). A more extreme suggestion of eliminating kickoffs altogether was also suggested to reduce injuries, but that would take so much away from the game, mainly special teams. The kick-off elimination is referred to by an USA Today article as “gimmicky.” The article also acknowledges that while change is coming, and is necessary to keep players safe in an ever-injury prone sport, the NFL cannot “cannonball into the pool” by completely eliminating kickoffs (Chase, 2012).

Leagues adjusting their rules or altering the game is not new, and accepting acts of gamesmanship as unwritten rules should not be tossed aside either. The textbook’s definition of gamesmanship even says, “looking for any way to possibly gain an advantage…without actually violating or breaking the rules” (pg. 80).
However, it is important to keep these unwritten rules in-check, and this is up to league officials and referees to keep an eye on. Flopping is one (semi) unwritten rule that comes to mind. The distinction between a blocking foul and an offensive foul in basketball is listed in both college and professional rulebooks. The leagues have edited the charge/block in the recent past by adding the half moon-shaped line under the basket. A defensive player has to be in front of that line in order to have a chance at drawing a charge. Recently though, the leagues – both professional and collegiate – have come under some criticism due to allowing too many “flopping” or fake charge calls. This is where the leagues and officials come in. The NBA front office has already begun looking into the issue, and has contemplating fining players for repeat flop offenses (Farber, 2012). I am not saying that an act of gamesmanship such as drawing a questionable call has to be added to the rulebooks with such extreme consequences, I am saying, though, that the league and the referees are doing the right thing by looking into the issue and making rulings on it.

Another rule that has been left to the officials in basketball is the incidences that involve swinging elbows, hits to the head, or intentionally committing a foul. The use of the in-game replay monitor has certainly helped both NBA and NCAA referees when reviewing these hard fouls. But what about when players fake being hit by an elbow? Fake an injury for a timeout? Stop to tie their shoe, catch their breath, and interrupt the other team’s rhythm? I would say that those examples are also part of the unwritten rules.

Very recently, on February 27, Indiana University’s Will Sheehey fell to the ground after it appeared a University of Minnesota player had elbowed him in the head. Flagrant and intentional fouls have become so commonplace that they have garnered timeslots on popular sports news shows such as ESPN’s Pardon the Interruption with Tony Kornheiser and Michael
Wilbon. The two *Washington Post* columnists debated the issue that occurred in the waning seconds of the game: there were 25 seconds left in the game, and number one-ranked Indiana was down five to unranked Minnesota (Kornheiser & Wilbon, 2013). It appears that Sheehey faked this injury on purpose, and fellow-ESPN broadcaster Mike Tirico took time during the stoppage of play to explain why he supports this display of gamesmanship:

> The way it’s going in college basketball, I would be coaching my guys that if there’s any contact above your shoulders make it look like you go down. Why not hit the deck? Particularly now, down five, you want to get a flagrant [foul], you want to go to the [foul] line, and a chance to get the ball. Put the officials in the position to make a difficult and tough call.

In the end, the referees did make the correct call with the help of instant replay, and the game continued normally. Minnesota went on to upset number one Indiana (Goergen, 2013).

**Application**

Acts such as these have become part of the game, a strategy used by coaches to gain an advantage over their opponent. By that definition, the act of gamesmanship is a form of strategic reasoning. While this is the opposite of moral reasoning, I believe gamesmanship is too far along to be able to change it in anyway. Humans, let alone athletes, will never have completely solid morality. However, as long as the leagues and referees make sure that equal competition, fairness, safety, and decency are kept in check, integrity can still be maintained in sport.
References


