Resting Healthy Players and Tanking in the NBA

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Recently there is a public debate and discussion within professional sport surrounding the phenomenon of tanking. Lenten et al. (2018) noted tanking occurs when teams deliberately lose games in an attempt to gain long-term competitive advantage. In North American professional sports leagues, the tanking discussion is often linked to the amateur draft system as it provides an incentive for teams to lose regular season games in order to increase the probability of selecting higher in the amateur draft where a top first-year player could have a dramatic impact on the on- and off-field performance of the team (Price et al., 2010; Soebbing & Mason, 2009).

The National Basketball Association (NBA), for example, adjusted the format of the amateur draft a number of times since the 1980’s partly in an attempt to reduce or eliminate the incentive for teams to tank (e.g., Soebbing & Mason, 2009). Prior research noted the incentive to tank corresponded to the financial gain related to the player selected at or near the top of the draft (Price et al., 2010). Looking at regular season game outcomes, it also found NBA teams responded to the incentive to tank in formats where the motivation to tank was present (e.g., Price et al., 2010; Soebbing & Humphreys, 2013; Taylor & Trogdon, 2002). While the evidence is clear that teams respond to incentives to tank, there is no empirical evidence looking at mechanisms or tactics through which teams tank.

The purpose of the proposed study looks at the tactic of resting healthy players, specifically whether teams eliminated from playoff contention are more likely to rest healthy players compared to non-eliminated teams. The sample period for the proposed research begins with the 2005-2006 season, the first year that records are available regarding healthy players not playing. It extends to the 2017-2018 season where the NBA adopted a policy that explicitly fines teams for resting multiple players under certain circumstances (Mahoney, 2017).

The unit of observation is a team-game-season with the dependent variable being a count of the number of healthy players that did not play in the observed game in the observed season. The two independent variables are indicator variables equal to 1 if the observed team/its opponent is eliminated from playoff contention. Control variables include whether observed team/its opponent clinched a playoff berth, the winning percentage of both teams entering the observed game, and scheduling factors such as whether the observed team/its opponent is playing a game for a second consecutive night.

Preliminary estimates from a number of Poisson models find eliminated teams rested a higher number of healthy players. These findings extend earlier discussions by both McManus (2019) and Lenten et al. (2018) regarding understanding potential tactics through which teams tank. Furthermore, the research can assist professional leagues in adopting policies to specifically counteract tanking since changing formats has not achieved much of the desired results as evidenced by the number of format changes over a period of three decades.