

THE SPORTS PLAYBOOK

Building Teams that Outperform,
Year after Year

*Joshua A. Gordon, Gary T. Furlong,
and Ken Pendleton*

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FOREWORD

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FOREWORD

In the recent assault on the two-hour marathon, exercise physiologists have been discussing the limits of human performance. As in, like, real, firm limits, some speed faster than any natural human will *ever* run.

We are approaching the point where science swallows sports whole—less than a century after Olympians smoked cigarettes! Who remembers the cutting-edge athletic snack of raw egg? Slimming jogs in black plastic bags? I know a guy who played on a German soccer team that carbo-loaded with a case of beer per player, the night *before* games.

It's hilarious, in an office with shelves full of recently published books on elite human performance, how recently it was all so folkloric. It's not that everyone agrees on everything these days, but every little midfoot strike and lactate threshold has been studied. The disagreements have been narrowed to a window that excludes Marlboros and Pilsner.

Yes, sports have lost some goofball charm in the process. There won't be any walk-on MVPs. There might not even be walk-ons. In a lot of professional sports it's increasingly difficult for people with "normal" body types to even earn a spot. The typical American male is 5'10"; entire NBA drafts have no players that short.

With stakes ever higher, more athletes and more coaches have been using more trial, more error, and more science to do more. The talent selection, training and on-field tactics are immaculate. Records fall routinely in no small part because they were doing it wrong back then. Other than the PED cheats, this is a story of human triumph.

It might be tempting to think, then, that there's little room left to improve. Perhaps this Rubik's cube has been solved? Could it really be that the globe's one great unifying religion, called sport, has reached the point of scientific predictability?

No.

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“In the weeds.”

That’s a phrase *The Sports Playbook* uses early and often to describe the current state of many sports organizations.

How can this be? Well . . . think about where you work. Have humans, in your view, mastered the art of teamwork in all facets? Let me guess: you feel, or know, there’s room for improvement. Lots of it.

“The tagline of this book,” according to co-author Joshua Gordon, “is that it’s *Moneyball* for human motivation and interaction.”

Tricky though it may be to get muscle fibers to fire efficiently, interpersonal dynamics are surely a tougher riddle to solve. Fans, media, and even children know the basics of what winning athletes do—they show up, lace ‘em up, run, jump, and the like. But the huge decisions of sports at any level are made by coaches, general managers, owners, and everyone else in the back office.

One way you can tell they’re “in the weeds”: not only can we not identify the practices that foster long-term success, but we’re fuzzy if there even are any. Draft for fit, or the best available player? Play the best players, or give minutes to bench players? Get high-character guys, or killer producers? Play fast or slow? When George Steinbrenner fired managers by the dozen, was he making the Yankees better, or worse?

Any and every approach has credible defenders. Even as the NBA entered a period when every NBA finals team averaged more three-point attempts than any team had ever attempted a decade earlier, Phil Jackson won an outpouring of support for tweeting that it wouldn’t work.

Where human choices are driven by the shifting winds of emotion, data, however limited, very often exposes the game. When the Oakland A’s scouts were lost in a tangle of not wanting this guy because he has an ugly girlfriend or not wanting that guy because he has an ugly throwing motion, it was data that sliced through the crap; on-base percentage *really* identified the players who could make a difference.

On the field of play, where the action is public and well tracked, data arrived forcefully a decade ago. But it was never going to confine itself to the field of play. Now the research is traveling for the more obscure, weightier parts of the business, and addressing the massive questions that dog sports at every level, and in fact organizations of all kinds. Who is doing the right things in the front office to build a sustained winner? Which coaches and managers actually tilt play in their team’s favor? What can an organization do to get the most out of many different kinds of players?

In *The Sports Playbook*, Gordon, Furlong, and Pendleton make clear, the best teams are holding talented employees back unless they have a real, definable “the

way we do things around here” culture, from top to bottom. Which means the days of ad hoc front office decisions are numbered. Great talent causes team greatness only as much as great ingredients make great meals. The path from the farmer’s market to the table is more than guile and luck. We need a chef with a sharp knife and a plan.

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LeBron James feels it. In 2010, the biggest story in the history of the digital NBA was LeBron’s free agency decision. Here, surely, was the living embodiment of the kind of player who had ruined the league for dawdlers and amateurs. Not just bigger, faster, and stronger, but brilliant, obsessive, and durable. Wherever James would go would become a contender merely by his presence. He’d outrun, outjump, outwork, and outthink you. When he attacked the rim, some of the biggest and strongest of their generation slunk away for fear of pain, or worse, ego-assassination-by-highlight.

He had his choice of teams; we had breadcrumbs of insight as to which he might pick. The best sources insisted he wanted to play with his friends Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh. They said he’d pick winning over maximum dollars. The best sources also said, however, that he was looking for an organization that took winning as seriously as he did, from the owner down.

It flips the conventional thinking so far on its head. We are so used to thinking that James must be so happy to live this NBA dream, made possible by the dollars of owners like Dan Gilbert. By then James had worked inside that dream for seven years, and showed the conviction that what his team needed was essentially a better Gilbert. James chose the Miami Heat in part out of respect for Micky Arison and his obsessive-like-LeBron executives Pat Riley and Erik Spoelstra (and then rejoined the Cavaliers four years later only with a contractual construct giving him the tacit threat of leaving every summer, a big hammer to squash Gilbert’s Comic Sans impulses).

But it still begs the question: to what degree are owners, general managers and coaches holding back players? They call Kristaps Porzingis “the unicorn” because there are no other players with his gifts and skillset—how great would his Knicks be if they said the same thing about owner James Dolan in his job?

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In 2012, while working on a TrueHoop blog post, I learned about an NBA general manager who worked, in the estimation of one of his close colleagues, around four hours a week. I know! Shocked me, too. (And fans complain about lazy *players* stealing money? They are televised showing up game after game.) The next person I called, at a different team, guessed that my first source was someone at his team. Wait . . . you’re telling me your GM is *also* like that? After I published that story,

sources from two other teams called me up to say that they suspected I had been talking about their GM. That's four, without even shaking the tree hard.

All this at a time the league was exploding in global popularity and closing big distribution deals. Small-market teams were trading for around a half billion. The executives in the crosshairs, charged with the biggest decisions, making millions, by many measures counted as the among the globe's elite in their fields were . . . what were they doing for all but four hours of each week? Shopping? Golfing? Loafing around at home?

Tim Ferriss has a book advocating a four-hour workweek, and maybe, out there somewhere, are people so brilliant they can thrive like that. But these weren't those guys. I heard one story of a team's war room on draft night where the boss had not heard of some of the players selected in the first round (12-year-olds in the cheap seats have done more homework). Another team had a strategy of identifying the clueless executives and aggressively cultivating relationships with them, in the name of trading for their draft picks, as a real-world bet against their competence.

Things seem to have improved since, but at that time there were plenty of boneheads to choose from. The Knicks hoarded money for LeBron, whiffed, then spent it on Amare Stoudemire and his uninsurable knees; lo and behold his injuries soon made him a millstone. The Nets traded away all of their most valuable assets for aging players who had already been bad together as Celtics. Under Donald Sterling, the Clippers drafted a who's who of future stars who played their best ball only after finding their way to other, better-run teams.

Old-school sports executives like to sell the idea that running a team comes with alchemy, pressures and bad breaks unlike any other business, and that us mortals could never understand. Not to mention, players are tricky. *The Sports Playbook* upends all that with these marvelously subversive fighting words: "Bad apples come from bad apple factories. Good apples come from good apple factories."

It's an electric idea, and while it's all phrased very kindly, there's no denying the research lands in the executive suite with fingers pointed. The big message is not that every great team must have the same culture. It's that "there must be a culture," says Gordon, "and it must be done purposefully, at all levels." Teams where that hasn't happened are doing it wrong.

And of course we all know on some level that it works. The NBA's kings of culture are famously and perennially Gregg Popovich's Spurs. They signed Danny Green and Boris Diaw when they were freshly cut by two of the worst teams of the decade. Then they both made huge contributions to title-winning teams. That's how a good apple factory works.

Henry Abbott

Henry Abbott founded the NBA blog TrueHoop in 2005 after a decade as an award-winning journalist. ESPN acquired TrueHoop two years later, and he became ESPN's first blogger. His work became a mainstay of NBA conversation, mentioned repeatedly from the mouths of everyone from the commissioner to LeBron James, and Kobe Bryant on platforms from SportsCenter to GQ. Henry rose in time to lead ESPN's digital and print NBA coverage. The TrueHoop Network, created with Kevin Arnovitz, launched the career of dozens of current full-time NBA media. TrueHoop TV, an innovative digital video project, averaged tens of millions of annual video starts. The TrueHoop Podcast became a juggernaut.

Featuring the work of Jackie MacMullan, Baxter Holmes, Pablo Torre, Tom Haberstroh, Ethan Sherwood Strauss and others, the TrueHoop Presents longform team set online traffic records and dominated *ESPN The Magazine's* NBA coverage. Henry is now writing his first book.

