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ILR Cornell Sports Business Society

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Sports, Inc. Volume 9, Issue 2

Description

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ILR Cornell Sports Business Society

Comments

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Sports, Inc.

A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and striped tie stands in front of a background of autumn leaves. The man has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the camera.

**Jocks Versus
Nerds:**

**The Battle Over
Proper Strategy
Towards MLB
Roster Construction**

ILR Sports Business Society 2016-2017



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The Inc.'s INK

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Bigger Isn't Always Better

Ryan Krainz '18

Knowing that the long herky-jerky left-handed swing that would miss on a fastball then come back with the occasional 4-3 groundout was valued at \$184 million was hard to watch. Does frustration settle in when \$23 million a year gets a return of a 1.5 WAR or a .230 BA? I'm sure this wasn't what Theo Epstein had in mind either when he inked Jason Heyward for 8 years. No team is perfect and Heyward is still very young, only 27, and has 7 more years to prove his worth. This is by no means a knock on Heyward, but rather the concept of the 'mega-contracts' that MLB clubs hand out to players.

Even though Major League Baseball does not have a hard salary cap, such as the NHL, teams still face payroll constraints. Now this varies completely depending on if you're in a small market, such as the Tampa Bay Rays, or a large one like the New York Yankees. Regardless, no matter the team or market, baseball is a business and teams want the most from their players. Whether that means production from young controllable players who come in to the spotlight and perform in the likes of a Kris Bryant or Francisco Lindor, or the heavily paid free agent such as Robison Cano or Alex

Rodriguez. No matter the market, it hurts a club a lot more when a player with a large contract is not performing.

For instance, take the infamous New York Yankees, a team that is always in the top 3 for payroll salary. The Yankees, being notorious for paying star-studded free agents lots of money, went on a spending spree during the 2007 and 2008 off-seasons. According to Baseball Reference, they re-signed Alex Rodriguez for 10 years at \$275 million, the highest salary in MLB history at the time.¹ CC Sabathia was the next target as they scooped him from free agency with an offer of 7 years for \$161 million.² Mark Teixeira then signed an 8-year deal worth \$180 million.³ There is no question that these players were very talented and maybe worth the money at the time. However, "A-Rod" would be 41 when his contract expired, Sabathia 37, and Teixeira 36. Professional athletes tend not to perform better with age.

Once again, the talent was there and these players produced early in their contracts. According to Baseball Reference, Rodriguez was the AL MVP in 2007 and finished in the top 10 for the 2008 and 2009 MVP voting. He had a respective WAR of 7, 4.7, and 2.3 during those years.⁴ Teixeira was second in AL MVP voting during his first year as a Yankee in 2009 and finished

in the top 20 for voting during his 2010 and 2011 seasons. Teixeira posted WAR's of 2.9, 1.7, 1, and 1.9 during his first four years in Pinstripes.⁵ Sabathia is no different, as during his first four years as a Yankee he finished in the top four for Cy Young voting three separate times, top 15 for MVP voting twice, and was a three-time All-

"There is no doubt that these players produced in their prime; however, the long contract signings allow players like these three to age out of their prime and become a liability rather than an asset."

Star.⁶ These three stars helped the Yankees to a World Series ring in 2009. There is no doubt that these players produced in their prime; however, the long contract signings allow players like these three to age out of their prime and become a liability rather than an asset.

Since 2012, Rodriguez posted the following WARs: 0.3, -0.3, 0.9, and -2.0, per Baseball Reference. He batted .272, .244, .250, and .200 during those years.⁷ Rodriguez retired a year early to serve in an advisory role in which the club will still have to pay him \$21 million for his final year on his 10-year contract. Teixeira recorded WARs of -0.4, -0.8, 2.2, and -2.1 during those years. His batting averages since 2012 were as follows, .151, .216, .255, and .204.⁸ Sabathia posted WARs of 1.7, -1.6, -1, and -0.5. His ERA since 2012 has been 3.38, 4.78, 5.28, and 4.73.⁹ Rodriguez, Teixeira, and Sabathia all faced a significant decline in the last half of their contracts. As a result, the Yankees haven't played in a playoff series since 2012, the same year the decline for these players hit.

Lets take a look at some other big free agent signings, as I am not just picking on the Yankees. The Angels signed Albert Pujols in the winter of 2011 for 10 years and \$240 million. Once again, there is no



Rodriguez, Sabathia, Derek Jeter, and Teixeira formed the core of the once-formidable Yankees.

Photo courtesy of Zimbio.com

doubting the talent of Albert Pujols as he posted WARs of 7.3, 7.6, 5.5, and 3.3 in his years leading up to signing with the Angels. In his first year as an Angel, he posted a WAR of 2.4, since then he has had WARs of 0.0, 1.5, 0.8, and -0.8.¹⁰ The Angels still have five more seasons with Pujols and when his contract expires in 2021, he will be 41 years old.¹¹ This was another signing that added a very talented player but is head-scratching for the amount of years and money given.

Over the past 3 years there have been mega-contracts given to the following players: Jason Heyward, Jon Lester, Robinson Cano, Max Scherzer, and Giancarlo Stanton, just to name a few. While it is still too early to analyze the following signings, it would be naïve to ignore the past ones. All of the aforementioned players are signed for at least 6 years and will be well into their 30s when the contracts expire, barring an opt-out.

There is no question that the game is moving toward a different direction with the abundance of young talent that results in great production such as Mookie Betts, Mike Trout, and Bryce Harper. Serious money is going to be thrown around with a huge free agent class ready to hit the market in the fall of 2018 as the names of Machado, Donaldson, Harper, and Kershaw (if he opts out) look to sign mega-contracts. Pujols, Rodriguez, Teixeira, and Sabathia were all at the same point in their careers. A team will have no interest in having one of these superstars depreciate in their final half of a multi-million dollar contract. A shorter offer, say 3,4, or maybe 5 years with an above average market price seems more feasible. Instead of offering a player \$20 million annually for 10 years, an offer above the market price, say \$25-27 million instead of 20 million might catch their attention.

Some teams have started to do this already; the Mets signed Cespedes this winter for 4 years at \$110 million (\$27.5 million yearly), the Dodgers signed Justin Turner for \$64 million which extends 4 years, and the Cardinals signed Dexter Fowler for 5 years at \$82.5 million. The shorter contract allows a team to have flexibility and move on from a signing if it doesn't pan out rather than being stuck in turmoil like the Yankees were with Rodriguez, Teixeira, and Sabathia.

However, are these massive contracts



The Angels hoped that Albert Pujols would bring his MVP-caliber production to Anaheim.

Photo courtesy of TooMuchTuma.com

inevitable? With high talent creating a high market for the MLB, these mega-contracts may become impossible to avoid. If one team is unwilling to offer a huge contract it always seems as if another team is. With Pujols, the Cardinals weren't willing to offer a large contract but the Angels were. To avoid these mega-contracts it would take all 30 clubs, which is just not feasible. It becomes a case that is easier said than done.

Practically speaking, a player who is young and of All-Star talent is looking for some security and probably won't accept a shorter contract. In my mind, if they produce they deserved to be paid. I also believe that a long-term contract of over 7 years is very risky for any team and is not the smartest investment especially in the last half of their contract. Professional athletes tend not to get better with age and these long contracts allow players to produce for a couple of years and then age out of their prime while still clogging up the payroll. The Yankees haven't played in a playoff series in over 4 seasons because of depleted talented. These mega-contracts will not go away any time soon but your team might not be playing in October either.

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From Tiger to Rory: Nike is Moving on in Many Big Ways



Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy sporting Nike athletic wear on the course.

Photo courtesy of Getty Images.

Bradley Wright '18

Phil Mickelson once regarded that “he hates that I can fly it past him now [off the tee]. He has a faster swing speed than I do, but he has inferior equipment. Tiger is the only player who is good enough to overcome the equipment he’s stuck with.” Rather than thinking that Nike was helping Tiger dominate the field, many believed that Tiger was winning despite Nike. This image only worsened over time, highlighted when Rory McIlroy infamously admitted the switch to Nike negatively affected his golf game in 2013. Rory had always played Titleist clubs, a brand known for high quality, but never really paying its athletes very much. When Tiger switched from Titleist to Nike, he was even able to play a Scotty Cameron putter (produced by Titleist) that he used until eventually switching in 2010. After the switch, Tiger went from being one of the best putters on tour to one of the worst. He was second on tour in strokes gained putting in 2009, but fell outside the top 100 in 2010 and 2011,

and was outside the top 30 in 2012.

In terms of what makes Nike equipment subpar, there are many theories as to why they failed, but I believe it is because Nike invested too much in marketing and design and not in quality. Their clubs often have a smaller “sweet spot”, and become harder to hit, but are often the most stylish clubs on the market. Aside from equipment, many people have worn Nike golf clothes, and its clothing line has been steadily improving. So, with negative brand imagery regarding equipment and a market that was quickly moving past it, Nike used the two things it had left to make a major change in the golf industry: brand loyalty and money. Nike wisely left the golf equipment business this year, but decided to go all in on the clothing sector.

Before delving into whether or not this was a smart move, it is important to note that this move could not have been done without Nike originally making equipment. Although other players like Anthony Kim, Paul Casey, and Rory McIlroy have all helped promote Nike, Tiger is what brought Nike into the same conver-

sation as TaylorMade, Titleist, PING and Callaway. Perhaps the best PR Nike ever received was Tiger’s chip-in on the 16th hole of the 2005 Masters. For those of you living under a rock, Tiger made an unbelievable chip that stopped just before the hole and then fell in. While it was temporarily stopped, the only visible part of the ball was just the Nike Swoosh. Nike even had a commercial centered around this shot, that said, “We gave you a wedge with more feel, you showed us what it could do. We gave you a ball with more control, and you didn’t center the logo?”. The purpose of this anecdote is that many people, (myself included) played Nike clubs and Nike Golf balls because Tiger did it. For lack of a better word, it was cool to play Nike. I’d be remised if I failed to mention that the first golf club I ever bought was the bright yellow Nike SQ driver. I did it because I wanted to be like Tiger, and I’m positive I wasn’t the only one.

Nike’s big problems began when Tiger’s major issues began. Since 2008, Tiger has failed to win a major. He has been World Number One and won a handful of tourna-

ments, but majors have eluded him. In 2012, Nike signed Rory McIlroy to pick up where Tiger left off. They ran a few commercials with the two of them together, with “Ripple” (2015) and “No Cup is Safe”(2013) being the two most popular commercials.

“Nike wisely left the golf equipment business this year, but decided to go all in on the clothing sector.”

“Ripple”, was a commercial that showed Rory growing up and demonstrated Rory’s admiration for Tiger. The commercial was very much a passing of the torch, but the issue was that, although Rory had a dominant 2014, Jordan Spieth stole his spotlight in 2015, and Rory had a rocky start to 2016. In other words, Rory didn’t run with the torch the way Nike expected him to. In all fairness, it seemed like Nike expected Rory to be Tiger, which is too much to ask of anyone. Before moving on, I also want to make one thing perfectly clear. The reason I feel like Nike left the golf equipment business is not because Rory failed to run with the torch passed from Tiger but because he failed to win despite Nike in the same way that Tiger did. When Rory was using Titleist equipment, he was nearly impossible to beat when he was playing well. I still believe that Rory’s “A-game” is better than anyone else’s “A-game”. Since Nike has left the golf business, Rory has consistently finished inside the top 10. Between November and March of this past year, Rory has won over 11 million dollars in prize money and has been in contention every single week. The biggest difference is that he is now playing TaylorMade clubs (another top brand), Titleist golf balls and only wearing Nike clothes.

So, in August of this year, Nike stopped making golf equipment.² While many see this as a failure, it was extremely smart. Nike’s golfers will still wear Nike clothing, but will no longer have to suffer from playing bad equipment. Tiger could use Mizuno Irons, and Rory could use a Taylor-Made driver, which would be unbelievable to see. Rory could even go back to using the Titleist clubs he used for so long, and I expect to see Tiger putting better with the Scotty Cameron that helped him win 13 of his 14 majors. With these players now be-

ing able to use better equipment, it is likely that they’ll be even more competitive than they were before. Additionally, Nike will be able to spend more time in clothing and apparel, which should help that business become even better.

While it is good that Nike’s athletes will be playing better and that they’ll be able to make better clothes, they can also sign athletes to different deals now. Jordan Spieth loves being signed by Under Armour because he can still play Titleist clubs, but now players can sign apparel deals with Nike, and still sign equipment deals with other companies. For example, in September, Nike signed the top ranked golfer in the world, Jason Day, to an apparel deal,³ which will only make Nike’s clothing line even more visible. So yes, Nike is no longer making golf equipment, but they will still be in golf. They are now a more attractive brand for players to sign with, and this could be a chance for its current players to go back to their winning ways. Nike has truly made its best decision since signing Tiger in 1996. It only took 20 years for them to do it.

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Tiger Woods’ dominance of the game served to be Nike’s best advertisement.

Photo courtesy of Nike.com

Jocks Versus Nerds: The Battle Over Proper Strategy Towards MLB Roster Construction

Daniel Solomon '19

Michael Lewis's *Moneyball*, which examined the use of "sabermetrics" by the forward-thinking Oakland A's front office, changed the landscape of Major League Baseball. It called traditional player evaluations into question, and created an entire body of baseball fans devoted to converting the game into one of numbers and algorithms. Now, many organizations treat sabermetrics—the application of statistical analysis to baseball—as a fundamental aspect of their baseball operations departments. While its ultimate goal of finding value where others fail to see it is applicable to any properly functioning organization, it is unclear if the use of sabermetrics is creating on-field success stories. By looking at the recent performance of several teams, one can assess whether or not General Managers and Presidents of Baseball Operations should mold their front offices in a traditional fashion—stressing scouting observations of players' physical tools and old statistics such as batting average, wins, and runs batted in (RBI)—or should adopt advanced analytics in order to make better baseball decisions.

It is difficult to truly assess the merits of each method when considering the immense turnover in baseball operations departments in recent seasons—18 of 30 General Managers have been hired by their current teams as recently as 2014. But a 2015 ESPN ranking provides a general overview of teams that have fully embraced the analytics movement compared to those that have stuck to traditional scouting as their primary method of assessing players.¹ It divided the league into five sections, two of which indicated a strong willingness to adopt sabermetrics and three which were less accepting of the movement. Only 11 of 30 teams were considered full believers or nonbelievers of the movement, with many teams falling in hybrid categories. For the sake of this article, we are going to focus

on five teams at each end of the sabermetric spectrum and compare their overall respective performances in terms of regular season and postseason records, along with success in several offensive and pitching categories. According to the "The Great Ranking Analysis" conducted by ESPN, the Oakland A's, New York Mets, Chicago Cubs, Los Angeles Dodgers, and Houston Astros all rank in the upper half of teams in terms of their focus on advanced analytics. Unsurprisingly, these front offices are composed of people who were either directly part of the initial Moneyball movement (such as Billy Beane of the A's and Sandy Alderson of the Mets) or others who have molded their baseball minds in the wake of the Moneyball era, including both Theo Epstein of the Cubs and the Dodgers' Andrew Friedman. Contrarily, teams such as the San Francisco Giants, Detroit Tigers, Texas Rangers, Arizona Diamondbacks, and Atlanta Braves all place near the bottom of ESPN's rankings. For the most part, the recent management for each of these teams has emphasized traditional scouting over modern statistics when evaluating players, often comprising their front offices with former players and scouting directors (because Mike Hazen, a Theo Epstein protégé, took over control of the Diamondbacks only in October 2016, their recent transactions will not be considered).^{2,3}

When looking at the overall performance of the above teams over the past five seasons, the traditional teams have "out-won" the sabermetric contingent by over two wins a season, yet have made the postseason on one fewer occasion. Additionally, the sabermetric teams have won two more postseason games overall but won one fewer championship. However, the issue with evaluating teams purely based on regular season records and postseason performances is that they fail to account for team rebuilds and the inherent randomness of the postseason tournament. Specifically, the Atlanta Braves tore down their roster prior to the 2015 season, and the Cubs and

Astros endured intense remakes during the first few years of the Theo Epstein and Jeff Luhnow regimes, respectively. The teams studied have endured varied success. The traditional Giants, for instance, have won two championships in the past five seasons with just one 90-win season in that span. Meanwhile, the sabermetric Dodgers have won an average of 91 games—by far the most of any team in this study—yet they've failed to achieve the same postseason success of the Giants, Cubs, or Mets, teams that have been objectively inferior over the past five years both offensively and on the mound.

The traditional teams have out-scored the sabermetrics group. This seems counterintuitive on the surface, as sabermetricians tend to believe that their evaluation will lead to more overall run scoring. Specifically, they value a player's ability to get on base (OBP) and hit the ball out of the ball park (HR) as two fundamental aspects of run production, while devaluing traditional stats such as RBIs and batting average. And while OBP and HRs are important in any circle, diminishing batting average may have a greater overall impact on run

"While its ultimate goal of finding value where others fail to see it is applicable to any properly functioning organization, it is unclear if the use of sabermetrics is creating on-field success stories."

production than generally theorized by the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) community. The sabermetric oriented teams batted .014 below non-sabermetric teams. While this is not bad in isolation, this contributed to an OBP that was nine points lower than their adversaries

and they scored 29 fewer runs per season. While there is logic to constructing a roster that gets on base at a high rate and has power, removing contact hitters and speedsters from the equation may make an offense function worse, as it fails to capitalize on poor defenses and other random occurrences that can only happen when the ball is put in play. Therefore, a team like the Giants, who hit the fewest homeruns, on average, of any team in the study, was still able to score more runs per year than all but one sabermetric team. Conversely, the best individual run scoring seasons were held by teams of both factions, with both the Cubs and the Rangers maxing out at 808 runs scored in 2016 and 2012, respectively. And these teams took very different approaches to scoring these runs. The Cubs walked nearly 200 times more than the Rangers, yet hit 13 fewer extra base hits and stole 25 fewer bases while hitting for a significantly lower batting average (.256 as opposed to .273).^{4,5} Though both strategies can work, the traditional evaluations seem to have led to more consistent offensive production over the past five seasons.

The sabermetric teams outperformed the traditional teams in every pitching category. This is undoubtedly enhanced by the elite rotations assembled by the Mets, Dodgers, and Cubs in recent seasons, along with the declines of once dominant Giant and Tiger pitching staffs. But it ultimately comes down to the greater success of the sabermetric community in stressing the role of elite relief pitching beyond the closer. Brian Kenny, author of "Ahead of the Curve" and an analyst for MLB Network, has stated that the next big thing in baseball is the "full bullpen attack." He suggests to forgo the classic starting pitcher and instead have a "guy go two innings, [another] guy goes one, [and a third] guy goes three. Why are we running this guy out for six innings until he's exhausted and gives up three runs?"⁶ In 2016, the Cubs traded away their best prospect for half a season of Aroldis Chapman when they already had an established closer on their roster. This put an elite reliever, Hector Rondon, in a non-closing role and ultimately helped the Cubs win a World Series title.⁷ The Astros signed both Luke Gregerson and Pat Neshek to augment their bullpen in the 2014-2015 offseason,⁸ and then gave up a bounty of five players (including a former number one overall draft pick, Mark Appel



Dodgers catcher Yasmani Grandal excels at "pitch framing", a metric heavily emphasized by the Sabermetric community.

Photo courtesy of Sports Illustrated.

and current rising star Vincent Velasquez) for closer Ken Giles the following year.⁹ The sabermetric teams also construct their pitching staffs with a greater number of strikeout pitchers, with all of the top three strikeout per nine rates coming from saber-minded teams.

And while the SABR community's emphasis on strikeouts and more frequent use of relief pitching probably plays a large role in their teams' pitching dominance, other aspects of sabermetric analysis realistically play an even greater role. Specifically, the community emphasizes defensive metrics that provide a greater total assessment of players than evaluating just based on the eye-test and on generic errors. This has led to more balanced rosters that, though unable to score at the same rate as the traditional teams, can provide value on both sides of the ball. Notable are the Cubs' and Dodgers' acquisitions of Jason Heyward and Yasmani Grandal, respectively. Heyward is a defense-first outfielder with just one season of over 20 homeruns and zero 100 RBI seasons.¹⁰ But Heyward has posted positive defensive statistics each year he's been in the majors, with three gold glove awards

to validate his defensive prowess.¹¹ And though Grandal has failed to post a batting average above .234 since 2012, he is regarded as one of the best pitch framers in the league (pitch framing is when a catcher convinces an umpire that a borderline pitch is a strike).¹² According to Baseball Prospectus, Grandal was the second-best pitch framer in baseball in 2016, and was credited with saving the Dodgers nearly 52 runs just from his framing.¹³ And while sabermetric-oriented teams round out their rosters with overall productive players, traditional teams such as the Diamondbacks and Braves have countered with acquiring players such as Yasmany Tomas and Matt Kemp, respectively. Tomas is essentially position-less and would be a designated hitter if on an American League team, and Kemp has failed to produce a positive defensive WAR (wins above a replacement player) since 2008.¹⁴ Thus, while the teams' rotations and bullpens will inherently vary in quality, the surrounding pieces are also large factors in evaluating the overall approach to designing a pitching staff.

Ultimately, looking at each tactic in isolation fails to provide a full portrait of

the happenings on the diamond. The teams were nearly even in the categorical assessment conducted (the sabermetric teams “won” 8 of 14 categories). But in order to properly construct a Major League team, front offices must rely on both mathematical data and traditional scouting. The Giants did not win two world champions in the past five years and three in the past seven years by accident. Their method of scouting and development has produced a legacy of winning that tops anyone since the Yankee dynasty of the late 1990s. But the Oakland A’s method of advanced analytical assessments has also helped one of the poorest franchises in sports experience three years of great success in a five-year stretch, until it was inevitably forced to tear down the roster before it became too expensive to maintain. And though the Giants admit to “put[ting] the numbers secondary to the player,”¹⁵ there are many who would argue that the team has put its faith in advanced analytics, notably by deploying a tracker which allows them to measure a defensive player’s reaction time to a hit ball.¹⁶ Despite their classifications, most teams have ultimately utilized both philosophies when constructing their rosters. And beyond the different methods of player as-

essment, teams must have the financial resources to maintain a nucleus of great players as defined by either method and the foresight to continue to plan for expected declines in player production. There is room for both in the game. And both need to play roles in the decision-making processes of a front office in order to achieve the optimal outcome on the field.

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The Giant’s “traditional” method of roster construction has built a team that has won three World Series championships in the past seven years.

Photo courtesy of The Odyssey Online.

Politics in Sports: NBA as a Social Liberalism Pioneer



NBA superstars Carmelo Anthony, Chris Paul, Dwyane Wade, and LeBron James, who opened up the 2016 ESPY's with a powerful address on the topics of racial divisiveness, police brutality, and steps for social progress.

Photo courtesy of ABC News.

Harrison Marcus '20

There has been a rich history of Americans valuing the separation of sports and politics. For centuries, athletes would strive to maintain the pure, natural form of athletic performance, eradicating any of the commercial or political aspects of sporting events. In the postwar era this has certainly changed, as evident by the breakthrough of Jackie Robinson for the African-American community, the role of diplomacy and Cold War politics in many of the mid-late 20th century Olympic Games, and the rise of athletes as political symbols. In a culture where sports and politics are increasingly intertwined, the NBA has built a reputation the past few years as the most socially liberal professional sports organization. Both its progressive business strategies and liberal-minded, outspoken athletes have shaped the democratic reputation of the NBA brand. The most recent presidential campaign season also brought out the liberal nature of the league's players, coaches, and owners, with many dominant figures publicly showing support for the Democratic party. The NBA is of course built around the game of basketball, but its social efforts, democratic policies, and political impact shape the league just as much as the skill of its players. A Stephen Curry

three-pointer on the basketball court holds the same significance on the hardwood as a public outcry against President Donald Trump's policies do in the political sphere.

A monumental aspect of the NBA's liberal culture has been its acceptance of the LGBT community. When Jason Collins became the first openly gay athlete to play in a North American professional sports game three years ago, the NBA embraced his presence proudly. Just after he first signed with the Brooklyn Nets in 2014, his jersey was the top seller at the NBA store.¹ Collins drew praise from not only fellow NBA players, coaches, and league officials, but he also caught the attention of the White House. Former President Barack Obama and former First Lady Michelle Obama – both of whom belong to the Democratic party – embraced Collins as a fixture for the democratic platform and a role model to all. Collins' unprecedented decision to notify the world of his sexuality while still an active player was a courageous act that has influenced many people. In fact, he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World" in April of 2014.² His presence in the NBA has been crucial to the league's progressive and accepting nature, helping modernize the social views and values of the league. The fact that North America's first openly gay professional athlete played in the NBA

is both monumental and unsurprising.

More recently, Adam Silver embarked upon a major decision that has once again showed the NBA's public support for the LGBT community. The 2017 NBA All-Star Game, which just took place at Smoothie King Center in New Orleans, Louisiana, was originally scheduled to be played at the Spectrum Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. However, after the controversial HB2 "bathroom bill," which prohibits transgender persons from choosing the bathroom they feel most comfortable in, commissioner Adam Silver decided to move the game and the weekend festivities out of North Carolina.³ This was a powerful decision that truly shows the political influence of the NBA's top executives. Silver has been dedicated towards stimulating the inclusive culture of the league, as proven through the switching of venues for this past February's All-Star Weekend.

Aside from a commitment to the LGBT community, the NBA has also taken a powerful stance on the police brutality and racism that has stirred up controversy in the United States the past few years. In 2014, an African-American male by the name of Eric Garner was brutally choked to death by white police officers despite constantly saying "I can't breathe," to the officers.⁴ This was viewed as a racist crime that drew widespread national attention. As

a sign of protest against police brutality, many NBA players wore warmup shirts before games that relayed his message of “I Can’t Breathe” on their chests. It was a commanding message to American society that as a predominantly African-American league, the NBA and its players will not tolerate racial violence and will actively protest against it.

During this past summer, the tragic deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, both of whom were fatally shot by police officers, triggered social unrest across the country. America was in an unsettling place, with racism, divisiveness, and violence dominating the news for a few weeks in July. The country was in need of change, acceptance, and a vision towards equality. Recognizing their roles in American society as influential role models, NBA superstars LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, Chris Paul, and Carmelo Anthony kicked off the 2016 ESPY’s with a dark yet inspirational message. They emphasized both the need for change as well as the severity of gun violence and racial divisiveness in the United States. Four of the NBA’s most influential and popular players used basketball as a platform for a broader social message, striving to help the country put an end to gun violence and racial profiling. At an event where athletes of all sports were brought together, NFL, MLB, and NHL players weren’t the ones delivering this message to the American public. It was NBA players who were taking responsibility to initiate change and serve as leaders to a nation in desperate need of guidance and unity.

James, Wade, Paul, and Anthony’s message triggered a series of actions by prominent players and teams across the league. Anthony in particular became a pioneer for social activism. He organized a town hall meeting between his Olympic teammates, teenagers of minority descents, and police officers to discuss the issues at the forefront of American society and possible change to resolve them. Similarly, the Sacramento Kings organized a town hall meeting of their own. The Charlotte Hornets owner, also referred to as the “GOAT” - Michael Jordan - donated \$1 million to the International Association of Chiefs of Police’s New Institute for Community-Police Relations and \$1 million to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. In a statement addressing the difficult state of America, Jordan said

that he was “troubled by the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of law enforcement and angered by the cowardly and hateful targeting and killing of police officers.”⁵ This past summer was an unsettling stretch of time for everyone who identifies as an American, and the NBA prioritized its role as a leader for change. They tackled the issues head on, and as an organization the NBA promoted valuable dialogue to stimulate progress.

With regard to the recent presidential election, many iconic NBA figures have passionately spoke out against President Donald Trump and his proposed policies. Head coaches Steve Kerr, Stan Van Gundy, and Gregg Popovich were among those who have publicly expressed their resentment for then-candidate Trump. They frequently criticized the travel ban and the infamous wall, preaching for inclusivity and acceptance. Popovich in particular did not hold back on his views of Donald Trump, telling reporters in one of his multiple political rants to the media, “We’re watching him be misogynistic and xenophobic and racist and make fun of handicapped people.”⁶ Steve Kerr told the media after Trump’s immigration ban was first signed, “As someone whose family member is a victim of terrorism, having lost my father [Malcolm Kerr, a university professor, was murdered in 1984 in Beirut] if we’re trying to combat terrorism by banishing people from coming to this country, we’re really going against the principles of what this country is about and creating fear.”⁷ Even LeBron James formally endorsed Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton at one of her Ohio rallies alongside teammate J.R. Smith. Additionally, Adam Silver, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, and NBA icon Earvin “Magic” Johnson reportedly donated a significant amount to Hillary Clinton’s campaign.⁸ Cuban and Johnson in particular were very vocal about their displeasure for Donald Trump’s consequential rhetoric and agenda. In perhaps the most politically divided campaign season in American history, the NBA as a brand let it be known which side it stood on. There has been a long history of prominent athletic figures keeping their political views to themselves due to the fear of losing potential fans. However this election season was unlike any other, and the NBA community responded accordingly by speaking out in an unprecedented fashion.



Jason Collins, who became the first openly gay athlete to play in any of the four major North American professional sports leagues.

Photo courtesy of SB Nation.

There are countless other examples that highlight the NBA’s democratic culture. The league has quickly emerged as a platform for minorities and an organization of social acceptance. Its brand is directly associated with themes of liberalism, social activism, and the Democratic party. As the business of the NBA continues to flourish, its political influence will only continue to expand.

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Show Me the Money:

Incentives and the NFL

Noah Fink '19

It is no secret that the NFL suffered downward trending viewership this past season, displayed by the recurring theme of lackluster Thursday Night Football games amplified by lower ratings virtually across the board.¹ There are multiple variables at play in determining what caused this drop-off, as factors such as attention toward a hotly-contested presidential election, the ongoing concussion dialogue, and the controversial movement started by Colin Kaepernick all could have contributed to the resulting lower viewership. It even could have been just a random statistical aberration, but it seems that the NFL may be in trouble and perhaps has been for a short while. While baseball may be America's pastime, football is America's sport and its dominance had been relatively unquestioned. That is, until this year. The

Goodell regime has so far weathered the somewhat storm of complaints of softening the game while taking heat for the undisclosed effects of head trauma to players as well as a host of off-the-field issues some NFL players have had such as domestic violence and driving under the influence.

While not suggesting that such things do not happen in other major sports leagues, the attention given to the NFL and the seemingly endless terrible publicity the organization has received in the past few years is alarming. In regards to the concussion issue, the death of Junior Seau and some of his peers as well as the early retirements of players such as Chris Borland have opened the doors for crisis in the NFL. With such bad press and an ever-expanding list of injury concerns, football has been regarded as a less attractive option compared to some of its counterparts, such as baseball and basketball. By now, the mental health concerns can probably be

considered common knowledge, meaning that it will be hard to argue a lack of understanding from this point forward given the attention concussions have garnered in the recently. How can youths be encouraged to play a sport that could leave them with permanent brain damage after a short career when the MLB and NBA seem to lead to better outcomes in terms of health? With that being said, how can the NFL maintain or even grow its talent pool? The obvious answer is to further incentivize its budding participants to weigh the potential benefits more heavily than the anticipated risks, but more crucially, how could this be done?

Von Miller, arguably the best active defensive player in the NFL, signed a contract worth \$114.5 million over six years in the summer of 2016.² That number is somewhat deceptive, however, as about 60% of that figure is "guaranteed money" that Miller will earn, and even the "guaranteed" portion of that money comes with complex



Matt Flynn (15) only received around 50% of what he originally signed for, and Von Miller (foreground) will hope that he doesn't share a similar fate.

Photo courtesy of TheNewsTribune.com



Von Miller received a massive payday, but how much of the \$114.5 million he signed for will he actually see?

Photo courtesy of The Chicago Tribune

caveats.³ Let's compare this lucrative contract with that of an MLB player. In December of 2015, former Braves and Cardinals outfielder and Gold Glove winner⁴ Jason Heyward signed an eight year, \$184 million deal.⁵ While not perfectly alike in regards to contract details, similar terms and player traits make this an appropriate comparison. It is clear that in terms of pure dollars, years, and annual average salary, Heyward emerges victorious and by a large margin. Even if, hypothetically, Miller earned every dollar he signed for (which is not certain), Heyward has still garnered more intake, and his contract has ensured him of two more years of guaranteed money. It is important to note, for the sake of this specific comparison and for the overall discussion, that Miller is a "one-way" player. He only appears as a member of the defense, and thus is only involved in roughly half of the game. While some may argue that Heyward is two-way player in name but is only an asset defensively in practice, he nonetheless is involved in both the offensive and defensive sides of the game. With this taken into account, Miller is paid less to participate less, thereby his contract can be seen as a fair, if not openly beneficial, one. Both players are in their prime and this may be the only contract that either signs before retirement and they receive sizeable sums of money for their craft. But in contracts, and specifically those of the NFL, the devil is in the details.

The heart of the issue is "guaranteed" money. NBA and MLB contracts are fully guaranteed in regards to base salaries and signing bonuses. The NFL operates with a more complex system that allows teams to sign a player to a contract, pay for their services while they are useful, and cut the player when it is strategically and financially advantageous. The Forbes article "The Anatomy of an NFL Player Contract" looks at the example of quarterback Matt Flynn's 2012 contract. While holding a reported value of \$19.5 million over three years,

"The NFL operates with a more complex system that allows teams to sign a player to a contract, pay for their services while they are useful, and cut the player when it is strategically and financially advantageous."

only \$10 million of that total was money that Flynn was sure to see, parceled out as a \$2 million base salary for the first two years with a \$6 million signing bonus.⁶ A year and a half later, Flynn had been traded and released, with \$9.5 million of the \$19.5 million he signed for forever out of his

possession.⁷ The Seahawks (and then Raiders) doled out funds for him while he was of some value to them but when the situation was in favor of it, he was disposed of with no real financial repercussions. This structure benefits teams in a sport that is infamous for the short-lived careers of its players and quick rates of decline among former stars as teams can swiftly tear up weighty contracts in favor of the next wave of players. But if you are a sport that may face a labor crisis of sorts, basic economics show that when the supply of labor contracts, the price of labor will increase.

This comparison leads to the heart of the issue and the factors that hamper a "quick fix". The uniqueness of the NFL is seen primarily in the method of play and roster construction. While the NBA, MLB, NHL et al. still have players who have skill sets that reside in some dichotomy of offensive and defensive talent, you play with both mindsets depending on individual situations. For Von Miller and company, outside of the rare trick-play or desperate need, a defensive player rarely participates in offensive situations and vice versa. Football even includes the added dimension of "special teams" which is valued by coaches as a specialized brand of player all by itself. This tri-fold division thus results in a sizeable disparity in the number of players on a roster. Football sees each of its 32 teams carry 53 players on the active roster, while the MLB maintains 25-man major league rosters and NBA teams carry up to 15.⁸ To purely insist that players be given wealthier contracts is thus a difficult suggestion, for the NFL would have to manage its funds to cover twice as many active professionals as MLB teams or nearly four times as many active players as NBA teams. While the NFL is unquestioningly the most profitable sport overall, its position relative to the MLB and NBA⁹ hinder the argument that simply paying all of the players more is feasible. At least not in the traditional sense.

There are certainly athletes in the NFL who successfully play out contracts and receive large paydays, but if your sport is seeing a growing stigma of the dangers of the game, the risks most likely dominate the potential rewards. This holds even more so when the rewards are as contingent as they are in the NFL. As has been stated, doling out larger contracts may not be necessarily as easy as it appears, but the

“It soon may be time for the NFL to take an already socially contested step: pay its athletes even more”

money is already there. It just needs to be accessible for players, and this could be done through contracts that are fully guaranteed. To suggest that the NFL unilaterally alter the structure of contracts to make them fully guaranteed is not likely to happen in any world where the commissioner wishes to remain on good terms with the teams in the league. It may, however, serve the NFL well to look to its next Collective Bargaining Agreement with the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) with an open mind should compensation security come up as a hot topic.

Suggesting a particular solution as beneficial would be ignorant if the potential repercussions were not discussed. Fully guaranteed money may well result in teams offering contracts with less years of pay, and in the NFL, some players may not make it past their rookie contracts (which are themselves, interestingly, becoming more structured and rigid in their terms¹⁰). Stripping teams of their relative power over players, achieved through contracts that favor releasing players over continued long-term commitments, would potentially see a massive backlash from owners and GMs. The NFL's restrictive salary cap is conducive to such contracts as teams can quickly reduce their payroll to get under the cap by cutting expensive players who no longer provide a needed level of utility while signing other players to similar deals. These new players will most likely be treated similarly two or three years down the line, continuing the vicious cycle. This somewhat hampers the idea of having fully guaranteed contracts, as the money saved by cutting players goes back into the investment into other players. Perhaps then the NFL could look to drastically increase the salary cap or adopt a similar “luxury tax” to that of the NBA or MLB in the hopes that it could alleviate teams of the strict financial concerns and in turn allow them to retain players that have signed sizeable contracts. Having to pay more to players will never be an attractive option to the team owners in the league, but if the NFL continues to fall in terms of viewership

and overall popularity, such “unpleasant” measures may be necessary and thus, albeit coldly, welcomed.

It seems then that the trade-off may be more secured money over a shorter amount of time. Would it be worth it? Considering the Matt Flynn situation, not even comparatively short contracts are “sure bets” for players, and because of that he lost nearly half of the initial value he signed for. As mentioned previously, it is widely known that NFL players tend to have shorter careers and the turnover levels for certain positions can be quite high. Understandably then, players wish to secure as much value as they can in their prime, and given that goal it seems that this trade-off may be one that is worth taking. It would be nearly impossible for contract security to spontaneously appear in the game of football, but it may be a crucial point should the NFL find itself at a crossroads with diminished interest in the game from both fans and players. It soon may be time for the NFL to take an already socially contested step: pay its athletes even more. Or at least, ensure that they are paid in full for the value they signed for. And to invoke Tom Cruise's Jerry Maguire, it may just be time to show them the money.

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2017 SABR Analytics Conference Retrospective

Matt Vani '19

Introduction *(Written by Noah Fink)*

Founded in 1971 by a core group of 16 members, the Society of American Baseball Research (SABR)¹ would lead a movement to research and deepen the understanding of the game of baseball. Perhaps its most salient contribution has been its role in the rise of mathematical analysis and statistics in the game of baseball. Their efforts would not find immediate popularity; however, as a “traditionalist” mindset dominated the culture of baseball. Bill James’ work in the 1970s and 1980s furthered the burgeoning movement,² but it was Michael Lewis’ 2003 book *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game* that finally brought the use of statistical analysis in baseball to the forefront in both the game itself and the general public. Statistical metrics, termed “sabermetrics” after SABR, continue to be a growing aspect of player evaluation and the SABR Analytics Conference serves as a venue in which new ideas and methodologies are highlighted and discussed. This past March, four Cornellians traveled to Phoenix, AZ to participate in the Conference’s “Diamond Dollars Case”. In this spotlight piece, Matt Vani describes the event and the team’s project for the SABR Conference:

When people think of sports analytics, the word moneyball is usually the first thing that comes to their mind. The idea of moneyball changed the game of baseball. Many people associate moneyball with advanced statistics but at the heart of moneyball is the idea that certain players in baseball have a gap between their perceived value and their actual value on a baseball field and front offices wanted to take advantage of this gap. These players deceived scouts for years, as their actual value was much higher than what scouts could see from the eye test. This idea of deception and value gap was a key element to the 2017 SABR Analytics Conference Diamond Dollars Case Competition.

During the competition, college students

are given a case that involves a baseball operations decision that a major league front office may face. This year’s case was a bit different from previous years as each team was given a set of data and told to create their own way to use the data to their benefit. The data set that the teams were given involved pitch tunneling statistics from 2008-2016. Pitch tunneling is the art of deceiving hitters by having different pitches look the same while in the tunnel when the hitter has to decide whether or not to swing but then break differently after the hitter has decided to swing. In an era where pitchers are graded based on how hard they throw, tunneling is another way for pitchers to gain an edge over hitters without having overwhelming velocity. Hall of Famer Greg Maddux was known for his ability to disguise his pitches and use late break to fool hitters. Now thanks to Baseball Prospectus we have stats to see how well pitchers are able to disguise their pitches.

One of the key applications of this pitch tunneling data is to help pitchers optimize their pitch sequencing. If a pitcher has great tunneling data associated with his fastball and slider, it would be beneficial for that pitcher to set up his slider with his fastball. Many of the teams who participated in the competition used the data to analyze pitch sequencing. The Cornell team of Skyler Kanfer, Kyle Sargent, Nate Buchwald and Matt Vani focused specifically on whether or not specific teams in 2016 had optimized their pitch sequencing in their presentation. They analyzed whether or not pitch tunneling could help explain why the Cubs pitching staff ranked 1st in the league in ERA and the Diamondbacks pitching staff ranked 30th in the league in ERA.

The team from Elon University that won the competition used the tunneling data to create a predictive model. This model called The Pitch Machine was able to suggest, based on previous pitch sequences and locations, where and what pitch each active MLB pitcher should throw to a each active MLB batter in order to get a strike. The model was able to modify for any count, previous pitch thrown and many other factors. Using this model, teams would be able to help their pitchers deceive hitters and be-

come more effective.

When boiled down, moneyball is all about seeing beyond deception and creating more effective baseball teams for less money. This year’s Diamond Dollars Case Competition keyed in on this idea and allowed the competitors to use new advanced data to see beyond the average box score and see how certain pitchers are using pitch tunneling to deceive hitters and be more effective than other pitchers of a similar caliber.

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Photo courtesy of Twitter.

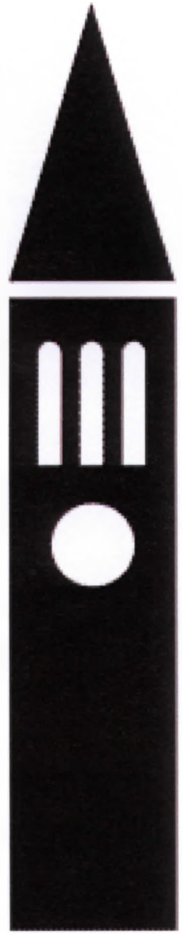
Letter From the President

As an undergraduate student organization dedicated educating and preparing its members, from across the entire university, for career opportunities in the sports industry, the Cornell ILR Sports Business Society is one of the premier student-run sports business organizations in the country. The club aims to reach this mission through the club's four main platforms: speaker events, website blog, magazine, and radio program. This semester our club featured 13 executive board members and added a new research department. The club had a general body meeting every other week. This semester was highlighted by a debate about the Super Bowl and the role politics play in sports. This semester we also had a team represent Cornell and our club at the SABR Analytics Conference in the Diamond Dollars Case Competition in Phoenix, Arizona. A couple of club members also attended the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. In the future, the club needs to increase its presence on all social media platforms, but especially in LinkedIn. With a larger presence on LinkedIn, we hope to increase communication between alumni and active members. We also hope to redesign our website over the summer.

Content production has been and continues to be one of the club's main goals. I am happy to report that our blog is more active than ever before, featuring weekly blogger roundtable discussions on our club website. Furthermore, our Sports Inc. magazine is produced on a bi-annual basis and features a wide range of stories about current sports topics. The SBS Report is produced every week and broadcasted through Cornell Radio. Finally, the club is grateful to all alumni and other professionals who have taken the time to visit campus or Skype with us throughout the semester. This semester we were lucky to have the likes of Andy Noel, FX Flinn, Chris Chaney, Peter Wilhelm, Marc Cornstein, and DeMaurice Smith. We are very fortunate that our alumni have been more than happy to be involved with the Sports Business Society as there is no better way to learn about the industry. With the diverse and extensive alumni network that is willing to support our group, we hope to add value to their own career advancement by connecting them with the rest of Cornell's community.

The Cornell ILR Sports Business Society strives to serve both our student's and alumni's passion for sports business. Cornell is perhaps the most respected name within the Sports industry. The club hopes to continue and grow that reputation in the years to come.

**Special thank you to Cornell
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