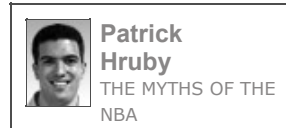


COLUMNIST



By Patrick Hruby

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Lenin once said that a lie told often enough becomes the truth. He also paved the way for Stalinist genocide as well as pretentious grad students donning dorky fisherman's caps.

As such, his track record was a bit mixed.

In one respect, however, the Soviet founding father was exactly right: A lie told repeatedly really can become the truth. Especially when told about the NBA.

Superstars get the calls. Only the last five minutes matter. The fix is in for big-market teams. Such are a few of the clichéd conceptions surrounding pro basketball, articles of faith so stubborn, so commonplace it's as if James Naismith himself carved them onto stone tablets after taking dictation from a flaming peach basket.

Too bad they're utterly bogus.

From the effectiveness of Thunderstix to a supposed lack of team basketball, everything you know about the NBA is wrong. Why wallow in ignorance? As a new season begins, it's time to slam-dunk some old myths, starting with...

**1. NBA Players Can't Shoot**

Scoring is down. Ditto for field-goal percentage. Team USA couldn't have thrown a golf ball through an Olympic Stadium-sized hoop in Athens. Add it up, and it's easy to conclude that modern players can't shoot as well as their predecessors.

Easy ... but wrong.

"It's funny," says Washington Wizards forward Caron Butler, a 44.5 percent shooter from the floor last season. "You take the average NBA player and put him in a gym, just work him out and shoot, he'll look phenomenal."

So what's the problem?

"In a game, you don't get a lot of open shots," Butler adds. "You've always got a hand in your face, coming from a guy with a 40-inch vertical, athletic as I don't know what, coming right at you."

In other words, forget a lack of skill. Think degree of difficulty. For one, mid-range shots largely have been replaced by 3-pointers; more to the point, scoring from anywhere on the floor has never been harder. Defenders are longer, stronger, quicker and more aggressive.

Thirty years ago, a 7-footer such as Kevin Garnett would have been patrolling the paint almost exclusively; today, he roams the entire floor, challenging perimeter jumpers.

Open shot? Relative term.



Michael Redd is just one of many sweet-shooting NBA marksmen.

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"And if you beat a guy like Ben Wallace," says Wizards forward Antawn Jamison, "you've got another guy coming."

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From Gregg Popovich to Larry Brown to Pat Riley's forsaking showtime for chest-to-chest, no-layups basketball, being a good coach means being a good defensive coach. Sophisticated schemes and hyper-detailed scouting reports have followed suit, propelled by advances in stat-tracking and video technology.

"In the playoffs, you'll get a whole [scouting] pamphlet on one guy," Butler says, shaking his head. "What he likes to shoot going right. Going left. His percentage on pull-ups. Drives going right. Drives going left. What he likes to do when it's raining outside, when it's snowing outside. Everything."

Still think today's NBA teams with inept marksmen? Consider the following test, suggested by [ESPN Insider columnist John Hollinger](#).

Free throws are uncontested. The foul line hasn't moved in 75 years. If shooting is truly a lost art, numbers should tell the story. Let's take a look:

YEAR	AVG FT %
2005	75.6
1995	73.7
1985	76.4
1975	76.5
1965	72.1
1955	73.8

Hmmm. Seems as though contemporary players are slightly more accurate than players of the '50s and '60s. And that's *after* accounting for Shaquille O'Neal. Go figure.

## 2. Only the Last Five Minutes Matter

Nope. Not true. And too bad for Eddie Jordan. If pro teams really did coast until the waning moments of games, the Wizards' coach could work less. Sleep more. See his family. Chill out.

Heck, Jordan and his peers could possibly -- just possibly -- make it through the *preseason* without developing puffy, blue-gray bags beneath their eyes.

"That's a huge myth," Jordan says. "Of course, people like to see the end of a close game, like in any other sport. But as a coach, it's 48 minutes. You need to take care of each possession. Each one means a lot."

The same goes for the guys on the floor. Is play more intense at the end of a tight game, what Magic Johnson once dubbed "winnin' time?" Without question. Focus goes up. Adrenaline kicks in.

Even so, don't think players are lollygagging the rest of the way. Slack off early? Your team may not have a chance to make up the deficit. And you probably won't be on the floor to help.

"Some guys don't even play in the last five minutes of the game," says Wizards guard Antonio Daniels. "So what about when they get in for that six or seven minutes earlier on? They're not playing hard?"

Remember: every NBA player wants to start. Every player wants to finish. The time in the middle is a rolling audition.

## 3. The Draft Lottery is Rigged

Even Superman needs help. When Washington won the 2001 NBA draft lottery -- just months before Michael Jordan came out of retirement to play for the club -- NBA fans swamped a team message board, each post more conspiratorial than the next.

*Of course it was rigged.*

*NBA Fixed.*

*MJ Owns NBA!*

The implication? The league fixed the lottery to spur Jordan's return, in turn juicing interest, ratings and an upcoming television deal.

In other words, just a typical, unremarkable, massive follow-the-ping-pong-ball plot linking Jordan, David Stern, the NBA, the networks, the accounting firm of Ernst and Young, the CIA and the Freemasons.

And, possibly, whoever shot Tupac.

"When I opened the envelope, it hit me: Michael [Jordan] won the lottery," recalls league deputy commissioner Russ Granik. "I said, 'Well, we're going to hear from the conspiracy theorists.' I don't think the talk will ever go away."

Indeed. For many, the NBA's Secaucus, N.J., soundstage is nothing short of a grassy knoll. Sinister theories have surrounded the lottery since its 1985 inception, when the Knicks finished with the league's fourth-worst record but beat out six other teams for the top slot, placing Patrick Ewing in the nation's biggest media market.



**Did the Knicks win the Ewing lottery with the help of a frozen ping-pong ball?**

Other eyebrow-raising results? Try 1993, when Orlando entered the lottery with a one-in-66 shot, snagged the top pick for a second consecutive year and paired Penny Hardaway with Shaquille O'Neal to become a national attraction.

"That first one with Patrick, that perpetrated a whole wave [of theories]," Granik says.

Then again, so did the Kennedy assassination. And like Oliver Stone's "JFK," the whispers involving the draft are overheated. Granted, the team with the worst record has scored the winning ping-pong ball just four times; that said, consider some of the teams that have beaten the odds: Charlotte. Golden State. Houston. Milwaukee.

Ask yourself: If Stern were truly a master of puppets, wouldn't he have made sure the Knicks or Bulls walked away with Yao Ming in 2002? Or that once-proud, long-lousy Boston landed Tim Duncan in 1997?

Instead, small-market San Antonio took home the Duncan prize. In fact, the glam-less Spurs have won the lottery twice, as have the near-invisible Bucks. Oh, and Washington? Jordan used the top pick on supposed franchise savior Kwame Brown.

Some conspiracy.

#### **4. There is no "NBA" in T-E-A-M**

If noted basketball fan Spike Lee added an anti-NBA jeremiad to the blistering racial slur montage in "Do the Right Thing," it likely would go as follows:

*Hot-dogging, no-passing, me-first one-on-one streetballing, Iverson jacking 50 shots, Kobe shooting over three defenders while four guys stand in the corner checking out the Laker girls, that's why you won a bronze medal at the Olympics, can't play as a team, I hate this game, whatever happened to Hickory High and the '72-73 Knicks, losers!*

Or something like that. Is team ball nearly extinct in the star-obsessed world of pro basketball?

Not according to the numbers. Last season, the percentage of shots taken by the top two scorers on each team ranged from 24.4 percent (Atlanta, New Orleans) to 41.1 percent (Houston). Most clubs were in the 30-percent area.

"A lot of it comes down to the teams you watch," says Wizards center Brendan Haywood. "If Philadelphia is on, that's [Allen Iverson's] team. If you saw the Lakers last year, Kobe was pretty much going one-on-one. But if you watch a good team like Detroit, they ran sets to get Richard Hamilton open. They ran counters off that to get Tayshaun Prince open. Then they'll come out of a timeout and have a play to get Ben Wallace a lob.

"There's a lot of game-planning in the NBA. It's not just catch the ball and put it up."

#### **NBA Myths: Agree or Disagree?**

Do you agree with these commonly held perceptions of the NBA game? Are you an NBA hater or an NBA lover?

[Vote in the SportsNation poll](#) and see how your views compare to other fans.

The Pistons play as a unit. So do the champion Spurs and plenty of other squads. Don't see it? That's because (a) you're only watching the ball, and (b) no one has told you what else to look for.

Consider the average NFL broadcast. Announcers use Telestrators and replays to illustrate the nuances of a zone blitz or a play-action pass. Many of us have never played a down of organized football, yet we still have a good grasp of how a Cover 2 defense works.

Now think of an NBA game. Phoenix is on the break. *Slam dunk by Marion!* Does anyone outside of Hubie Brown explain how the Suns' helter-skelter transition game is actually by design? Or go through the five or six scoring options the Wizards have in a typical half-court set?

Uh-uh. No chance. No time, really, since basketball moves so quickly. And that's a shame. The pro game isn't just a series of spectacular moves; it's the coordination and teamwork that puts players in position to make spectacular moves.

(Speaking of time limitations: The NBA shot clock is only 24 seconds. Expecting pro clubs to run a college-style motion offense is downright ludicrous. So let it go, already.)

"Honestly, certain guys are more talented offensively than others," Jamison says. "But teams do a great job of getting them the ball in their spots. Look at Amare Stoudemire last year. He couldn't have got the job done scoring if [Shawn] Marion wasn't spotting up, if [Steve] Nash wasn't coming off the pick-and-roll finding everybody."

As for complaints that the NBA overemphasizes one-on-one matchups, focusing too much on star players? Guess what: Coaches like winning. Talented scorers make it happen.

Of the seven clubs to have their top two scorers take less than 30 percent of their field-goal attempts, only Memphis and Indiana made the playoffs. Meanwhile, the leading scorers on supposed team-first Phoenix, Stoudemire and Marion, took nearly as large a percentage of the Suns' shots (37.4 percent) as two-man-gang O'Neal and Dwyane Wade did in Miami (37.9 percent).

Again, compare basketball to football. No one whines that San Diego hands the ball to LaDainian Tomlinson 25 times a game; to the contrary, the Chargers would be stupid to do anything else.

How is having LeBron James taking the bulk of Cleveland's shots any different? Especially when the alternative is ... Anderson Varejao?

## 5. Stars Get the Calls

Even NBA players believe this one. But good luck getting them to go on the record.

"I'm not even touching that," Daniels says with a laugh. "I will say this: it's not a coincidence that the same guys lead the league in free-throw shooting every year."

Daniels is correct. It's no coincidence that Iverson and Stoudemire led the league in free-throw attempts last season. Both players shoot frequently. Both players get hacked a lot. Do the math. Nothing sinister about it.

"As players, we're taught to foul hot scorers and put them on the line," Jamison says. "And great scorers know how to draw contact. They even know how to make it seem like they were fouled. That's part of what makes them great."

As for a larger officiating conspiracy? Hard evidence is lacking. Look again at last year's free-throw attempt leaders: O'Neal, Wade, Bryant, James, Dirk Nowitzki, Paul Pierce and Gilbert Arenas, big-name players who routinely take shots in traffic.

Also in the top 10? Corey Maggette, hardly a marquee attraction. If NBA referees truly favor the league's top draws, how did Maggette finish with 19 more free-throw attempts than James, particularly when James took 698 more shots?

"I won't say superstars get the calls," Jamison says. "But certain guys get the benefit of the doubt.



Corey Maggette gets to the line because he goes hard to the hoop, not because he's a star.

Michael Jordan did. The game is played at a fast pace, and if it's a close call between a Michael Jordan and someone else, of course you're going to be like, "He's a great offensive player."

Maybe so. Yet while Jordan got away with a few memorable playoff noncalls -- pushing Bryon Russell in 1997, grabbing Hersey Hawkins' arm in 1995 -- those don't equal a smoking gun, let alone a full-blown plot.

To the contrary, **The Sporting News last March** added up player offensive touches (shot attempts, assists, offensive rebounds, turnovers), then divided the total by free-throw attempts to get a crude idea of which players get to the line most frequently.

The results? Duncan got fewer calls per touch than Dwight Howard. Austin Croshere beat out James. And the most prolific whistle-inducer in the league was none other than Danny Fortson, whose 1.9 touches per foul shot topped the likes of O'Neal (2.2), Iverson (3.5) and Garnett (4.4).

Unless Fortson has deeply compromising photos of league officiating director Ronnie Nunn, superstar favoritism is vastly overrated.

## 6. The Crowd Can Affect Free-Throw Shooting

A few words for everyone sitting behind the basket: Sit down. Shut up. For the love of John Wooden, lay off the Thunderstix.

Fact is, you're not making much of difference.

"The balloons, the signs, all that stuff that goes on behind the basket never bothered me much," says former NBA guard Steve Kerr, an 86.4 percent career shooter from the foul line. "The only thing I was ever distracted by was the situation."

Kerr has company. Lots of it. Last season, the 25 teams with split stats listed on NBA.com shot an average of 75.7 percent from the foul line at home and 75.3 percent away, a whopping difference of 0.4 percent. Ten squads even shot better on the road.

All of which suggests that those oh-so-clever BRICK signs aren't exactly getting the job done.

"Just sitting there yelling, waving your arms, that doesn't work," says Wizards guard Gilbert Arenas. "It has to be something you haven't seen before."

Such as?

"When I was at Arizona, the Oregon Duck had this big smile," Arenas recalls. "He stands in the back, kicking the goal over and over. We must have missed six free throws straight because we were laughing at him."

As it turns out, Thunderstix and wiggling balloons have little effect because the brain simply blocks out random motion, like white noise on a television screen. According to this [Slate.com article](#), fans behind the baseline would be better off moving side-to-side in unison.



Guess what? All those noisemakers aren't going to make a guy miss.

Why? Confronted with a field of background motion, observers tend to believe that *they* are moving while the background remains still -- think of sitting on a stopped subway train while an adjacent train passes. David Whitney, a visual scientist at the University of California-Davis, has demonstrated that a field of background motion can influence hand motions, such as the flick of the wrist on a free throw.

Kerr concurs.

"The most effective one I've seen might have been at Duke, or maybe Kansas," he says. "As soon as the guy was about to shoot, the fans would all move from the right side to the left. It would create this visual of everything moving."

Put those same fans in Duck costumes? *Now we're getting somewhere.*

## 7. College Guys Play Harder

No. No. A thousand times no. Compared to their pro counterparts, college players do a lot more jersey-popping and floor-slapping.

But play with more energy? Please.

"Coming out of college, I had no idea what it took to be successful in this league," Daniels says. "It took me going to San Antonio and playing around a professional group of guys.

"Things happen so quickly at this level. Decisions are made so much faster. Guys are a lot craftier, they think a lot quicker and they react a lot quicker."

College players show emotion. For sheer atmosphere, pep bands and rabid fans trump corporate boxes and Jock Jams Vols. 1-5. Couple that with a lower degree of skill, and the college game can *appear* more intense.

Don't be fooled.

In the time it takes a campus star to pound his chest, drop into a defensive stance and raise a fist, a pro player can use a quick hesitation dribble to get to the rim. Economy of motion does not equal economy of effort.

"When you watch Tracy McGrady score, it doesn't look like he's working," Haywood says. "But that's because he's just that good. College guys look a little more rugged, like they're playing extra hard when they're doing the same thing we're doing."

In college, an NBA-level player can sometimes coast -- he's that much better. In the pros, even the scrubs were campus stars. Come out flat, and you're bound to get hammered. Then there's playing through pain: think Jerry Sloan ignoring two broken ribs, Isiah Thomas scoring 25 points in a quarter on a severely sprained ankle, Iverson cutting off his own cast to play with a broken thumb.

Would most college players do the same?

Hollinger suggests another test. Defense, coaches say, is mostly a matter of effort. When was the last time a rookie -- fresh from hustling so very, very much in college -- made the All-Defensive Team?

Try never.

## 8. The Fix is in for Big-Market Teams

Blaming officials is nothing new. But during a 2001 playoff series between Philadelphia and Milwaukee, the Bucks took carping to a new level, submitting a self-spliced videotape of questionable calls to the league office.

Why the Zapruder-esque documentary?

"Nine times out of 10, when you have a referee you know there's no biases," then-Bucks guard Ray Allen told reporters. "But in the back of everybody's minds, it's like Philadelphia and the MVP [Allen Iverson] needs to play in the finals.

"I used to always think the series were fixed when I was in high school, then when I got to the NBA I said there's no way they could be fixed. But even last year against Indiana in Game 5 [of a first-round series] it seemed like everything went against us."

Join the club. Small-market teams getting an intentional league shaft is the T-1000 of NBA myths. *That's what they do! That's all they do! They won't stop! Ever!*

Think Tim Hardaway, referring to referee Dick Bavetta as "Knick" Bavetta. Or Ralph Nader, calling for an investigation after the Los Angeles Lakers shot 27 fourth-quarter free throws in a pivotal 2002 playoff victory over Sacramento.

Three years earlier, Pacers fans pointed to a series-turning, phantom four-point play by Knicks forward Larry Johnson as proof that the league wanted no part of an Indiana-San Antonio matchup in the Finals.

"We'll never get the benefit of the doubt like the big-market teams like New York and Los Angeles," former Pacers guard Reggie Miller lamented the following season. "That's just the league being the

league."

Is it? Not if you look at the evidence. After all, Indiana made it to the Finals. So did New Jersey (twice) and San Antonio (three times).

Did the dynastic Lakers benefit from a few bad calls? Sure. So does every team. Besides, any club featuring Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant is going to *draw* a lot of fouls, too.

Also keep in mind that NBA ratings have less to do with a team's local market size than its national following.

"When Michael [Jordan] was playing baseball, our highest-rated team was Orlando, with Shaq and Penny," Granik says. "And that's one of our smallest markets."

Then there's this: After a Game 5 loss that prevented his team from closing out the Western Conference finals a few years back, a well-known player sounded an accusatory -- if familiar -- note.

"If I open my mouth and say anything about the officials, that would be making an excuse," he told reporters. "...[But] you can't have the NBA on NBC when it's 4-1."

The grumbler in question? Rick Fox. Who happened to be playing for the Lakers.

Wait a second. Aren't they in on the fix?

### **9. Shaquille O'Neal is an Extraterrestrial**

Oops. This one actually may be true.

*Patrick Hruby is a Page 2 columnist.*

