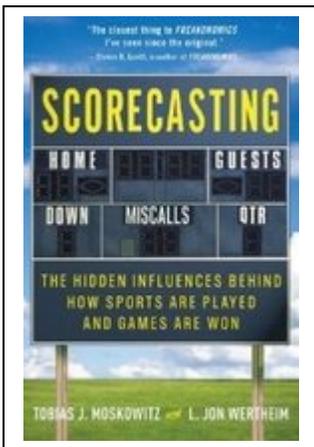




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'Scorecasting': Saying Sports Cliches Ain't So



Freakonomics used basic economic principles to change the way many people looked at things right in front of them — like standardized testing, real estate and kids' names. Now, another economist from the University of Chicago has taken lessons from economic theory and applied them to a subject where cliches and mythology tend to dominate the field of accepted knowledge: sports. Tobias Moskowitz, a behavioral economist and professor of finance at the University of Chicago, and L. Jon Wertheim, a senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*, have written *Scorecasting: The Hidden Influences Behind How Sports Are Played and Games Are Won*. And it will challenge most sports fans' basic assumptions about how to watch and evaluate professional games.

The book looks at bromides (such as "defense wins championships"), unquestioned traditions (like nearly always punting on the fourth down), and the curious World Series-less streak of the Chicago Cubs through a critical economic lens. Poring over data, the authors learned new lessons about things that are taken for granted in pro sports.

The authors talk with *Weekend Edition Saturday* host Scott Simon about a topic sure to come up at the Super Bowl: icing the kicker. Coaches, Wertheim says, feel compelled to call a time out right before a player kicks a field goal to somehow jangle his nerves. If they don't, and the player makes the kick, fans and sports journalists will surely deride him for the missed opportunity.

"A lot of times, a guy lines up to kick a field goal and the coaches call a time out, and the irony of that is that sometimes it even gives the kicker sort of a dress rehearsal — he can go ahead and kick the ball and it doesn't count, and he can gauge the wind, and, again, just running the numbers, there's nothing to suggest that's an effective strategy," Wertheim says.

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Another time the conventional wisdom doesn't quite pan out on the football field is when teams automatically punt the ball on fourth down, unless they're in a desperate end-of-game drive. Moskowitz says that according to the statistics, teams should run a play even in a situation like fourth-and-eight, as long as they're past the 50-yard line.

"People sort of view [a field goal] as, well, that's a sure three points," Moskowitz says. "Field goals aren't a sure thing, but the success of field goals is pretty high. But the success rate of gaining a couple of yards on fourth down is actually just as high if not higher on a lot of plays. And to keep that drive going and to potentially get seven points turns out to outweigh a lot of situations."

Moskowitz says many more things can be chalked up to randomness and luck in sports than players would like to admit, such as the concept of streaks. Just like flipping a coin, he says, one will sometimes get six heads in a row and the appearance of a streak. Situations generally described as "having momentum" or a "hot hand" are just random occurrences, much like the coin flip.

One exception to that idea, though, comes from one of the unluckiest teams in professional sports. The Chicago Cubs, who have not won a World Series in 102 years, have more factors at play than just randomness, the authors say. When they examined attendance data for the Cubs, the authors found it to be remarkably stable — around 90 percent — no matter if the team was at the top of the league or on a losing streak. Fair-weather fans, it seems, actually incentivize a team to win; team owners and coaches will work harder to win games so they can sell more tickets.

"We're going to come to your restaurant whether we enjoy our meal or not," Wertheim says in an analogy about Cubs fans. "We'll be back. Do you whip out the fancy sea foam, or do you just give the customers their meatloaf and mashed potatoes?"