



Reverse Basketball

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How easy is it to lose a basketball game, assuming both sides want to lose? Now, let's be clear: I do not advocate trying to lose in any sport. Please take this essay primarily as a source of amusement -- an intellectual exercise, if you will. Actually trying to lose is not only bad sportsmanship, but it may cause players to be suspended, coaches to be fired, and teams to be fined and even disqualified from leagues. Quite possibly, trying to lose may actually be illegal. At its worst, someone might get hurt and the perpetrator may even get jail time. However, imagining that everyone is OK with trying to lose, and that no one gets hurt, then let's have some fun and see what can be done to lose a basketball game.

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There are several reasons why a team that is supposed to win a basketball game might actually try to lose. One reason that occurred during a recent high school game was that both teams became convinced that losing the final game of the year would actually result in being placed in an easier bracket in the coming playoffs [1]. Another reason is that an NBA team that lost a game late in the season might gain a higher draft pick in next year's draft [2]. Last, movies are rife with depictions of fixed games where one side or one player on one side tries to throw a game so that bettors can make money.

The analysis that follows assumes US college rules as they exist in 2016. In the NBA, there is actually a rule that specifically says "It is a violation for a player to attempt a field goal at an opponent's basket" [3]. So far, NCAA rules do not appear to have the same provision, other than limiting the amount of points awarded on a "wrong basket" to two at the maximum [4]. Rules for other leagues including international leagues and clubs may differ or change over time. Even so, this analysis assumes, for the sake of amusement, that specific "no losing on purpose" rules do not exist that would prohibit, for example, purposefully scoring on an opponent's basket.

About terminology: "opponent's basket" here will refer to the basket that, if scored upon, would increase the score of the opponent. This is because, according to the NCAA rulebook "A team's own basket is the one into which its players try to throw or tap the ball." [4] Last, my understanding of these rules may be flawed, or my analysis may be flawed. Therefore, if you, the reader, find any mistakes, please contact me and I will update this essay.

That said, let's have some fun figuring out how to purposely lose a basketball game. It might not be as easy as you think. Now, if only one of the two teams is trying to lose, the path toward losing is easy enough: just deliberately miss enough shots on your own basket while slacking off on defense. If that is too subtle, one can be blatant: win the opening tip, then drive down the court toward the other team's basket and score. While everyone else is trying to figure out what is going on, your team gets to inbound the ball right then and there, under the other team's basket, as if the other team had scored. Neither the referee nor the any member of the opposing team need ever touch the ball. So your team can inbound the ball with a short pass to your own player right under your own basket, who puts it in for a layup. Inbound again another layup. And again. Keep going. The ball never needs to go outside of the region near your team's basket. If unopposed, your team can rack up literally hundreds of points

perhaps even thousands for the opposition. Left unchecked, the final score could be something like 1,286 to 0. At the end, it will look like your team not only lost, but was crushed by an amazingly talented, relentless, and unsportsmanlike foe.

The real challenge comes, though, when BOTH teams try to lose. Then, after your first score on your opponent's basket, the other team might try to steal the inbound pass so they can better go about their own business of trying to lose. Therefore, they may make it hard for your team to inbound the ball. A new game has emerged! Note, though, that the inbound passer is allowed to move behind the end line, and even pass the ball to another player behind the end line. Therefore, a team that is well practiced at inbounding the ball under the other team's basket has an advantage even at losing.

Let's say that your team inboundes the ball away from the basket -- what happens then? Your team should try to score as before on the other team's basket. There is no need to go down to the other end. The other team, if also trying to lose, may well play "defense" and try to stop any scoring on the basket that would give them points they don't want. Play may now appear similar to a normal basketball game, but on reverse ends. However, there will be differences. For one thing, your post players should try to camp out in the lane for as long as they want because, technically, they are playing on the defensive end. The offensive three-second rule now applies to the other team's players. Therefore, your post players can just wait in the lane for three seconds to become free, and then get a pass for an easy layup.

Let's say, though, that their post "defender" spends too long in the paint anyway, ending up with an offensive 3-second violation. Well the foul is on them, so your team gets to inbound the ball and still retains possession. However, since there is some chance that the other team will steal the inbound pass, the other team may keep these 3-second violations coming.

Another problem is the violation of not advancing past the half-court line within 10 seconds. If your team is shooting on your opponent's basket, your team likely never crossed the half court line. Therefore, if any play takes longer than 10 seconds without crossing the half-court line, a violation occurs and the other team takes possession of the ball. Which is not good even for losing. Therefore, your team needs to reverse-score within 10 seconds of taking possession.

Let's say that your team somehow gained possession of the ball near your own team's basket. Normally, your team would just shoot on that basket, but in reverse basketball, the goal is to lose and so shoot on the basket at the other end on the other team's basket. A problem is that your team cannot take the ball over the half court line without committing a half-court "over and back" violation. There are therefore two things that might be done. One is to shoot on the other team's basket from just over half court line. Even if that shot is missed, the ball has become a "loose ball" and, were it to hit the backboard or rim, might then be rebounded by your team near the other team's basket and put in for a layup. Alternatively, your team could try to bounce the ball off an opposing team player (without hurting them), so that the ball ricochets over the half court line. The loose ball can then be recovered by your team on the side of the half-court line nearest your opponent's basket and a layup soon attempted there. All within ten seconds, of course.

From half court -- that's a long shot. Suppose your team misses badly and the ball goes out of bounds? Then your opponents gain possession. However, assuming the ball went out under the opposing team's basket, your opponents must inbound the ball on the end line past their basket. Now they don't want to shoot on that basket because that would help them win. They want to shoot on the basket at the other end to lose. But they can't pass the half court line without an over-and-back violation. So they, too, might elect to shoot from half court. Assuming they, too, don't even hit the rim, this exchange of half-court shots could go on repeatedly. Eventually, one team should hit the backboard or rim and both teams could scramble for the rebound.

What about the three point line? Without a rule specifically addressing this situation, the three point line might act just as it would around your opponent's basket. If so, then shots made by your own team on

the other team's basket from behind that 3-point line should count 3 points for the opposition. Oddly, though, the current NCAA rule book does state explicitly that all baskets scored on your opponent's basket count for only two points [4].

Let's now say that a player on your team is fouled by an opponent while shooting on the opponent's basket. Is your team awarded foul shots? Although a bit of a gray area, most likely not. Your team was not inhibited from normal scoring, so the foul would just be a personal foul which would result in free throws only if your opponents were over their foul limit.

So let's consider foul shots. Who shoots fouls and on which basket? Well if the foul is on them, then your team shoots the fouls, but on your own basket. Therefore, were your player to make these foul shots, this could cause your team to gain points and possibly win -- exactly the wrong outcome. Also, if your team makes the last of the foul shots, the other team gains possession and can inbound the ball under their own basket, possibly for a quick layup. A bad situation if you want to lose.

Therefore, players should miss all foul shots. Both teams will surely figure this out and try to get the rebound of the final missed shot of the series. Now if this missed shot is soft and falls near your own basket, the other team may not only rebound the ball but immediately shoot a layup on your team's basket. Therefore, to avoid this, your player's last foul shot should be a hard shot. This might not be easy as the ball must hit the rim or the foul shot will not count and the other team will gain immediate possession. If possible, a rim-hitting hard shot may be rebounded by your team so that your team retains possession. Although perhaps unlikely, it would help to rebound this ball after it has bounced all the way down past the half-court line so that your team can scoop it up and just drive right in and score. On the other team's basket. Within ten seconds.

Intentional fouls by your team are never good since the other team will automatically gain possession after the shots. Also, fouls committed before going over "the limit" will result only in the ball being inbounded by the team that had possession previously.

What about technical fouls? Why not just make lots of technical fouls? Isn't that a good way to lose? Turns out: no. For one thing, if someone is injured on purpose, as explained previously, that is not only ethically and physically abhorrent, but also a crime and the hard fouler can go to jail. Don't do that. But let's say your team just throws the ball into the stands, or insults a referee, or fields six players. Then the other team gets technical foul shots. For them to try to lose, they will miss these shots, so the score will not change. However, after their foul shots they will regain possession of the ball and surely try to score on their own basket. Therefore, your team should try to avoid technical fouls, even when trying to lose.

Why not just forfeit? Ah, now this tactic opens up a whole new labyrinth of reverse strategy. At any time during the game, your coach should be able to just tell the referee that your team forfeits the game. Assuming no debate about "why" ensues, that should be it. Right then and there, your team loses. How simple is that? If the referee needs a reason or demands a better reason and so does not allow this, your coach can play all of your players at once until the refs forfeit your team. This is because referees are supposed to forfeit any team that "makes a travesty of the game". And, well, it should not be difficult to think up other harmless but ridiculous behaviors that should qualify.

But what happens if both teams want to forfeit? Then, quite possibly, the first team to forfeit will actually get the loss. Each coach may figure this out even before the opening tip, so the real competition may be between coaches trying to get their team forfeited first. If forfeiting by phone or email or text is allowed, as soon as a coach knows that their team should forfeit, they should do so. If this occurs at the end of a previous game, then as soon as the previous game is complete, the coach should contact the league office and forfeit the next game. Now this coach may get suspended or fired, but that's the quickest and surest way to lose. If, during a previous game, your coach comes to realize that your team needs to lose the next game, then your coach should immediately forfeit the next game by text even if the previous game is still being played.

Now what would a league office do if both teams try to forfeit for their own future advantage? They may reply that good sportsmanship involves trying to win. More cynically, they may also figure that fans who bought tickets will want to see a game. On the business side, basketball is not only about winning or losing, it's also about social entertainment and the financial return of actually playing interesting games. Therefore, the league may say, after doling out fines and penalties, that the game must be played. If things get messy enough and both teams want to lose badly enough, a league may even say that any team that purposely forfeits a game will be declared the winner of that game. If that ever happens, then watch out -- a real game of reverse basketball might really be played!

Of course, many other sports could lend themselves well to reverse-type games. If anyone wants to analyze such scenarios, please feel free. Those analyses may also be entertaining. This essay has a CCBY License: You may copy this work but only if you credit me. This essay was first posted to Google Plus on 2016 August 8. I am unaware of any similar analysis.

REFERENCES

[1] <http://ftw.usatoday.com/2015/02/riverdalesmyrnatankingshighschool>

[2] Present NBA rules try to avoid this. See, for example, "Has a team ever lost on purpose to get better draft picks?";
<http://sports.stackexchange.com/questions/1125/hasateameverlostonpurposetogetbetterdraftpicks>

[3] NBA Rulebook: <http://www.nba.com/news/officiating>

[4] See, for example, "NCAA: Men's Basketball Rules of the Game"
<http://www.ncaa.org/championships/playingrules/mensbasketballrulesgame>