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# ARTIFACTS

A Journal of Undergraduate Writing

## The Conspiracy of the NBA Draft

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Zack is originally from the East Coast having grown up in New York and South Florida. Since coming to Mizzou, he has studied both English and Communication and plans on graduating in May 2016. After he graduates Zack, hopes to get a job that will allow him to continue to show his passion for sports. That passion was one of the main factors that led to the conception of this paper. The other was from one of his favorite professors Dr. LuAnne Roth who made him

**aware that legends and  
conspiracies are all around us,  
you just have to look for them.**

The National Basketball Association is third largest professional sports league in the country and one of the biggest businesses, valued at over 12 billion dollars. With some of the most popular athletes on the planet, such as LeBron James and some of the most exclusive television deals and sponsorships the NBA is the very definition of a big business. The NBA also uses an interesting format for their draft, as they and the National Hockey League are the only two professional sports leagues to pick their draft order based on a lottery.

The lottery started in 1985 and was seen as a way to help teams level the playing field with more competitive teams as a team that might have one really good player might have the opportunity to add another possible superstar to their roster, even though the team might not have had terrible record. Since the first lottery though there have been many conspiracies about the NBA possibly fixing the order for two reasons, the first being that the league might want to add a great player to the players hometown team or a team in a lower market more competitive to increase ticket sales, and the second to add a premium player to a larger market team to not only improve them but to create a national interest for both games and sponsorships.

To get a better understanding of the conspiracies behind the NBA lottery, I will look at the beginnings of the NBA lottery, the 1985 lottery and the theories on how it could have been fixed, some other lotteries that could have been fixed and about how the conspiracy has survived over the years and the legacy it has left behind as a result.

The NBA lottery, ironically, started because of a controversy with the previous way that draft picks were selected. Before 1985 the draft order was picked by a coin flip between the two teams from each conference with the worst record for the first and second picks while the rest of the draft order was picked based on the records of the teams that were left. This meant that a team would never have the first or second pick of the draft unless they had the worst records in their respective conferences.

This led to rumors that teams were purposely losing games so that they could stock up on premium young players as building blocks to build a possible dynasty. The team that was accused of this the most was the Houston Rockets who won the coin flip in both the 1983 and 1984 NBA lottery. Bondy (2007) talks about this when he discusses Ray Patterson the former General Manager and President of the Rockets, when he writes “And in 1983, with a different league commissioner but in the same office with windows looking down on the spires of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Patterson had won another flip for the first pick and the right to draft Ralph Sampson” (p. xiii).

Sampson, a future Hall of Famer from the University of Virginia and the eventual Rookie of the Year in 1984, vastly improved the Rockets already but they still found themselves going back to the coin flip in the offseason for the number one pick. This is when the rumors of tanking games on purpose really began to pickup steam as well as the time that the Rockets started to deny everything. “The officials from the 1984 Houston Rockets will tell you that they were not dumping games at the end of that

season, that they were not obsessed with getting a top draft pick, and everybody else was just a conspiracy nut” (Bondy, 2007, p. 101).

Bondy also notes “Whether it was mythology, manipulation, or simple logic, the tanking theory became accepted as fact by practically everyone who closely watched the Rockets play a horrid and often unintentionally humorous version of professional basketball that March and April” (p. 101). It didn’t help the Rockets fight the tanking rumor, that when they won the coins flip again they selected another future Hall of Famer, Hakeem Olajuwon, who with Sampson would form “The Twin Towers”.

This led to the league, and new Commissioner David Stern, implementing the lottery system so that teams would have a better chance of being able to have a higher draft choice based solely based on record. Bondy spoke to former Utah State coach, Frank Layden, who admitted to that he heard about coaches losing on purpose and stated “And that’s why we went to the lottery system” (p. 106). So with the new system, teams no longer needed to have the worst record to be able to get the first pick in the draft, which many thought would lead to a controversy free draft. It soon became apparent with the 1985 lottery that this would not be the case.

The 1985 NBA draft lottery was supposed to fix the NBA’s problem of having the draft be controversy free but really it caused more controversy than ever before. The NBA decided to televise the selection process for the draft order with David Stern picking out an envelope from a glass sphere which were put in from an accountant hired from the firm of Ernst and Whinney, which would be the first pick and then picking out the rest of the envelopes, which would be the other six picks.

The Knicks, who had the third worst record in the NBA the previous season behind the Indiana Pacers and the Golden State Warriors, ended up winning the lottery and the right to draft the consensus number one pick, Patrick Ewing of Georgetown University. This is where fans and sportswriters began to create conspiracy theories, as it seemed very “convenient” that the New York Knicks, owners of the largest sports market in the country, would be able to draft Ewing who many saw as a future superstar after winning the College national player of the year award and leading Georgetown to a NCAA championship in 1984.

Some members of the media pointed out that if another team such as the Indiana Pacers or the Sacramento Kings had won the lottery barely anyone would see Ewing play as the smaller market teams were struggling with their ticket sales. Instead Ewing, who would have a dominant NBA career and be elected to the Hall of Fame, went to a team struggling in the largest market in the country where he would be able to gain national media attention quickly and be able to gain more exposure from signing endorsement deals.

Ewing would soon become one of the most popular players in the entirety of sports doing all kinds of product endorsements including his own athletic apparel company called Ewing Athletics, which included his own brand of shoes and still runs to this day. The Knicks meanwhile were able to turn things around after choosing Ewing and soon became one of the most dominant teams in the entire NBA. The Knicks never did win an NBA title though as they were unable to overcome the Houston Rockets, ironically the other team that had been caught up in draft conspiracy rumors. Because they

never won a title some fans have speculated that it might not matter that the NBA might have fixed the draft lottery.

The rumors of the league fixing the lottery immediately started to sprout up more and more, but David Stern denied it every time commenting that the conspiracies were just that conspiracies. So now rather than teams being able to fix the draft by losing on purpose to get to the coin flip, the association was able to create the draft order they wanted that would benefit and could possibly make the most money in the long run. They would also be able to deny any rumors as to why they may have as nothing can be proven, looking at the tape of when Stern first picked out the envelope he just reaches in for one and it appears that he is just picking one out randomly. So the question becomes: How did the association and its higher ups fix the lottery? There are two very popular theories that have sprouted up over the years. The first one is that the envelope was frozen before they were placed in the globe.

The frozen envelope may be one of the most popular theories in all of sports conspiracies. This theory is that the NBA put the envelope that held the Knicks card in it into a freezer so that when David Stern reached into the globe to pick out the envelope, he would be able to figure out which one was the Knicks envelope as it would be cold to the touch. This has become one of the most popular among the fans of the conspiracy theory, as they believe that this is a completely plausible.

This would explain how it appears that Stern was able to pick the envelope so easy without doing anything obvious looking when he picks the Knicks envelope. If the envelope felt colder than all the others then Stern would easily be able to figure which was the correct envelope without even looking at which one he was picking. This can also never be proven, as the envelope would return to a normal temperature shortly after it was picked and it would still appear the same as all the other envelopes from the globe. This is why the frozen envelope is such a popular theory as it is completely plausible and would explain how the NBA and David Stern were able to get away with fixing the draft. It is so popular that in his book, Kalb (2009) when talking about the YouTube video of the lottery says “Many fans wrote that the Knicks envelope was frozen before it was placed in the drum, so that Stern would be able to tell by touch” (p. 67). The other popular theory that has continued to persist over the years is that the envelope was bent on the corner.

The other major theory of how the NBA was able to fix the NBA lottery was that the Knicks envelope was bent somehow. The question is how the bend might get into the envelope since they all were uniform as they went into the globe. As Bill Simmons, a basketball commentator for the NBA and ESPN, notes while watching the YouTube video of the lottery, “When an accountant from Ernst and Whinney throws the seven envelopes into the glass drum, he bangs the fourth one against the side of the drum to create a creased corner’ (Simmons, 2007).

He also mentions that a reader told him to look at a specific point in the video and when he does he notes, “If you look closely right at the 5:31 mark, right as the commish yanks that Knicks envelope out, *there’s a noticeable crease in the corner of the envelope.*” (Simmons, 2007). It does appear that there is a crease on the Knicks envelope, which means that the theory is plausible as Stern could have felt the crease on the envelope as he took three out before selecting the bottom one which of course was the Knicks envelope. He may have picked the envelopes in that way just so he could find the one with the

crease. So the with both of these options being plausible it means that David Stern and the NBA could have fixed the lottery process and could have gotten away with it not only in 1985 but perhaps in other lotteries as well.

There have been some other lotteries besides the one in 1985 that may have been fixed as well for a various number of reasons. Five years after the beginning of the NBA lottery in 1990, the format for picking the draft order was changed once again as it became a weighted lottery based on Ping-Pong balls for each team which again the league thought would make things more fair for teams as it gave bad teams a higher chance of getting a better draft pick. Now when the lottery is aired on television they don't even show the Ping-Pong balls as they are drawn instead the results are just given. This has not staved off all criticism and conspiracy theories of the draft though as there have been a few more examples of drafts that may have been fixed by the NBA.

The first is the 2003 NBA draft, which is considered one of the best in NBA history. In this draft the Cleveland Cavaliers who were one of the worst teams that year won the number one overall pick and with it the right to take future superstar LeBron James who was a Cleveland native. This draft may have been fixed because even though the Cavaliers had one of the worst records in the league it made the most sense for James to go to the Cavaliers, as it would cause the franchise to be revitalized and more popular in Cleveland.

A similar situation happened in the 2008 NBA lottery as the Chicago Bulls won that year even though they had less than a 5% chance to get the number one pick. They used it to select Derrick Rose, a Chicago native, who instantly became one of the most popular players to ever play for the Bulls. The last lottery that may have been fixed was the 2011 NBA lottery. That year there was a consensus first pick in Anthony Davis of the University of Kentucky. The New Orleans Hornets who at the time were owned by the NBA won the lottery. This was very suspect as the Hornets did not own the worst record that year but many think the lottery was fixed because the league owned the team and were able to draft a player that was seen as a future superstar. So while these drafts may have been fixed, the question is why is the 1985 draft conspiracy still so popular today when it happened nearly 30 years ago?

The 1985 NBA lottery is still one of the most popular sports conspiracies of all time. The reason for this is that it is one conspiracy theory that most people admit it is completely plausible as the theories could have happened and could explain how David Stern was able to pick the Knicks envelope without changing the envelope too much. It also was a process entirely handled by the NBA, which would make it easy for them to fix the lottery as there would be no outsiders that help to set up the lottery, besides the accountants who worked for the NBA.

In Elliot Kalb's book he ranks the 1985 draft as the fifth biggest conspiracy in all of sports. This is because of its staying power in the sports community and its plausibility compared to other conspiracies in sports history. Another reason that the 1985 draft may still be a popular conspiracy is because Americans are starting to look at all conspiracies more and become more aware of conspiracy culture. Knight (2000) notes "Conspiracy theories have become not just more popular because they are more plausible, but they have also shifted their political function and location" (p. 32). This may help explain why Americans are still so enamored with conspiracy theories such as this one. As Knight also

notes that conspiracy theorists are now all over the political spectrum, which means that conspiracy theories are becoming more popular all throughout America.

By researching how the NBA draft lottery started, the 1985 draft, the frozen and bent envelope theories, other drafts, and why it is still popular I now have a better understanding of the NBA draft conspiracy. It is a truly amazing how plausible the theories of how the conspiracy happened are and they may very well be true. So did David Stern and the NBA fix different NBA draft lotteries? That is for people to decide themselves.

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Part of **Issue 13**, published in August 2015

Topics: **Sport**

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*Artifacts* is a refereed journal of undergraduate work in writing at The University of Missouri. The journal celebrates writing in all its forms by inviting student authors to submit projects composed across different genres and media.

*Artifacts* is sponsored by [The Campus Writing Program](#).

Published by the [Campus Writing Program](#).

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