

3-1-1995

The Magic Success, the Fans and the NBA Refs

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Magic Success, the Fans and the NBA Refs" (1995). *On Sport and Society*. 405. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/405>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
March 1, 1995

As NBA season's go, we're just about at the halfway point and the Orlando Magic are riding high. In number of regular season games over half the season has passed, but in real terms the NBA year is subdivided into four seasons, and the second is just concluding.

In the upcoming third season teams begin to jockey for playoff position, drive for home court advantage, and scramble to make the playoffs. This will take us to the end of the regular season, and then the fourth and final part of the NBA season will begin. The good teams and the great teams play at a different and higher level in each of the four seasons. Last year Orlando had no more to give, and was unable to turn it up that fourth notch. The result was a quick sweep by Indiana which send the Magic home for the summer.

Clearly the Magic are among the best in the league as the second season ends. What we wait to see is if they can continue to improve and keep pace with the NBA frontline teams.

There have been a few caution signs. About two weeks ago Penny Hardaway looked exhausted both physically and mentally. The Magic have on occasion looked very bad in losing, especially to poor teams. And the minor injuries have been taking a significant toll in the last few weeks.

But overall this is a team of excellent talent that, with the re-emergence of Dennis Scott, is gaining playoff quality depth. Brian Hill seems to have finally realized that you cannot exhaust your players in something as unimportant as the regular season. It is a team that can play with great defensive intensity, and when it does, can jump a lead ten to fifteen points in a blink of an eye. Shaq's game keeps improving, and there are times when his free throw shooting even looks acceptable.

As to the Magic Empire it remains a mixed bag. Magic fans leave the game early. At times the O-rena looks like Dodger Stadium after the sixth inning. In the NBA a twenty point lead with five minutes remaining or a ten point lead at two minutes is not safe. Do not leave the building.

Aspects of game production are becoming an annoyance which is unfortunate because overall it is quite good. Music playing during the flow of the game must stop. It is not needed and it detracts from the game itself. And for the most part the time-

out events and the half-time shows are an insult to the mentally challenged.

Magic fans remain remarkably naive. For some reason they still take NBA officiating seriously. And if you do that you wind up angry, frustrated, and nursing an ulcer. As a life-long veteran of NBA fandom I learned long ago that NBA referees are consistent in only one attribute: inconsistency. Fans must simply accept that reality, hope it will not influence the outcome of the game (and it only occasionally does), and watch the game, not the referees.

NBA referees have been highly trained to develop this remarkable level of inconsistency. This can not be attributed to chance or simple incompetence. This is studied inconsistency and exquisitely sculptured incompetence. How else could you possibly explain the fact that at one moment brutal physical assault is not a foul, while a twinkling of an eye later a barely visible touch is? In the NBA rulebook there can be no definition of a foul.

The three-second violation is a minimum of five seconds, while usually closer to seven. It is called so infrequently as to be an esoteric event. Travelling is even more bizarre. A head fake can and does bring a travelling call, while a waltz through the lane by Arthur Murray is usually ignored. It is my theory, and I must confess I do not know this for a fact, that NBA officials have been randomly programmed to make two travelling and one three-second call per game. Even the official himself doesn't when the alarm will sound inside their head, but when it does the whistle blows regardless of situation.

The one call that seems to be based on actual game conditions is the illegal defense. I must admit however that I have arrived at this judgement only because I have no idea what this call means.

Unfortunately all of this seems to send Magic fans into a frenzy. I even heard one fan explaining to another the other day that players in the O-rena should wear black shoes so they would not be noticed in the paint, and never have the three-second violation called on them.

Relax folks. Enjoy the game and this fine team. Forget the officiating, it just isn't important.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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