



WHY COLLEGE BASKETBALL IS BETTER THAN THE NBA

OPINION BY PAUL GAETA

The Level of Play in the NCAA Has Become Better Than in the NBA

Thirty years ago, there was a legitimate reason to shame someone for believing that National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) College Basketball was superior to the National Basketball Association (NBA). Swarming defenses and generational talent filled NBA arenas across the country in a time known as the “golden age” of professional basketball.

Over the last 20 years though, that belief has become less and less unconventional. Many basketball purists are coming to the realization that college basketball is more entertaining and engaging than the NBA. However, it doesn't take a basketball ‘purist’ or ‘expert’ to recognize this recent phenomenon. Basketball fans around the country are starting to take notice, and the NBA is feeling it when it comes to TV ratings. Last year, the average viewership of the six NBA finals games between the Boston Celtics and the Golden State Warriors was 12.4 million viewers according to the NBA. Viewership peaked at 13.99 million viewers in the deciding Game 6 where Golden State took home the championship. These numbers are historically bad; the lowest they have been in the last 20 years, excluding the shortened COVID year. College basketball, on the other hand, saw an increase of Final Four viewership from the year prior. The average viewership of both Final Four games in 2022 was 14.68 million viewers

according to statista.com. One of those two games, between Duke University and University of North Carolina, attracted 17.66 million. The national championship game topped that number, and pulled in 18.1 million viewers.

On the surface, these statistics may not seem that significant. Yet the decline of NBA viewership is eye opening. A deeper dive into this problem begs the question as to why. Some people believe it is due to the NBA becoming somewhat of a political platform for athletes and the association itself. During the ‘bubble’ portion of the 2019-20 season, players protested games as America saw another African-American man fall victim to police brutality. The association also created commercials and publicly endorsed the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Many Americans believe there isn't a place for politics and human rights issues in sports, and this drove some viewers away. While this may be part of the issue, it's not the full story.

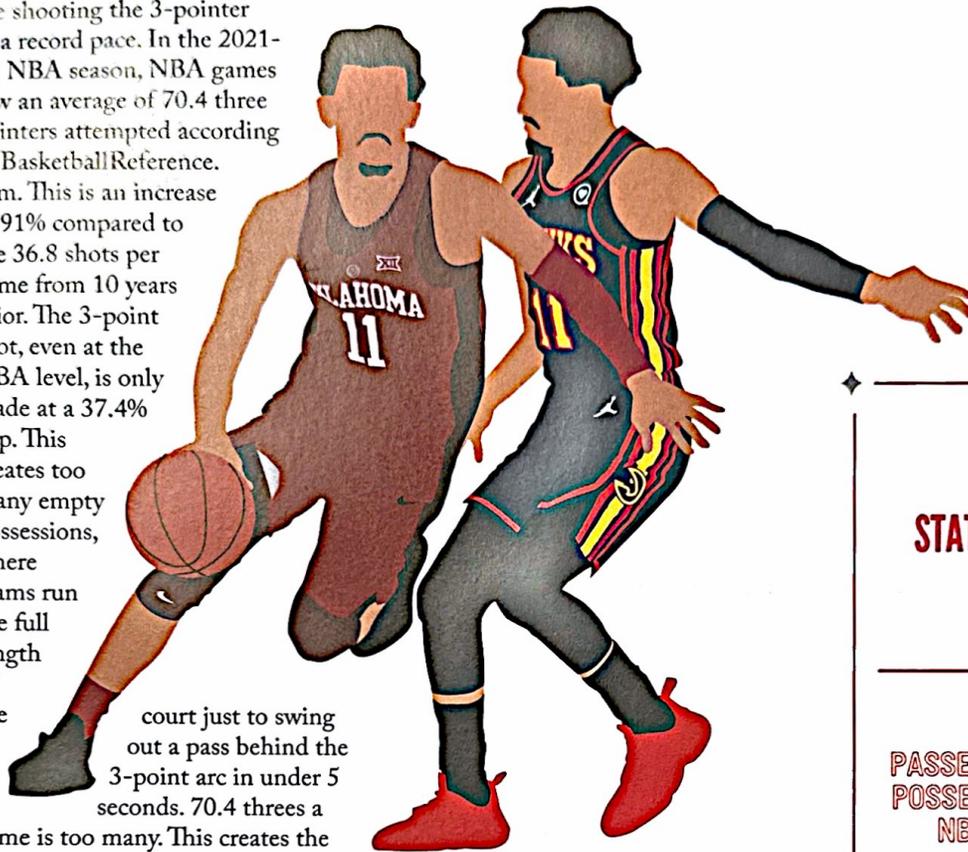
The way in which college basketball is played is slightly different than in the NBA. This may not be apparent to a casual viewer, but a basketball fan is sure to notice these subtle differences. The first major distinction is the distance of the 3-point line. In college basketball, the 3-point line is 22 feet, 1 ¾ inches from the basket, a distance that is known as the “international distance.” The NBA,

however, has slightly different 3-point dimensions with a 22-foot 3-point line in the corners and a 23-foot, 9-inch line elsewhere. NBA players are the highest paid players in the world. They are also widely viewed as the most talented basketball players as well, so it only makes sense to create a further shot for them. This logic makes sense, but the extent in which the 3-point line is pushed back is not drastic enough to “devalue the shot.” This means that NBA players are shooting the 3-pointer at a record pace. In the 2021-22 NBA season, NBA games saw an average of 70.4 three pointers attempted according to BasketballReference.com. This is an increase of 91% compared to the 36.8 shots per game from 10 years prior. The 3-point shot, even at the NBA level, is only made at a 37.4% clip. This creates too many empty possessions, where teams run the full length of the court just to swing out a pass behind the 3-point arc in under 5 seconds. 70.4 threes a game is too many. This creates the “entertainment” issue that is also hurting viewership.

This “entertainment” issue, which is the second glaring issue driving viewers away, is the lack of traditional basketball plays and strategy in today’s NBA. Many basketball fans enjoy the game because of its strategy. The chess match of offense vs. defense, and the various plays that the offense runs to create open shots is a major factor in the entertainment for a fan. The way that the NBA is played now is eliminating these entertaining matchups and plays. “Isolation,” or when the offensive player with the ball clears his teammates from the play and goes “1 on 1” with the defender, is becoming increasingly popular in the NBA. Isolation and early possession 3-point shots have a direct impact on the average passes per possession in the NBA.

In the most recent season, there was an average of 2.92 passes per possession in the NBA. This number is technically a bit higher when you adjust to the difference of shot clock times.. Shot clock adjusted, the number falls at 3.62 passes per possession, according to nbareference.com. The NCAA does not keep such a stat, but fortunately, NCAA Division 1 school Bellarmine University did. According to the Courier Journal, “...they averaged 6.8 passes per possession — a number that would be significantly higher if fast break possessions were excluded.” Although it is not fair to compare the entirety of the NBA to one NCAA team, this stat still holds weight. It is safe to assume that most college basketball teams, if not all, average more passes per possession than the NBA average. The numbers are intriguing. The sport is changing. The NBA has

a problem on their hands, and with college basketball thriving, the challenge doesn’t get any easier. Whether it be moving back the 3-pointer, or changing how teams fundamentally play the game, the NBA needs refinement. After all, the issue isn’t about the lack of enthusiasm Americans have towards the sport of basketball, it is that college basketball is more entertaining to watch than its professional counterpart. ■



STATISTICS OF IMPORTANCE

PASSES PER
POSSESSION:
NBA → 3.62

PASSES PER
POSSESSION:
BELLARMIN
UNIVERSITY → 6.8

GAME 6: 2022
NBA FINALS → 13.99
MILLION
TV
VIEWERS

2022 NCAA
NATIONAL
CHAMPIONSHIP
GAME → 18.1
MILLION
TV
VIEWERS