

On the Interminable Ending of Basketball Games

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I'm a regular reader of Phil Mushnick's sport columns in the New York Post online. Mushnick is extremely well informed about sports, including its history, and he's a superb analyst and writing stylist—I recommend him highly to you.

In his columns, three a week, Phil specializes in pointing out problems in big time sports. I find him a breath of fresh air amid all the cheerleading and inanity that passes for sports commentary in our time. Good for Phil Mushnick, and good for *The New York Post*, because Phil's candor rubs the sport show establishment the wrong way, and they have to be putting pressure on the paper to send Phil packing. I'm always a big surprised to see Phil still there when I check out his column. If he were to be silenced, it would be a loss for all of us who love sports. We don't want to see sports debased, distorted, and exploited, as it is in our time, and Phil gives us a voice. I feel less alone and less hopeless after reading one of his columns.

Phil's column of December 20th, 2018 was entitled "Readers fond memories bail me out after championship blunder." His blunder was in reference to the 1958 National League Football game between the New York Giants and Baltimore Colts, a classic game. We don't need to get into the nature of the blunder in this context; let's leave it that on the scale of blunders Phil's ranks very low in severity.

Phil usually deals with several topics in a column and one of them in this column was considered under the heading, "It's only a matter of time before fans stop watching." It involved a consideration of the extended amount of time it takes to play the last couple of minutes of close basketball games, especially at the college level, with all the interruptions due to intentional fouling, timeouts, and replays of disputed calls by the officials. Phil wrote:

The final 1:10 of last Saturday's Villanova-Kansas lasted a once-imponderable 19:48. What should have been the most exciting, compelling closing minute of a game again became nearly impossible to indulge, to care about.

Phil makes provision for readers to email him, and I've done so three times. He briefly replied to one of them. This morning, I sent another email:

Phil—

Regarding your observation that 1:10 of a college basketball game took 19:48 to complete:

As absurd and frustrating as this kind of thing is to anyone who cares about the game of basketball, it goes on because it makes good sense to those involved in the enterprise to do things in a way that results in stop-and-start, interminable endings to games. This phenomenon will only cease when the incentives to do what results in that are removed. Bitching about this circumstance won't get it done.

I noted your list of what went on during that almost twenty minutes: "Foul, timeout, 'instant' replay review, foul, foul, foul, turnover, refs huddle for a discussion, foul, foul, timeout, timeout, foul, ball out of bounds, replay review."

Three words that jump out to me from that list are "foul," "timeout," and "review."

Intentionally violating the rules, fouling, is a good tactic for the team that's behind. Fouling is a way to get the ball, and fast. The other team is forced to shoot immediately (at the free throw line), and they might miss, and, make or miss, most of the time you get the ball. A remedy to that practice is, at the end of games, give the fouled team the option of not shooting the foul shot. In football, you can decline a penalty. Or, the fouled team could shoot the foul shot and keep the ball. If the Eagles jump offside against the Giants, the ref marches off the penalty, but the Giants keep the ball.

As for another word in your list, “timeout,” limit their number. Say, one 20-second time out per team during the last two minutes of the game. Or have no timeouts. Let the players play.

As for replay reviews, drop them. Acknowledge that human fallibility is part of sports. Players make errors and so do officials. Recognize the downside of replay reviews—the action comes to a dead halt and people stand around, the flow of play is interrupted, and the length of the game gets extended. Why don’t we interrupt operas by having music critics come on stage during a performance and privately watch a video of what just transpired and then talk it over among themselves and then announce to the audience that indeed the diva missed a note in the last aria and have her sing it again. After all, the idea is to get it right.

Did you calculate how much of that 19:48 was given over to commercials? These drawn-out endings provide breaks in the action, which are good occasions for running ads. Viewers are prone to sit through them because they want to see how the game will turn out. If there was a lot of ad-time during that period, the obvious remedy would be to limit or eliminate commercial interruptions during the last two minutes. But that would run up against the business interests that use basketball programming to sell products. Very likely, the biggest factor in keeping the basketball shows as they are is that it’s a good arrangement for hawking beer and cars. As someone once said (I guess), “Follow the money.”

I’ve come up with my own personal solution to this vexing problem. I turn the channel on the clicker.

Keep it going,

Robert Griffin

I sent the email about twenty minutes ago. Just now, Phil sent a reply saying he liked my idea of limiting timeouts in the last few minutes of the game.

An idea just hit me. Except for Phil Mushnick complaining about these endings of basketball that seem to go on forever, I haven't come across anyone, in print or in person, who has a problem with them. If you watch the games on television, everybody seems to be having a great time--the players, coaches, the fans—even though ten minutes ago there were twelve seconds to play and the game is still going on. Phil Mushnick is an old guy like I am. Maybe for one reason or another, it's just old guys that have a problem with these long endings. Or maybe it's just Phil and me who can't get with them. If that's the case I feel for Phil. I can turn the games off and go do a crossword puzzle or something, but Phil is paid by the newspaper to watch these games with the endings that drive him up the wall.

I need to keep in mind that if I have a problem with something, I could be just about the only one—or the only one—that does. This phenomenon may account for the blank looks I get so often, followed by “Excuse me, I've got to be someplace.”