

On Free Throws in Basketball
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One of the challenges in life is to see commonplace things with new eyes; another way to say it, make the familiar strange. One very familiar phenomenon that has suddenly seemed strange to me is the free throw in basketball.

As I write this, in late May of 2014, the NBA is well into its seemingly endless best-of-seven-games playoff series. Beyond the fact that the games are looking remarkably alike apart from the fact that one team wins and the other loses, a problem I'm having that has gotten to be such an annoyance that I can't watch the games on TV are the constant interruptions for free throws. A few seconds of play and a whistle. Things come to a dead halt and there's the slow trudge to the free throw line and players stand aside while someone shoots a little fifteen-foot shot with nobody guarding him. The last game at this writing, between the Miami Heat and Indiana Pacers, there were 51 free throws, and the Pacers are complaining that there weren't enough fouls called on the Heat. That's over one free throw a minute. There are spirited basketball games in the park and every once in a while the players acknowledge a foul, it's obvious. The game gets played without multiple referees swarming in and around the action and grabbing the ball away from the players every few seconds and ordering them around and assuming center stage and taking over the game. Do there really need to be this many fouls called in organized basketball? Is there any other sport in which there are violations of the rules remotely as often?

What is particularly getting to me is the intentional fouling at the end of close games. Every time the team ahead has the ball, the other team immediately commits a foul and the game clock stops for the free throw ritual. Over and over this happens (interspersed with time-outs and commercials), and the game comes to a grinding halt. *The New York Times* recently had an article that noted the last minute of a recent NBA game took eighteen minutes to play (Richard Sandomir, "Seconds That Last an Eternity," May 11, 2014). I'm trying to think of another sport where violating the rules is a valid game strategy, a way, in the last seconds, to perhaps save what would otherwise be a certain loss.

Two things account for this end-of-the-game-intentional-

fouling absurdity:

First, the offending team isn't punished automatically. Rather, the offended team has to accomplish a feat in order for there to be a penalty, namely, make a free throw. It would be like one team jumping off side in football but no yards are marched off. Instead, the game stops cold and both teams line up on either side of a player while he kicks a twenty-yard field goal. If he is successful, his team gets a point. If he misses, jumping off side was just fine, no penalty.

And second, no matter what happens, violating the rules is a way to get the ball. After a free throw, made or missed, in all likelihood the offending team will get the ball. In the football example, whether the little field goal attempt (free goal?) is made or missed, the team that violated the rules gets the ball. Jumping off side was a way to get your team the ball.

I suggest basketball do what every other sport does:

Be reasonable about calling fouls. (Which, by the way, would include calling fouls on obvious violations. An example, I love how you can get away with things in basketball if you do them backwards. If you turn your back, you can ram and shove the opposing player. It's explained away as posting up.) How is it that soccer and hockey games aren't interrupted every few seconds with fouls and penalties?

And when there is a violation of the rules, penalize the violating team and pick up the game where it left off. If it were up to me, I'd get rid of the free throw, a silly piece of business when you think about it, certainly a flow stopper. Football realizes how boring little field goal attempts are, and that's why they are talking about getting rid of the extra point. The NBA evidently thinks free throw shooting is riveting entertainment (have they asked around?). Let the offending team in basketball play five on four for a minute or something. Or give them a point (or two points, or three, in the act of shooting) and let the offending team take the ball out of bounds. If giving unearned points is a problem, at least let the team that shoots the free throw keep the ball.

I'll leave the details up to the experts. All I can say for certain is that a beautiful game has become, for me at least, unwatchable, and it shouldn't be that way.

