College of Business book review by B. David Tyler

Title: "Scorecasting: The hidden influences behind how sports are played and games are won"

Author: Tobias J. Moskowitz and L. Jon Wertheim

Publisher: Crown Archetype

Length: 255 pages

Price: $15.85 (hardcover)

Reading rating: 5 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

In "Scorecasting," Moskowitz and Wertheim accomplish two main goals: educating the reader about what motivates human behavior, and calling into question many of the "truths" held by sports fans regarding why coaches and players make the calls they do. First, the book explores human action and decision-making via behavioral economics, which uses data-driven research on individuals to draw conclusions about how and why people act the way they do. "Scorecasting" does this within the context of professional sports, correctly noting sport's position as a good laboratory for learning about human behavior. Second, the book explains specific facets of sports in a way that challenges platitudes and absolute "truths" of the game. Is it worth it to call a time out before the opposing kicker tries for the game winning field goal? (No, according to page 211.) Armchair quarterbacks who want to actually know more than the coach can get a head start by reading "Scorecasting."

On its whole, this is a book about human behavior. As with "Freakonomics" (Levitt and Dubner, 2006) and "Predictably Irrational" (Ariely, 2009), "Scorecasting" takes scholarly research and presents it in a digestible format. Why do teams play better at home? Should football coaches punt on fourth down? "Scorecasting" uses empirical research to examine questions like these and explain the underlying causes.

Most chapters follow a similar format: first, a concept is introduced using a specific example (e.g., Dwight Howard swats a shot into the stands), which is then expanded to a larger set of behaviors. In the case of Howard, the concept is the comparative value of a block into the stands versus one into the hands of a teammate. Finally, the chapter provides simplified statistical analysis that explains the point, and the reader is convinced that Dwight Howard's 232 blocks were not as valuable as Tim Duncan's 149.

Each concept abstracts beyond the sporting world. The Dwight Howard anecdote illustrates the tendency to measure and value that which is easy to capture, even if it is not particularly helpful. It is easy for a bookkeeper to record a blocked shot, but knowing the true value of that block – did it prevent a likely score by the opponent? – is harder to capture and thus not used to evaluate performance. Consider how one evaluates high school teachers: it is easy to look at the test scores of their students, and thus those scores are used in determining teacher merit pay, but are those scores truly the best evaluation of a teacher's performance?

The book is ripe with similar principles relevant to managers across business industries. The concept of loss aversion (page 40) explains why coaches play it safe at the end of football games, but the authors also use it to explain why the housing market has been a self-reinforcing spiral of decline. Asset valuation of unknown entities (page 183) is particularly challenging, whether the entities are players in the rookie draft or fine pieces of jewelry. Randomness (page 221) is the true reason for more than we admit, both in terms of mutual fund performance and teams on winning streaks. And of course, no behavioral economics book would be complete without demonstrating that the incentives (page 203) within a system drive human behavior, such as players using steroids or people cheating on their taxes.

"Scorecasting" de-mystifies much of what we see in sports and what we see in human action. At the surface will help settle bar arguments, but at a deeper level will help people make sense of the behavior of those around them.

B. David Tyler is an assistant professor of sport management in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His research interests include fan communities and organizational rivalry. For previously reviewed books, visit us at our website at www.wcu.edu/cob/