

# Fix is still in, says point-shave theorist

Wharton prof's paper rebutted by Martelli, Vic

**P**oint-shaving in college basketball is alive and sick. Who says so? Justin Wolfers says so. Went looking for corruption in college hoops and says he found the tainted needle of point-shaving in the haystack of 44,120 games played over the last 16 years.



STAN HOCHMAN

Wolfers is an assistant professor of business and public policy at Penn's Wharton School. Worked for bookmakers

growing up in Australia, so he knows vigorish from licorice. Was aware of the history of point-shaving in America when he started his research.

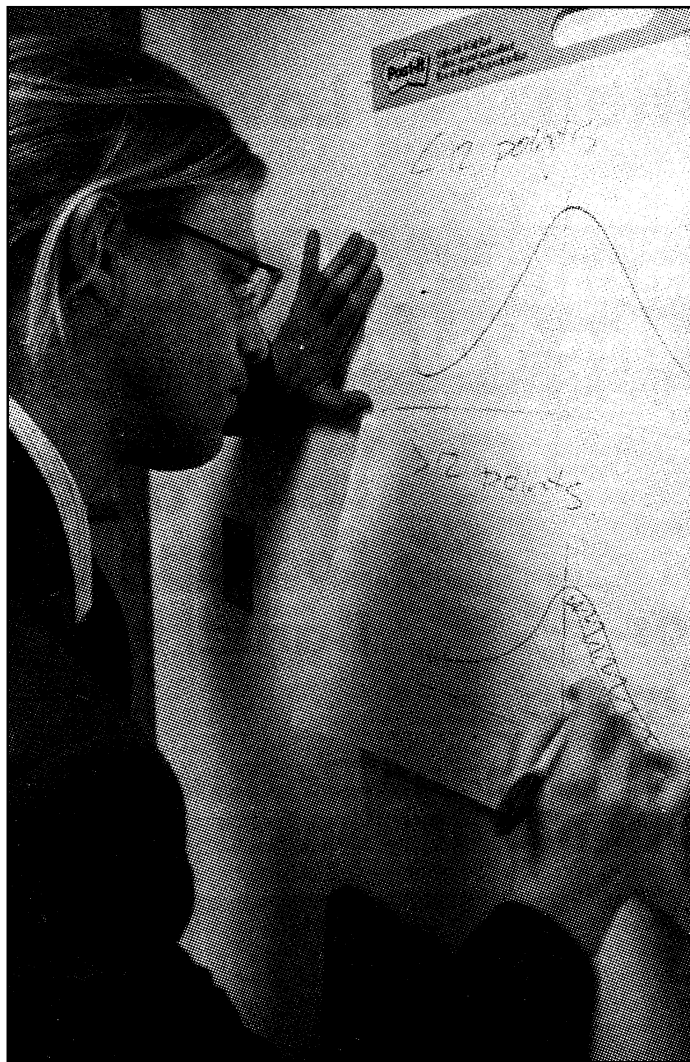
"You look for footprints in the data," he says.

Found ominous, tentative sneaker treadmarks of college kids trying to win the game while staying under the point spread.

"Football is too hard to fix," he says. "Too many players involved, 44. Pro basketball, too many \$10 million contracts. The White Sox threw the [1919] World Series because they felt exploited by a greedy owner. College kids feel exploited.

"Here, you have kids still wanting to win the game working with gamblers who want to win a bet. Besides the economic factors, many people don't regard it as morally wrong."

What in the name of Red Auerbach is going on here? Auerbach, when he was coaching the Celtics to all those NBA championships, would bar the public-relations guys from passing out box scores in the locker room. "Statistics," Auerbach grumbled, "are for losers."



STEVE GENGLER/Daily News

Justin Wolfers charts teams' results vs. point spreads.

Wolfers belongs to the school of forensic economists.

Analyze the numbers, searching for telltale patterns that indicate skullduggery. So, he analyzed those 44,120 games and discovered that in 46.2 percent of the games in which a team was favored by 12 or more points, the favored team barely failed to cover, winning by eight, nine, 10 or 11. Not enough blowouts to satisfy his view of probability.

In his paper, "Point-Shaving: Corruption in NCAA Basketball," wolfers writes, "There exists a *prima facie* case that point-shaving is surprisingly widespread." He goes on to say, there are "rough estimates suggesting around 6 percent of strong favorites have been willing to manipulate their performance."

Is Wolfers manipulating the numbers? Doesn't he recognize

that a coach, up by 15 with 2 minutes to play, might clear his bench, give the scrubs a chance, and that those seldom-used scrubs might squander four or five points of that lead?

"The losing team," Wolfers counters, "will also reduce their effort."

Phil Martelli, the Saint Joseph's coach, was stunned when a reporter summarized Wolfers' conclusions. "I'm speechless," he says, after breaking his own personal record for silence, 16 seconds.

"Human nature checks in. The [leading] players on the floor assume the game is over. The trailing team plays looser and freer. The refs may put their whistles away at the end. Lots of situations involve league games. You're gonna play 'em again this

season. You're gonna play 'em again next year.

"You don't want to add fuel to the fire by running up the score. Coaches are conservative by nature. So they play shot-clock basketball at the end. The man [Wolfers] has to be a brilliant man, analyzing all those games. But it seems to me it's just a fortunate time of year to be discussing this, with the tournament going on, if you want to make a lot of noise."

Noise? Wolfers is a scholar who lets the numbers talk. "You shouldn't have what's happening on the court, reflecting what's happening in Las Vegas," he says. "and that's exactly what's happening."

"Ludicrous" is the reaction in Vegas, caught up in the March Madness stampede of gamblers. The Vegas bookmakers and the NCAA share a common goal - they want the games honest.

"It was the casino sports books that blew the whistle on the Arizona State mess [in 1994]," Vegas Vic says vehemently. Vic has been involved in sports betting for more than 30 years. He handicaps games for the *Daily News* and other outlets.

"What a giant surprise," Vic said sarcastically, when told of Wolfers' theory that heavy favorites often win by margins close to the point spread. "I don't want to be disrespectful of the man, but that's the way it has been forever. The guys who set the 'line' are very good at their job. They have to be; there's hundreds of millions of dollars at stake,

You hear a rumor every now and then. But I haven't heard anything this year. Didn't hear anything last year. I have a device on my computer that's hooked into 30 sports books, including offshore operations. The line changes half-a-point, the color on the screen changes."

The proliferation of Internet offshore betting operations does change the equation. Devious college kids could eliminate the middle man, the hoodlum fixer. Now, a key player can conspire with a couple of teammates to fix a game, then bet on the opposition plus-13 and do their worst to have the game end in a 10-point victory.

## March Madness vs. the spread

It was a small sample, 48 games crammed into 4 days of NCAA Tournament action, but how did the point-spread number hold up against the winning margin in the first two rounds?

Well, only 22 favorites covered. That means if you bet every underdog, you cashed in 26 times. And if that wasn't dramatic enough, 13 of those 'dogs won the game outright. Five teams favored by 12 or more failed to cover. Only two did, UCLA and Memphis in the first round.

Of the 22 favorites that covered, the winning margin deviated from the betting line by 14 or more points six times. They are blushing all the way to the bank in Las Vegas. ★

— Stan Hochman

"The [key] kid at Arizona State scored 39 in one game," Wolfers says. "A player can continue to score, and then take a step back on defense."

All that circumstantial evidence, all that smoke and no gun. "I have no proof," Wolfers says bluntly. "No videotape broken down, play-by-play."

Just numbers that speak to him of corruption, revealed while the nation is caught up in March Madness. Just what the NCAA needed.

Just when you thought it was bad enough that Billy Packer, the grumpy CBS analyst, degrades the tournament *before* it even begins.

Only in America. ★

To read the full text of "Point Shaving: Corruption in NCAA Basketball" by Justin Wolfers, go to <http://bpp.wharton.upenn.edu/jwolfers/Papers/PointShaving.pdf>

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