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Free-Throw Distraction: The Best Fans in the N.C.A.A.

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Who are the most effective fans in college basketball — and which fans aren't effective at all?

Part of the appeal of college basketball is the creative and spirited fans who do everything in their power to rattle the visiting team, especially during free throws. Duke has the Cameron crazies. Michigan State has The Izzone. And the most inventive fans — and the single most effective in the country — appear to be the ones who deploy the so-called Curtain of Distraction at Arizona State, which The Upshot covered in detail last month.

Fans are so central to the college basketball experience that they're often called the sixth man. What has long been unclear is whether this sixth man was actually helping the home team, or whether opposing players were focused enough to shut out rowdy distractions.

And so we analyzed free-throw data over the past five seasons, comparing the free-throw percentages of visiting teams in hundreds of Division I arenas in men's college basketball. We focus on free throws because this is when the sixth man is arguably the only relevant defensive player.

Our interest was to establish which teams had the best "defensive" free-throw percentage. To ensure that we compared like with like, we compared the free-throw percentage of visiting teams at each arena with their percentage when shooting in their home arenas.

We found that distraction works. On average, college basketball players are about one percentage point less likely to make a free throw when in front of a hostile crowd than when at home. They are not less accurate in neutral arenas, which suggests that what matters is not whether a player is in a familiar arena, or whether they have had to travel, but whether they are trying to shoot in front of an organized student section hellbent on distracting them. On average, the sixth man's ability to distract opposing free throwers is worth about 0.2 points per game.

Our analysis reveals that there appear to be some fan sections that are particularly effective. The best remain the Arizona State fans, at least since their introduction of the Curtain of Distraction. Teams playing in front of the curtain shoot about nine percentage points worse than they do at home. A handful of other teams, including Northwestern, Baylor, Utah, Nebraska and U.C.L.A., are also blessed with effective fans, costing visitors about one point per game on average.

Some of the tremendous variation among teams may reflect statistical noise, given that we're evaluating only five seasons' worth of data. But that's still enough to suggest that the overall patterns are real. The teams on the left tail of the histogram below really do seem to be doing something to distract shooters, even if the precise order of teams involves some randomness.

There are also a handful of arenas where visiting teams have actually hit a greater share of free throws than they typically do in front of their home fans. Boston College and Notre Dame are two prominent examples. It's unfair to suggest that these fans actually hurt their team; rather, it's more likely that

they were of little or no help, and random luck means that visitors hit a few extra free throws.

Almost every fan has dreamed about going beyond mere watching and rooting — to somehow finding a way to help a favorite team. In college basketball, at least, some fans seem to be living that dream.

Below, we offer more detail on some of the most notable discoveries from our analysis.

Utah State

Teams shot about 3.6 percentage points worse at Utah State than they did at home — a greater difference than at about 90 percent of colleges. In 2009, Wild Bill Sproat, a devoted Utah State fan, began dressing up for games in an array of costumes that a man of his substantial girth would otherwise never be seen wearing in public. His sartorial style involved a less-is-more approach — a hint of a Cupid, Batman or Peter Pan costume — which kept his jiggly belly prominent and distracting. Health problems eventually forced his retirement in 2011, but the legend of Wild Bill had taken root, and other students stepped in to fill the role. Mr. Sproat made a final farewell appearance last Saturday. He should retire secure in the knowledge that visitors to Utah State still struggle to win.

Baylor

What accounts for the 5.5-percentage-point difference in free-throw percentages of teams visiting Baylor, making Baylor fans the third-most effective among major-conference teams?

Matt Strickland, vice president of Baylor's Bear Pit (the president was on spring break in Mexico), suggested possibilities: The Bear Pit was recently raised to the direct line of sight of opposing teams' free throw shooters; the Bear Pit is now free to join; students in the Bear Pit receive a free Gut Pak (Fritos, cheese, sausage, brisket, beans, pickles, onions, jalapeños, bread) from a local barbecue restaurant if an opposing shooter misses both of his free throws in the second half. Nothing motivates college students like free food.

Still, Baylor fans stop well short of the antics at Utah State and Arizona. "Being a Baptist school, they don't really let us do those things," Mr. Strickland said.

Duke and North Carolina

Duke's Cameron Crazies are among the most famous fan groups in any sport in the country. And to some extent, they live up to their hype. Our data ranks them as one of the more distracting teams in the nation, although they're outside our top 10. It could be that they're actually better than that, and that their numbers will improve with more seasons of data. Or perhaps their creativity does not match their intensity.

Here's the bad news for Duke fans: Their main rivals, the fans in Chapel Hill, have them slightly beaten here. North Carolina's fans help the Tar Heels to the tune of about two-thirds of a point per game, relative to a typical home crowd.

Perhaps the Blue Devils should look back to their more glorious history, in particular to someone they called "Speedo Guy." Imagine, if you will, a man who told ESPN he wanted to look "like a blooming flower" rising from the crowd in just a swimsuit (starting at about the 50-second mark in [this video](#), and worth it). Unfortunately, we don't know how effective that young man was because our data begins with the 2010-11 season.

Northwestern

The Wildcats have not been nationally significant in a long time, but they do appear to be doing something right behind their opponents' basket: Opponents have shot almost seven percentage points worse when playing at Northwestern over the last four years. Whether pure luck or directly related to large, floating heads, Northwestern is near the top of our list.

Arizona State

Our earlier article detailed Arizona State's success in introducing unicorns to games; since it started the Curtain, opposing teams have shot about nine percentage points worse at Arizona State, by far the biggest effect at any college. That said, this data sample is significantly smaller than those of other colleges, which grouped five seasons into a single rating. If the twerking farm animals lose their mojo next season, this number will come down in a hurry.

But for now, Arizona State is celebrating a 4-point win over Cal in which the visitors were 4 of 11 from the foul line when shooting toward the Curtain of Distraction.

Below, tables showing the rates for all colleges.

The Times will have interactive men's and women's N.C.A.A. brackets this year — with a small twist. The bracket will feature a market-based scoring system that will reward upsets with bonus points based on how common your choice is among all Times readers.

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