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THE COUNT Updated May 31, 2012, 9:01 p.m. ET

Does Calling Timeout Actually Help?

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In the NBA, calling a timeout to slow the opposition's momentum is such a fundamental tactic that even the woeful Charlotte Bobcats managed not to get it wrong this season. But here's the thing about timeouts: New research is challenging the notion that they have a significant effect on the final outcome of games.

In a recent study, three Northwestern University researchers analyzed the time and score scenarios of every timeout called by all 30 NBA teams over the last three seasons. They started with the hypothesis that timeouts do, in fact, change games. From there they focused on the score differential between timeouts and compared it to the expected score differential if timeouts were randomized.

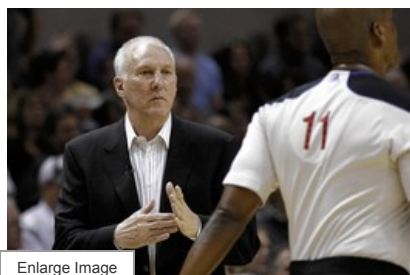
Huddle Up

The NBA teams that were the best and worst this season at using timeouts (based on their score differential per minute between timeouts):

Table with 4 columns: RANK, TEAM, AVERAGE, EXPECTED. Lists teams from 1st (Indiana Pacers) to 30th (Sacramento Kings).

Sources: Serguei Saavedra, Satyam Mukherjee and James Eastern University

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Associated Press

San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich

What they found surprised them: Timeouts had no significant effect in 68 of the 90 cases. Over a full game, their research shows, the better team still usually won.

Granted, no one is expecting Spurs coach Gregg Popovich (above) and the other remaining coaches in the NBA playoffs to stop trying to use timeouts strategically. Not only are timeouts practical and potentially inspiring—"I need a little bit more dose of nasty," Popovich urged the Spurs during their Game 1 win over the Thunder this week—but the Heat, Thunder and Spurs are also exceptions to the rule. The study found that the handful of teams for whom timeouts were significant were often the best and worst in the NBA.

The only team that used timeouts better than those three? That would be the Indiana Pacers, who lost to the Heat last round.

—Ben Cohen

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A version of this article appeared June 1, 2012, on page D10 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Does Calling Timeout Actually Help?

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