

**Reader's Guide:** A story that illustrates the power of a single definition – the *three-point shot* - and how it dramatically altered the game of basketball. Can you think of another rule change that would so dramatically alter everything? (1,300 words) Other definitions: basket, shot, free throw, referee, call, walking, foul, goal tending, technical, foul out and the Fosbury Flop.

## **BASKETBALL - Refereed by Definitions**

Basketball is a game of rules. All sports pretty much are, but let's just center on basketball for the moment. In this case the rules of basketball are a finite set of definitions. A basket counts for two points, a free throw for one and a three-pointer is self-defining.

The definition of the basket itself or alternatively making a basket comes from the actual peach basket first used in the infancy of the game. That is typical for definitions. The logic of calling it a basket was clear, practical and straightforward. It has stuck even though much has changed. Still changing this definition would gender no real improvement or gain. I seriously doubt if such a change has ever even been considered. The term basket is a definition that really doesn't matter to the possible improvement of the game itself, yet remains central to applying the Rule Book. In addition, a "shot" has become a de facto basket. That is, as long as it is not a free throw. Is this all archaic or not?

In theory basketball should be viewed in "black and white" terms, but alas it is not. That is why there are three referees - interestingly dressed in black and white stripes - for each High School and above game. They are keepers of the definitions or, if you prefer, interpreters and enforcers of the rules. They are highly trained to make "calls" that coaches and fans often argue about, yet always accept. A foul is an infraction of the rules and draws an immediate punishment. You can "walk the ball" up the court, but you can't "walk" with the ball. These rules are so clearly defined and understood that on the playground the players themselves self-enforce them.

---

### **You can "walk the ball" up the court, but you can't "walk" with the basketball.**

---

There are governing bodies that gather annually to review these definitions and make changes to improve the games attractiveness, fairness or balance. This is especially true when someone exceptional joins the game. It is the Rule Making Committee and the changes they make do matter. Think of the emergence of the big man - George Mikan. While with the original and then Minneapolis Lakers his dominance resulted in the three-second lane on both ends of the court with a myriad of specifics on how this zone was to be enforced. Then came Wilt Chamberlain and "basket interference" (or goal tending) quickly followed. Wilt could sure tend a goal. The net effect is that if you are really, really exceptional in playing basketball there will be a change in the rules. That is, to keep the game competitive and of course to seemingly make things fair for all the other less talented players and teams.

The rules in a basketball game are broken continuously. This by definition may or may not result in bonus free throws for the team against whom the infractions are made. Gee, did I forget to mention that basketball is scored continuously and until the defined time to play expires

or is that just a given. So extra free throws can really alter the results of who wins and who loses.

When team defense started to take sway over offenses (obviously the more entertaining part of watching the game) a guaranteed bonus free throw was added to the rules. In college and high school basketball at the tenth and above "called" breaking of the rules each half of the game the team player fouled suddenly gets a *guaranteed* extra free throw. Alternatively what if they had said that the coach could select any player to shoot that bonus free throw or for that matter all free throws. After all this is in fact what currently happens when a technical free throw is called. It would certainly change the game, raise the scores and alter player time, but they didn't redefine it that way. It would also usher in the era of a specialist free throw shooter, not unlike the designated hitter in baseball or a kicker in football.

---

**Alternatively, what if the rules stated that the coach could select any player to shoot that bonus free throw or for that matter all free throws.**

---

Basketball, while it is great individual exercise has evolved into entertainment and a spectacular spectator sport. About twenty-five years ago the US National Basketball Association (NBA) took over its rival league. This professional league was the ABA (American Basketball Association) and they in prior efforts to compete in the marketplace used a multi-colored basketball and had the fan-friendly three-point shot. That is, when a shot was made behind an arbitrary perimeter arc around the basket. Did this really change the game! Almost everyone views it as a major improvement and get this all they did was add a definition that up to then simply didn't exist.

Well the ABA's back as a thus far considerably less visible league. Its twenty-five year no-compete agreement (another series of definitions, but this time purely legal) has expired. They are not surprisingly making major changes in the game. There are no "foul outs" by any player and they have true to their history added another three-pointer to their Rule Book. It is the 3-D rule, which adds an extra point to any basket scored when the ball is turned over in the back-court. This again makes the game more exciting and even faster paced and more intense. At the moment it would take a real fan or player to even understand these potential improvements, but once seen in practice even a casual observer catches on right away. Whether these two rules will spread or not to the rest of basketball of course remains to be seen. What is for certain is that there will be more substitution of players and maybe even larger rosters.

---

**The 3-D rule in the ABA adds an extra point to any basket scored when the ball is turned over in the opponent's back-court.**

---

What is the ABA doing again? It is simply changing or adding a couple of game changing definitions. They are at critical tipping points (no pun intended) in the game. These changes do not even cost anything to implement and in their opinion they create significant benefits in the form of a better and more entertaining game.

This is a dream come true for a die-hard corporate Cost-Benefit quant. That is, for little cost great benefits may be reaped. Another example of a definition having a major impact in sports is the Fosbury Flop in High Jump. Unlike painting a three point line the stadium people did not even have to do anything to accommodate this transformative definition of how to jump higher over the high bar.

Basketball does *not* mirror the rest of life. Rule infractions do exist, but in only very limited ways. There are, however, many other Rules Committees ranging from Accounting to Quality Standards to Teacher Accreditation and Laws to the World Trade Organization. They can hold great sway over many. Maybe this is too simple, but I see these all as simply different forums for managing blocks of definitions.

The central point is, unlike basketball, there exists no format or reasoned way to examine definitions that can stand in the way of the betterment of our lives and society. Referees are also few and far between. However, there are often select definitions that can be altered and implemented that can generate significant improvements. Life is more about the definitions than we often realize. There are many additional three-pointers out there - across a wide range of disciplines and common practices - that beg for a more sapient definition.

---

**Life is more about the definitions than we often realize. There are many additional three-pointers out there - across a wide range of disciplines and common practices - that beg for a more sapient definition. That's our job.**

---

This is what I have been pondering and attempting to address or if it must be said this way - define. In general this line of thought may have real and large-scale positive potential in a wide range of situations.

The game of basketball has and will continue to be redefined incrementally and that is by design. What about the rest of life's three-pointers? How might we best capitalize on them?

Copyright 2008, B. Helton