

# THERE'S NO / IN *TEAM*

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But there is an *m* and an *e*

After concluding that defense *doesn't* necessarily win championships, we decided to examine another shopworn bit of sports wisdom. Before young athletes are capable of lacing their sneakers and putting on their cleats, they're invariably taught, "There's no *I* in *team*." This spelling lesson is, of course, meant to reinforce the virtues of teamwork, stressing the importance of unity and the corrosive effects of attempts at personal glory. But does it accurately capture reality?

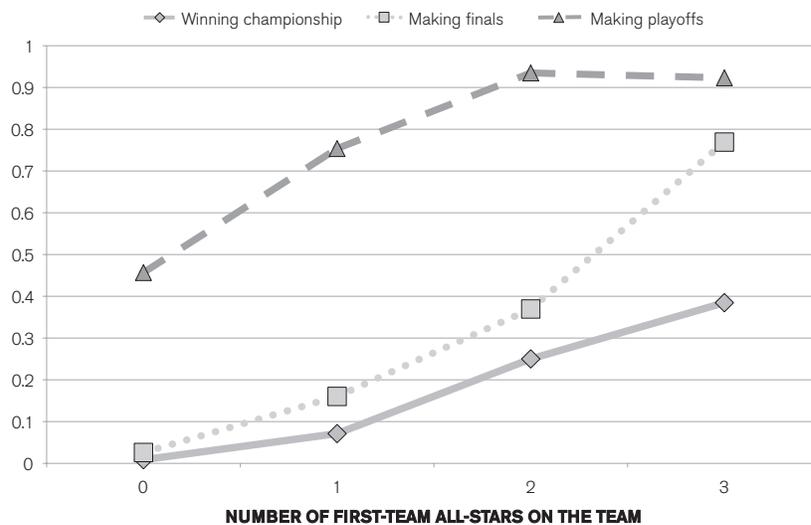
It's in basketball that the no-I-in-team cliché is most often tossed around. If we were to compile a list of the top, say, five or six NBA players over the last 20 years, it probably would include Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan, Shaquille O'Neal, Hakeem Olajuwon, and LeBron James. If there were no *I* in *team*, those stars wouldn't much matter. A team that formed a symphonic whole, with five players suppressing and sublimating ego for a common goal, could surmount teams with the "I" players, stars willing and able to play selfishly when the situation calls for it. But that's rarely the case. Since 1991, every year at least one of those players has appeared in the NBA finals. Go back another decade and add Larry Bird and Magic Johnson and now at least one

of the top eight players has been featured in all but one NBA finals series for the last 30 years. In other words, a remarkably small number of select players have led their teams to the vast majority of NBA titles. Lacking one of the best players in history has all but precluded a team from winning.

We wondered how likely it is that an NBA team without a superstar wins a championship, makes it to the finals, or even makes it to the playoffs. We can define superstars in various ways, such as first-team all-stars, top five MVP vote-getters, or even those with the top five salaries. Pick your definition; it doesn't much matter. The chart below shows what we found for the NBA.

A team with no starting all-star on the roster has virtually no chance—precisely, it's 0.9 percent—of winning the NBA championship. More than 85 percent of NBA finals involve a superstar player and more than 90 percent of NBA titles belong to a team with a superstar. The graph also shows, not surprisingly, that as a team gains superstars, its chances of winning a title improve

**PROBABILITY OF WINNING AN NBA CHAMPIONSHIP, MAKING FINALS, OR MAKING PLAYOFFS GIVEN NUMBER OF SUPERSTARS ON THE TEAM**



dramatically. One first-team all-star on the roster yields a 7.1 percent chance of winning a championship and a 16 percent chance of making it to the finals. A team fortunate enough to have two first-team all-star players stands a 25 percent chance of winning a championship and a 37 percent chance of making the finals. On the rare occasions when a team was somehow able to attract *three* first-team all-stars, it won a championship 39 percent of the time and made the finals 77 percent of the time.

The numbers are even more striking when we consider the top five MVP vote recipients. A team with one of those players stands a 15 percent chance of winning it all and a 31 percent chance of making the finals. Having two of those players yields a 48 percent chance of winning the championship and a 70 percent chance of making the finals.

Really, it's no mystery why the Miami Heat fans celebrated deliriously when the team lured LeBron James in the summer of 2010. When James "took his talents to South Beach" and joined Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, it made the Heat a virtual lock to go deep into the playoffs. Having the MVP (James) in addition to two other all-stars makes the Heat 98 percent likely to make the playoffs, 70 percent likely to make the finals, and 36 percent likely to win it all.

At some level this stands to reason, right? The superstars are usually going to be concentrated on the best basketball teams. The average winning percentage of teams with a first-team all-star on their roster is 56 percent. Two first-teamers and it's 63 percent. Have a top-five MVP vote-getter and your team wins 64 percent of its games; that in itself calls the "no-I-in-team" shibboleth into question.

Here's where it gets interesting. Even after controlling for the team's winning percentage during the regular season, teams with superstars do measurably better in the playoffs. That is, a top-five MVP candidate improves his team's chances of winning a championship by 12 percent and of getting to the finals by 23 percent even *after* accounting for the regular season success of the team. This implies that superstars are particularly valuable during the

playoffs—ironically, the time when “team” is relentlessly stressed by coaches, media, and analysts.

What about the notion that a lineup of five solid players is better than a starting five of one superstar and four serviceable supporting role players? One way to test this idea is to look at the disparity among a team’s starters in terms of talent. Controlling for the same level of ability, do basketball teams with more evenly distributed talent fare better than teams with more dispersed talent? Measuring talent is difficult, but one reasonable metric is salary. Controlling for the average salary and winning percentage of teams, do teams with bigger *differences* in salaries among their starting players fare worse than teams whose salaries are spread more evenly among the players?

We find the opposite, in fact. Teams with more variable talent across their players are more likely to make the finals and more likely to win a championship than teams with more uniformly distributed talent. Again, this suggests that a superstar with a relatively weak supporting cast fares better than the team with five good players.

The same holds for the NHL and even soccer. Without a prolific goal scorer and/or goaltender/goalkeeper, survival in the postseason tends to be short-lived. There may be an *I* in Major League Baseball, too, but the effects are considerably weaker, in part because the team is larger, making it harder for one player to change the overall make-up of the team. Nonetheless, the bulk of World Series titles and appearances belong to the teams with a handful of elite superstars, both hitters and pitchers. But there are some examples of championship teams without a starting all-star player. (Name a “star” on the 2003 Florida Marlins. How about the 2002 Angels?) But this makes sense. Although we focus on individual achievements in baseball, it’s hard for any one player other than the starting pitcher, who pitches only one game out of five, to take control of a game. Even the best hitters come to bat only once every nine times.

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If the evidence suggests that in basketball, hockey, and soccer a handful of individual players are extremely valuable for success, why do so many coaches and commentators place such heavy emphasis on the team? Perhaps it's because admitting that in these sports the star matters as much as he does blunts the incentive for the rest of the team. Though teammates may be less valuable than the stars, they still have *some* value. They're needed to grab rebounds, pass, block, chase loose balls, and defend. Sure, the superstar makes a big difference, but he can't do it alone. In that sense, the team certainly does matter.

Stars tend to recognize this delicate balance. Remember how lustily Michael Jordan embraced the conventional wisdom that "defense wins championships," a phrase that galvanized his teammates? Nonetheless even Jordan felt differently about the "no-*I*-in-*team*" truism. He recognized that not all players were created equal.

At his 2009 induction into the Basketball Hall of Fame, Jordan gave a speech that revealed much about his turbo-powered competitive drive. He told a story of once scoring 20 consecutive points late in a game to lead the Chicago Bulls to victory. Afterward, he was admonished by Tex Winter, the Bulls' eminent longtime assistant coach, "Michael, there's no *I* in *team*." Jordan recalled his response: "I looked back at Tex, and said, 'There's an *I* in *win*. So which way do you want it?'"