

Unintended consequences of the pitch clock in baseball

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Major League Baseball made several rule changes for this year's season. These changes are designed to make the sport more interesting to fans and spectators by speeding up the pace of the game.



These changes have worked, with games now almost 30 minutes shorter. They have also produced more balls in play for hits and more stolen bases, and the average batting average is up by 18 points from last year.

The most significant change is pitching and batter clocks: A pitcher must deliver his pitch within 15 seconds when no one is on base and 20 seconds when runners are on base or be penalized with a ball in the count. The batter must also be ready and set in the batter's box or be penalized with a strike.

Whether these changes will yield the desired uptick in fan interest remains to be seen.

By comparison, the average NFL game lasts three hours and 12 minutes, and the average NBA game lasts a little more than two hours.

By design, baseball is more methodical and plodding than football and basketball. Also, analytics have made it even more cerebral than it already was. This may be contributing to baseball's downturn in interest compared with football and basketball. Speeding up the pitching and batting process will certainly work to counter this propensity.

However, like any experiment that has not been completely vetted, unintended consequences are certain. What are some possible outcomes?

Analytics have been used to give teams statistical edges on the field, whether it is how a batter is pitched to or how players are positioned on the field. (One of MLB's new rules affects defensive positioning.) Small changes that prevent one or two hits in a series can mean the difference between winning or losing an extra game.

As more data is collected under the new rules, analytics will tease out new advantages that will eventually neutralize their effect. This means that while games may remain shorter in length, the impact on better performance on the field may wane over time.

Baseball has traditionally been a pitcher's game. "Good pitching beats good hitting" may be more than folklore. What the new rules will do is force pitchers to adapt to the speed and ultimately get better when pitching at a faster pace. This will conceivably reward more athletic pitchers, while the slower, more methodical pitchers will find themselves less desirable. Such changes may take several years to occur.

However, the end result will be higher-quality pitching.

At the same time, with current batters finding it easier to reach base, their collective skills may marginally erode over time, creating a future of better pitching and weaker hitting. That is a combination MLB wants to avoid to maintain fan interest. The World Series will be most affected by the rule changes. When teams are locked in a one-run game, the last few innings keep fans on the edge of their seats. This is exactly when a lengthier at-bat provides enormous fan interest. But a pitcher having to rush to pitch after a batter fouls off ball after ball on a 2-2 count depresses, rather than enhances, fan interest.

Like every professional sport, the playoffs, not the regular season, are what attracts the most interest. This is why a rule change that benefits the regular season but suppresses interest in the playoffs may need to be reevaluated.

No one knows with certainty whether the rule changes will boost or dampen fan interest. The assumption that shorter games will appeal to fans is reasonable, though not necessarily true. Moreover, every game played is somewhat unique, making the impact of one-size-fits-all changes harder to predict.

It will take a few seasons to make such an assessment. What is certain is that the laws of unintended consequences will surface, and the game on the field will be changed. How fans and players respond to such changes is the next chapter that has yet to be written.

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