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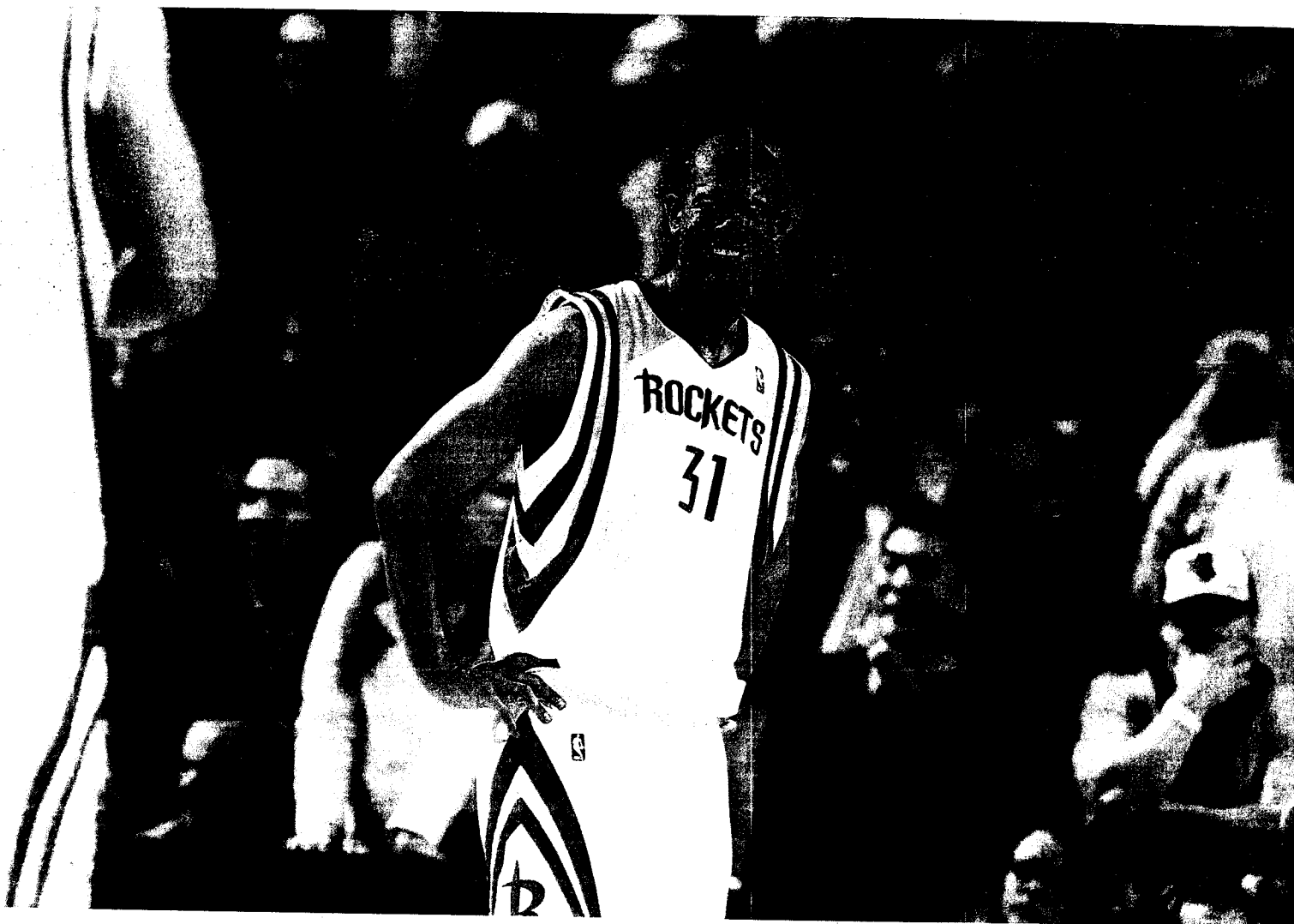
EFFICIENCY

POSSESSIONS

Money (Basket) Ball!

The N.B.A. (learning from all) is discovering the power of new stats and weird analytics. By measures, the unsung and undervalued Shane Battier is a true all-star.





Statistical Anomaly His greatness is not marked in box scores or at slam-dunk contests, but on the court Shane Battier makes his team better, often much better, and his opponents worse, often much worse. Photograph by Robert Seale for The New York Times.

COVER STORY 2.15.09

QUOTED. NOTED.

"I call him Lego. When he's on the court, all the pieces start to fit together. And everything that leads to winning that you can get to through intellect instead of innate ability, Shane excels in. I'll bet he's in the hundredth percentile of every category."

Daryl Morey, in "The No-Stats All-Star,"
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26 The No-Stats All-Star

BY MICHAEL LEWIS

Inspired by the Bill James-led revolution in baseball statistics, some N.B.A. front-office types are understanding how a player who doesn't score a lot of points or grab many rebounds can be his team's most valuable player. Meet Shane Battier, who's got a new kind of game.

On the cover: Photograph by Dan Winters for The New York Times. Grooming: Wendy Martin.

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BY DANIEL MENAKER

Neko Case's songs are full of claws, wolves, tornadoes, birds of prey and the occasional gust of wind. But her voice is the real force of nature.

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BY NICHOLAS SCHMIDLE

Terrorism experts feared that North Africa would be the next Afghanistan: a haven, and a launching pad, for Al Qaeda. Why hasn't it turned out that way?

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ALL OVER THE MAP
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Previous installments of Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel

FROM THE ARCHIVE
Michael Lewis on the football player Michael Oher and the baseball general manager Billy Beane.

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The No-Stats All-Star

By Michael Lewis

Photograph by Dan Winters



Out of Duke University. ...

6-foot-8-inch forward. ...

**He had more or less admitted
to me that this part of his
job left him cold. 'It's the same
thing every day,' he said,**

as he struggled to explain how a man on the receiving end of the raging love of 18,557 people in a darkened arena could feel nothing. "If you had filet mignon every single night, you'd stop tasting it."

To him the only pleasure in these sounds — the name of his beloved alma mater, the roar of the crowd — was that they marked the end of the worst part of his game day: the 11 minutes between the end of warm-ups and the introductions. Eleven minutes of horsing around and making small talk with players on the other team. All those players making exaggerated gestures of affection toward one another before the game, who don't actually know one another, or even want to. "I hate being out on the floor wasting that time," he said. "I used to try to talk to people, but then I figured out no one actually liked me very much." Instead of engaging in the pretense that these other professional basketball players actually know and like him, he slips away into the locker room.

Shane Battier!

And up Shane Battier popped, to the howl of the largest crowd ever to watch a basketball game at the Toyota Center in Houston, and jumped playfully into Yao Ming (the center "out of China"). Now, finally, came the best part of his day, when he would be, oddly, most scrutinized and least understood.

Seldom are regular-season games in the N.B.A. easy to get worked up for. Yesterday Battier couldn't tell me whom the team played three days before. ("The Knicks!" he exclaimed a minute later. "We played the Knicks!") Tonight, though it was a midweek game in the middle of January, was different. Tonight the Rockets were playing the Los Angeles Lakers, and so Battier would guard Kobe Bryant, the player he says is the most capable of humiliating him. Both Battier and the Rockets' front office were familiar with the story line. "I'm certain that Kobe is ready to just destroy Shane," Daryl Morey, the Rockets' general manager, told me. "Because there's been story after story about how Shane shut Kobe down the last time." Last time

Michael Lewis is the author of "Moneyball" and a contributing editor for Vanity Fair. His next book, "Home Game," a memoir about fatherhood, will be published in June.

was March 16, 2008, when the Houston Rockets beat the Lakers to win their 22nd game in a row — the second-longest streak in N.B.A. history. The game drew a huge national television audience, which followed Bryant for his 47 miserable minutes: he shot 11 of 33 from the field and scored 24 points. “A lot of people watched,” Morey said. “Everyone watches Kobe when the Lakers play. And so everyone saw Kobe struggling. And so for the first time they saw what we’d been seeing.” Battier has routinely guarded the league’s most dangerous offensive players — LeBron James, Chris Paul, Paul Pierce — and has usually managed to render them, if not entirely ineffectual, then a lot less effectual than they normally are. He has done it so quietly that no one really notices what exactly he is up to.

Last season, in a bid to draw some attention to Battier’s defense, the Rockets’ public-relations department would send a staff member to the opponent’s locker room to ask leading questions of whichever superstar Battier had just hamstrung: “Why did you have so much trouble tonight?” “Did he do something to disrupt your game?” According to Battier: “They usually say they had an off night. They think of me as some chump.” He senses that some players actually look forward to being guarded by him. “No one dreads being guarded by me,” he said. Morey confirmed as much: “That’s actually true. But for two reasons: (a) They don’t think anyone can guard them and (b) they really scoff at the notion Shane Battier could guard them. They *all* think his reputation exceeds his ability.” Even as Battier was being introduced in the arena, Ahmad Rashad was wrapping up his pregame report on NBA TV and saying, “Shane Battier will try to stop Kobe Bryant.” This caused the co-host Gary Payton to laugh and reply, “Ain’t gonna happen,” and the other co-host, Chris Webber, to add, “I think Kobe will score 50, and they’ll win by 19 going away.”

Early on, Hoop Scoop magazine named Shane Battier the fourth-best seventh grader in the United States. When he graduated from Detroit Country Day School in 1997, he received the Naismith Award as the best high-school basketball player in the nation. When he graduated from Duke in 2001, where he won a record-tying 131 college-basketball games, including

that year's N.C.A.A. championship, he received another Naismith Award as the best college basketball player in the nation. He was drafted in the first round by the woeful Memphis Grizzlies, not just a bad basketball team but the one with the worst winning percentage in N.B.A. history — whereupon he was almost instantly dismissed, even by his own franchise, as a lesser talent. The year after Battier joined the Grizzlies, the team's general manager was fired and the N.B.A. legend Jerry West, aka the Logo because his silhouette is the official emblem of the N.B.A., took over the team. "From the minute Jerry West got there he was trying to trade me," Battier says. If West didn't have any takers, it was in part because Battier seemed limited: most of the other players on the court, and some of the players on the bench, too, were more obviously gifted than he is. "He's, at best, a marginal N.B.A. athlete," Morey says.

The Grizzlies went from 23-59 in Battier's rookie year to 50-32 in his third year, when they made the N.B.A. playoffs, as they did in each of his final three seasons with the team. Before the 2006-7 season, Battier was traded to the Houston Rockets, who had just finished 34-48. In his first season with the Rockets, they finished 52-30, and then, last year, went 55-27 — including one stretch of 22 wins in a row. Only the 1971-2 Los Angeles Lakers have won more games consecutively in the N.B.A. And because of injuries, the Rockets played 11 of those 22 games without their two acknowledged stars, Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming, on the court at the same time; the Rockets player who spent the most time actually playing for the Rockets during the streak was Shane Battier. This year Battier, recovering from off-season surgery to remove bone spurs from an ankle, has played in just over half of the Rockets' games. That has only highlighted his importance. "This year," Morey says, "we have been a championship team with him and a bubble playoff team without him."

Here we have a basketball mystery: a player is widely regarded inside the N.B.A. as, at best, a replaceable cog in a machine driven by superstars. And yet every team he has ever played on has acquired some magical ability to win.

Solving the mystery is somewhere near the heart of Daryl Morey's job. In 2005, the Houston Rockets' owner, Leslie Alexander, decided to hire new management for his losing team and went looking specifically for someone willing to rethink the game. "We now have all this data," Alexander told me. "And we have computers that can analyze that data. And I wanted to use that data in a progressive way. When I hired Daryl, it was because I wanted somebody that was doing more than just looking at players in the normal way. I mean, I'm not even sure we're playing the game the right way."

The virus that infected professional baseball in the 1990s, the use of statistics to find new and better ways to value players and strategies, has found its way into every major sport. Not just basketball and football, but also soccer and cricket and rugby and, for all I know, snooker and darts — each one now supports a subculture of smart people who view it not just as a game to be played but as a problem to be solved. Outcomes that seem, after the fact, all but inevitable — of course LeBron James hit that buzzer beater, of course the Pittsburgh Steelers won the Super Bowl — are instead treated as a set of probabilities, even after the fact. The games are games of odds. Like professional card counters, the modern thinkers want to play the odds as efficiently as they can; but of course to play the odds efficiently they must first know the odds. Hence the new statistics, and the quest to



Revision quest

Daryl Morey was hired by the Houston Rockets as a 33-year-old to look at players in new ways.

acquire new data, and the intense interest in measuring the impact of every little thing a player does on his team's chances of winning. In its spirit of inquiry, this subculture inside professional basketball is no different from the subculture inside baseball or football or darts. The difference in basketball is that it happens to be the sport that is most like life.

When Alexander, a Wall Street investor, bought the Rockets in 1993, the notion that basketball was awaiting some statistical reformation hadn't occurred to anyone. At the time, Daryl Morey was at Northwestern University, trying to figure out how to get a job in professional sports and thinking about applying to business schools. He was tall and had played high-school basketball, but otherwise he gave off a quizzical, geeky aura. "A lot of people who are into the new try to hide it," he says. "With me there was no point." In the third grade he stumbled upon the work of the baseball writer Bill James — the figure most responsible for the current upheaval in professional sports — and decided that what he really wanted to do with his life was put Jamesian principles into practice. He nursed this ambition through a fairly conventional academic career, which eventually took him to M.I.T.'s Sloan School of Management. There he opted for the entrepreneurial track, not because he actually wanted to be an entrepreneur but because he figured that the only way he would ever be allowed to run a pro-sports franchise was to own one, and the only way he could imagine having enough money to buy one was to create some huge business. "This is the 1990s — there's no Theo," Morey says, referring to Theo Epstein, the statistics-minded general manager of the Boston Red Sox. "Sandy Alderson is progressive, but nobody knows it." Sandy Alderson, then the general manager of the Oakland Athletics, had also read Bill James and begun to usher in the new age of statistical analysis in baseball. "So," Morey continues, "I just assumed that getting rich was the only way in." Apart from using it to acquire a pro-sports team, Morey had no exceptional interest in money.

He didn't need great wealth, as it turned out. After graduating from business school, he went to work for a consulting firm in Boston called Parthenon, where he was tapped in 2001 to advise a group trying to buy the Red Sox. The bid failed, but a related group went and bought the Celtics — and hired Morey to help reorganize the business. In addition to figuring out where to set ticket prices, Morey helped to find a new general manager and new people looking for better ways to value basketball players. The Celtics improved. Leslie Alexander heard whispers that Morey, who was 33, was out in front of those trying to rethink the game, so he hired him to remake the Houston Rockets.

When Morey came to the Rockets, a huge chunk of the team's allotted payroll — the N.B.A. caps payrolls and taxes teams that exceed them — was committed, for many years to come, to two superstars: Tracy McGrady and Yao Ming. Morey had to find ways to improve the Rockets without spending money. "We couldn't afford another superstar," he says, "so we went looking for nonsuperstars that we thought were undervalued." He went

looking, essentially, for underpaid players. "That's the scarce resource in the N.B.A.," he says. "Not the superstar but the undervalued player." Sifting the population of midlevel N.B.A. players, he came up with a list of 15, near the top of which was the Memphis Grizzlies' forward Shane Battier. This perplexed even the man who hired Morey to rethink basketball. "All I knew was Shane's stats," Alexander says, "and obviously they weren't great. He had to sell me. It was hard for me to see it."

Alexander wasn't alone. It was, and is, far easier to spot what Battier doesn't do than what he does. His conventional statistics are unremarkable: he doesn't score many points, snag many rebounds, block many shots, steal many balls or dish out many assists. On top of that, it is easy to see what he can never do: what points he scores tend to come from jump shots taken immediately after receiving a pass. "That's the telltale sign of someone who can't ramp up his offense," Morey says. "Because you can guard that shot with one player. And until you can't guard someone with one player, you really haven't created an offensive situation. Shane can't create an offensive situation. He needs to be open." For fun, Morey shows me video of a few rare instances of Battier scoring when he hasn't exactly been open. Some large percentage of them came when he was being guarded by an inferior defender — whereupon Battier backed him down and tossed in a left jump-hook. "This is probably, to be honest with you, his only offensive move," Morey says. "But look, see how he pump fakes." Battier indeed pump faked, several times, before he shot over a defender. "He does that because he's worried about his shot being blocked." Battier's weaknesses arise from physical limitations. Or, as Morey puts it, "He can't dribble, he's slow and hasn't got much body control."

Battier's game is a weird combination of obvious weaknesses and nearly invisible strengths. When he is on the court, his teammates get better, often a lot better, and his opponents get worse — often a lot worse. He may not grab huge numbers of rebounds, but he has an uncanny ability to improve his teammates' rebounding. He doesn't shoot much, but when he does, he takes only the most efficient shots. He also has a knack for getting the ball to teammates who are in a position to do the same, and he commits few turnovers. On defense, although he routinely guards the N.B.A.'s most prolific scorers, he significantly reduces their shooting percentages. At the same time he somehow improves the defensive efficiency of his teammates — probably, Morey surmises, by helping them out in all sorts of subtle ways. "I call him Lego," Morey says. "When he's on the court, all the pieces start to fit together. And everything that leads to winning that you can get to through intellect instead of innate ability, Shane excels in. I'll bet he's in the hundredth percentile of every category."

There are other things Morey has noticed too, but declines to discuss as there is right now in pro basketball real value to new information, and the Rockets feel they have some. What he will say, however, is that the big challenge on any basketball court is to measure the right things. The five players on any basketball team are far more than the sum of their parts; the Rockets devote a lot of energy to untangling subtle interactions among the team's elements. To get at this they need something that basketball hasn't historically supplied: meaningful statistics. For most of its history basketball has measured not so much what is important as what is easy to measure



**Here we have
a basketball mystery:
a player is widely
regarded inside
the N.B.A. as, at best,
a replaceable cog
in a machine driven by
superstars. And yet
every team Battier
has ever played on has
acquired some
magical ability
to win.**

Before one game, Shane Battier asked Coach Rick Adelman (right) if he could come off the bench to be able to guard the high-scoring sixth-man Manu Ginóbili. "No one in the N.B.A. does that," says the Rockets' general manager Daryl Morey.

— points, rebounds, assists, steals, blocked shots — and these measurements have warped perceptions of the game. ("Someone created the box score," Morey says, "and he should be shot.") How many points a player scores, for example, is no true indication of how much he has helped his team. Another example: if you want to know a player's value as a rebounder, you need to know not whether he got a rebound but the likelihood of the *team* getting the rebound when a missed shot enters that player's zone.

There is a tension, peculiar to basketball, between the interests of the team and the interests of the individual. The game continually tempts the people who play it to do things that are not in the interest of the group. On the baseball field, it would be hard for a player to sacrifice his team's interest for his own. Baseball is an individual sport masquerading as a team one: by doing what's best for himself, the player nearly always also does what is best for his team. "There is no way to selfishly get across home plate," as Morey puts it. "If instead of there being a lineup, I could muscle my way to the plate and hit every single time and damage the efficiency of the team — that would be the analogy. Manny Ramirez can't take at-bats away from David Ortiz. We had a point guard in Boston who refused to pass the ball to a certain guy." In football the coach has so much control over who gets the ball that selfishness winds up being self-defeating. The players most famous for being selfish — the Dallas Cowboys' wide receiver Terrell Owens, for instance — are usually not so much selfish as attention seeking. Their sins tend to occur off the field.

It is in basketball where the problems are most likely to be in the game — where the player, in his play, faces choices between maximizing his own perceived self-interest and winning. The choices are sufficiently complex that there is a fair chance he doesn't fully grasp that he is making them.

Taking a bad shot when you don't need to is only the most obvious example. A point guard might selfishly give up an open shot for an assist. You can see it happen every night, when he's racing down court for an open layup, and instead of taking it, he passes it back to a trailing teammate. The teammate usually finishes with some sensational dunk, but the likelihood of scoring nevertheless declined. "The marginal assist is worth more money to the point guard than the marginal point," Morey says. Blocked shots — they look great, but unless you secure the ball afterward, you haven't helped your team all that much. Players love the spectacle of a ball being swatted into the fifth row, and it becomes a matter of personal indifference that the other team still gets the ball back. Dikembe Mutombo, Houston's 42-year-old backup center, famous for blocking shots, "has always been the best in the league in the recovery of the ball after his block," says Morey, as he begins to make a case for Mutombo's unselfishness before he stops and laughs. "But even to Dikembe there's a selfish component. He made his name by doing the finger wag." The finger wag: Mutombo swats the ball, grabs it, holds it against his hip and wags his finger at the opponent. Not in my house! "And if he doesn't catch the ball," Morey says, "he can't do the finger wag. And he loves the finger wag." His team of course would be better off if Mutombo didn't hold onto the ball long enough to do his finger wag. "We've had to yell at him: start the break, start the break — then do your finger wag!"

When I ask Morey if he can think of any basketball statistic that can't benefit a player at the expense of his team, he has to think hard. "Offensive rebounding," he says, then reverses himself. "But even that can be coun-

terproductive to the team if your job is to get back on defense.” It turns out there is no statistic that a basketball player accumulates that cannot be amassed selfishly. “We think about this deeply whenever we’re talking about contractual incentives,” he says. “We don’t want to incent a guy to do things that hurt the team” — and the amazing thing about basketball is how easy this is to do. “They *all* maximize what they think they’re being paid for,” he says. He laughs. “It’s a tough environment for a player now because you have a lot of teams starting to think differently. They’ve got to rethink how they’re getting paid.”

Having watched Battier play for the past two and a half years, Morey has come to think of him as an exception: the most abnormally unselfish basketball player he has ever seen. Or rather, the player who seems one step ahead of the analysts, helping the team in all sorts of subtle, hard-to-measure ways that appear to violate his own personal interests. “Our last coach dragged him into a meeting and told him he needed to shoot more,” Morey says. “I’m not sure that that ever happened.” Last season when the Rockets played the San Antonio Spurs Battier was assigned to guard their most dangerous scorer, Manu Ginóbili. Ginóbili comes off the bench, however, and his minutes are not in sync with the minutes of a starter like Battier. Battier privately went to Coach Rick Adelman and told him to bench him and bring him in when Ginóbili entered the game. “No one in the N.B.A. does that,” Morey says. “No one says put me on the bench so I can guard their best scorer all the time.”

One well-known statistic the Rockets’ front office pays attention to is plus-minus, which simply measures what happens to the score when any given player is on the court. In its crude form, plus-minus is hardly perfect: a player who finds himself on the same team with the world’s four best basketball players, and who plays only when they do, will have a plus-minus that looks pretty good, even if it says little about his play. Morey says that he and his staff can adjust for these potential distortions — though he is coy about how they do it — and render plus-minus a useful measure of a player’s effect on a basketball game. A good player might be a plus 3 — that is, his team averages 3 points more per game than its opponent when he is on the floor. In his best season, the superstar point guard Steve Nash was a plus 14.5. At the time of the Lakers game, Battier was a plus 10, which put him in the company of Dwight Howard and Kevin Garnett, both perennial All-Stars. For his career he’s a plus 6. “Plus 6 is enormous,” Morey says. “It’s the difference between 41 wins and 60 wins.” He names a few other players who were a plus 6 last season: Vince Carter, Carmelo Anthony, Tracy McGrady.

As the game against the Lakers started, Morey took his seat, on the aisle, nine rows behind the Rockets’ bench. The odds, on this night, were not good. Houston was playing without its injured superstar, McGrady (who was in the clubhouse watching TV), and its injured best supporting actor, Ron Artest (cheering in street clothes from the bench). The Lakers were staffed by household names. The only Rockets player on the floor with a conspicuous shoe contract was the center Yao Ming — who opened the game by tipping the ball backward. Shane Battier began his game by grabbing it.

Before the Rockets traded for Battier, the front-office analysts obviously studied his value. They knew all sorts of details about his efficiency

and his ability to reduce the efficiency of his opponents. They knew, for example, that stars guarded by Battier suddenly lose their shooting touch. What they didn't know was why. Morey recognized Battier's effects, but he didn't know how he achieved them. Two hundred or so basketball games later, he's the world's expert on the subject — which he was studying all over again tonight. He pointed out how, instead of grabbing uncertainly for a rebound, for instance, Battier would tip the ball more certainly to a teammate. Guarding a lesser rebounder, Battier would, when the ball was in the air, leave his own man and block out the other team's best rebounder. "Watch him," a Houston front-office analyst told me before the game. "When the shot goes up, he'll go sit on Gasol's knee." (Pau Gasol often plays center for the Lakers.) On defense, it was as if Battier had set out to maximize the misery Bryant experiences shooting a basketball, without having his presence recorded in any box score. He blocked the ball when Bryant was taking it from his waist to his chin, for instance, rather than when it was far higher and Bryant was in the act of shooting. "When you watch him," Morey says, "you see that his whole thing is to stay in front of guys and try to block the player's vision when he shoots. We didn't even notice what he was doing until he got here. I wish we could say we did, but we didn't."

People often say that Kobe Bryant has no weaknesses to his game, but that's not really true. Before the game, Battier was given his special package of information. "He's the only player we give it to," Morey says. "We can give him this fire hose of data and let him sift. Most players are like golfers. You don't want them swinging while they're thinking." The data essentially broke down the floor into many discrete zones and calculated the odds of Bryant making shots from different places on the court, under different degrees of defensive pressure, in different relationships to other players — how well he scored off screens, off pick-and-rolls, off catch-and-shoots and so on. Battier learns a lot from studying the data on the superstars he is usually assigned to guard. For instance, the numbers show him that Allen Iverson is one of the most efficient scorers in the N.B.A. when he goes to his right; when he goes to his left he kills his team. The Golden State Warriors forward Stephen Jackson is an even stranger case. "Steve Jackson," Battier says, "is statistically better going to his right, but he *loves* to go to his left — and goes to his left almost twice as often." The San Antonio Spurs' Manu Ginóbili is a statistical freak: he has no imbalance whatsoever in his game — there is no one way to play him that is better than another. He is equally efficient both off the dribble and off the pass, going left and right and from any spot on the floor.

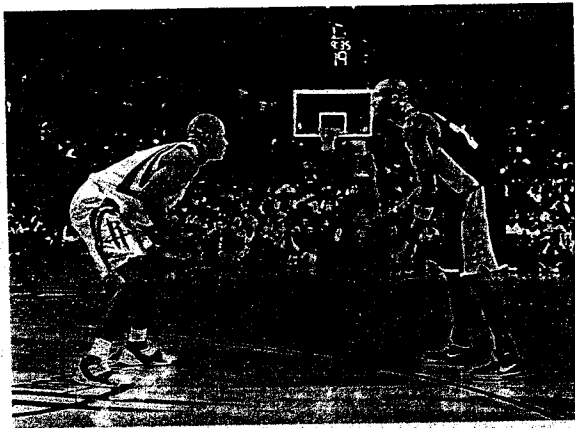
Bryant isn't like that. He is better at pretty much everything than everyone else, but there are places on the court, and starting points for his shot, that render him less likely to help his team. When he drives to the basket, he is exactly as likely to go to his left as to his right, but when he goes to his left, he is less effective. When he shoots directly after receiving a pass, he is more efficient than when he shoots after dribbling. He's deadly if he gets into the lane and also if he gets to the baseline; between the two, less so. "The absolute worst thing to do," Battier says, "is to foul him." It isn't that Bryant is an especially good free-throw shooter but that, as Morey puts it, "the foul is the worst result of a defensive play." One way the Rockets can see which teams think about the game as they do is by identifying those

that “try dramatically not to foul.” The ideal outcome, from the Rockets’ statistical point of view, is for Bryant to dribble left and pull up for an 18-foot jump shot; force that to happen often enough and you have to be satisfied with your night. “If he has 40 points on 40 shots, I can live with that,” Battier says. “My job is not to keep him from scoring points but to make him as inefficient as possible.” The court doesn’t have little squares all over it to tell him what percentage Bryant is likely to shoot from any given spot, but it might as well.

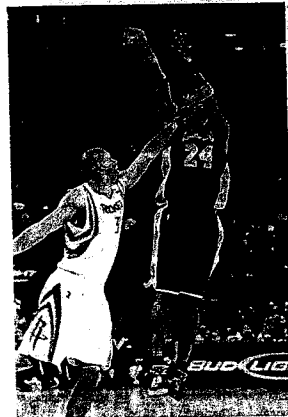
The reason the Rockets insist that Battier guard Bryant is his gift for encouraging him into his zones of lowest efficiency. The effect of doing this is astonishing: Bryant doesn’t merely help his team less when Battier guards him than when someone else does. When Bryant is in the game and Battier is on him, the Lakers’ offense is worse than if the N.B.A.’s best player had taken the night off. “The Lakers’ offense should obviously be better with Kobe in,” Morey says. “But if Shane is on him, it isn’t.” A player whom Morey describes as “a marginal N.B.A. athlete” not only guards one of the greatest — and smartest — offensive threats ever to play the game. He renders him a detriment to his team.

And if you knew none of this, you would never guess any of it from watching the game. Bryant was quicker than Battier, so the latter spent much of his time chasing around after him, Keystone Cops-like. Bryant shot early and often, but he looked pretty good from everywhere. On defense, Battier talked to his teammates a lot more than anyone else on the court, but from the stands it was hard to see any point to this. And yet, he swears, there’s a reason to almost all of it: when he decides where to be on the court and what angles to take, he is constantly reminding himself of the odds on the stack of papers he read through an hour earlier as his feet soaked in the whirlpool. “The numbers either refute my thinking or support my thinking,” he says, “and when there’s any question, I trust the numbers. The numbers don’t lie.” Even when the numbers agree with his intuitions, they have an effect. “It’s a subtle difference,” Morey says, “but it has big implications. If you have an intuition of something but no hard evidence to back it up, you might kind of *sort of* go about putting that intuition into practice, because there’s still some uncertainty if it’s right or wrong.”

Knowing the odds, Battier can pursue an inherently uncertain strategy with total certainty. He can devote himself to a process and disregard the outcome of any given encounter. This is critical because in basketball, as in everything else, luck plays a role, and Battier cannot afford to let it distract him. Only once during the Lakers game did we glimpse a clean, satisfying comparison of the efficient strategy and the inefficient one — that is, an outcome that reflected the odds. Ten feet from the hoop, Bryant got the ball with his back to the basket; with Battier pressing against him, he fell back and missed a 12-foot shot off the front of the rim. Moments earlier, with Battier reclining in the deep soft chair that masquerades as an N.B.A. bench, his teammate Brent Barry found himself in an analogous position. Bryant leaned into Barry, hit a six-foot shot and drew a foul. But this was the exception; normally you don’t get perfect comparisons. You couldn’t see the odds shifting subtly away from the Lakers and toward the Rockets as Bryant was forced from 6 feet out to 12 feet from the basket, or when he had Battier’s hand in his eyes. All you saw were the



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When Battier guards Bryant, the Lakers' offense is worse than if the N.B.A.'s best player took the night off. 'The Lakers' offense should obviously be better with Kobe in,' the Rockets' general manager says. 'But if Shane is on him, it isn't.'

statistics on the board, and as the seconds ticked off to halftime, the game tied 54-54, Bryant led all scorers with 16 points.

But he required 20 possessions to get them. And he had started moaning to the referees. Bryant is one of the great jawboners in the history of the N.B.A. A major-league baseball player once showed me a slow-motion replay of the Yankees' third baseman Alex Rodriguez in the batter's box. Glancing back to see where the catcher has set up is not strictly against baseball's rules, but it violates the code. A hitter who does it is likely to find the next pitch aimed in the general direction of his eyes. A-Rod, the best hitter in baseball, mastered the art of glancing back by moving not his head, but his eyes, at just the right time. It was like watching a billionaire find some trivial and dubious deduction to take on his tax returns. Why bother? I thought, and then realized: this is the instinct that separates A-Rod from mere stars. Kobe Bryant has the same instinct. Tonight Bryant complained that Battier was grabbing his jersey, Battier was pushing when no one was looking, Battier was committing crimes against humanity. Just before the half ended, Battier took a referee aside and said: "You and I both know Kobe does this all the time. I'm playing him honest. Don't fall for his stuff." Moments later, after failing to get a call, Bryant hurled the ball, screamed at the ref and was whistled for a technical foul.

Just after that, the half ended, but not before Battier was tempted by a tiny act of basketball selfishness. The Rockets' front office has picked up a glitch in Battier's philanthropic approach to the game: in the final second of any quarter, finding himself with the ball and on the wrong side of the half-court line, Battier refuses to heave it honestly at the basket, in an improbable but not impossible attempt to score. He heaves it disingenuously, and a millisecond after the buzzer sounds. Daryl Morey could think of only one explanation: a miss lowers Battier's shooting percentage. "I tell him we don't count heaves in our stats," Morey says, "but Shane's smart enough to know that his next team might not be smart enough to take the heaves out."

Tonight, the ball landed in Battier's hands milliseconds before the half finished. He moved just slowly enough for the buzzer to sound, heaved the ball the length of the floor and then sprinted to the locker room — having not taken a single shot.

In 1996 a young writer for The Basketball Times named Dan Wetzel thought it might be neat to move into the life of a star high-school basketball player and watch up close as big-time basketball colleges recruited him. He picked Shane Battier, and then spent five months trailing him, with growing incredulity. "I'd covered high-school basketball for eight years and talked to hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of kids — really every single prominent high-school basketball player in the country," Wetzel says. "There's this public perception that they're all thugs. But they aren't. A lot of them are really good guys, and some of them are very, very bright. Kobe's very bright. LeBron's very bright. But there's absolutely never been anything like Shane Battier."

Wetzel watched this kid, inundated with offers of every kind, take charge of an unprincipled process. Battier narrowed his choices to six schools — Kentucky, Kansas, North Carolina, Duke, Michigan and Michigan State — and told everyone else, politely, to leave him be. He then set out to minimize the degree to which the chosen schools could

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interfere with his studies; he had a 3.96 G.P.A. and was poised to claim Detroit Country Day School's headmaster's cup for best all-around student. He granted each head coach a weekly 15-minute window in which to phone him. These men happened to be among the most famous basketball coaches in the world and the most persistent recruiters, but Battier granted no exceptions. When the Kentucky coach Rick Pitino, who had just won a national championship, tried to call Battier outside his assigned time, Battier simply removed Kentucky from his list. "What 17-year-old has the stones to do that?" Wetzel asks. "To just cut off Rick Pitino because he calls outside his window?" Wetzel answers his own question: "It wasn't like, 'This is a really interesting 17-year-old.' It was like, 'This isn't real.'"

Battier, even as a teenager, was as shrewd as he was disciplined. The minute he figured out where he was headed, he called a sensational high-school power forward in Peekskill, N.Y., named Elton Brand — and talked him into joining him at Duke. (Brand now plays for the Phila-

delphia 76ers.) "I thought he'd be the first black president," Wetzel says. "He was Barack Obama before Barack Obama."

One way the Rockets can tell if their opponents analyze basketball the way they do is to check the 3-point shot from the corner: the smart teams take a lot of them and seek to prevent their opponents from taking them.

Last July, as we sat in the library of the Detroit Country Day School, watching, or trying to watch, his March 2008 performance against Kobe Bryant, Battier was much happier instead talking about Obama, both of whose books he had read. ("The first was better than the second," he said.) He said he hated watching himself play, then proved it by refusing to watch himself play. My every attempt to draw his attention to the action on the video monitor was met by some distraction.

I pointed to his footwork; he pointed to a gorgeous young woman in the stands wearing a Battier jersey. ("You don't see too many good-looking girls with Battier jerseys on," he said. "It's usually 12 and under or 60 and over. That's my demographic.") I noted the uncanny way in which he got his hand right in front of Bryant's eyes before a shot; he motioned to his old high school library ("I came in here every day before classes"). He took my excessive interest in this one game as proof of a certain lack of imagination, I'm pretty sure. "I've been doing the same thing for seven years," he said, "and this is the only game anyone wants to talk about. It's like, Oh, you can play defense?" It grew clear that one reason he didn't particularly care to watch himself play, apart from the tedium of it, was that he plays the game so self-consciously. Unable to count on the game to properly measure his per-

formance, he learned to do so himself. He had, in some sense, already seen the video. When I finally compelled him to watch, he was knocking the ball out of Bryant's hands as Bryant raised it from his waist to his chin. "If I get to be commissioner, that will count as a blocked shot," Battier said. "But it's nothing. They don't count it as a blocked shot. I do that at least 30 times a season."

In the statistically insignificant sample of professional athletes I've come to know a bit, two patterns have emerged. The first is, they tell you meaningful things only when you talk to them in places other than where they have been trained to answer questions. It's pointless, for instance, to ask a basketball player about himself inside his locker room. For a start, he is naked; for another, he's surrounded by the people he has learned to mistrust, his own teammates. The second pattern is the fact that seemingly trivial events in their childhoods have had huge influence on their careers. A cleanup hitter lives and dies by a swing he perfected when he was 7; a quarterback has a hitch in his throwing motion because he imitated his father. Here, in the Detroit Country Day School library, a few yards from the gym, Battier was back where he became a basketball player.

And he was far less interested in what happened between him and Kobe Bryant four months ago than what happened when he was 12.

When he entered Detroit Country Day in seventh grade, he was already conspicuous at 6-foot-4, and a year later he would be 6-foot-7. "Growing up tall was something I got used to," he said. "I was the kid about whom they always said, 'Check his birth certificate.'" He was also the only kid in school with a black father and a white mother. Oddly enough, the school had just graduated a famous black basketball player, Chris Webber. Webber won three state championships and was named national high-school player of the year. "Chris was a man-child," says his high school basketball coach, Kurt Keener. "Everyone wanted Shane to be the next Chris Webber, but Shane wasn't like that." Battier had never heard of Webber and didn't understand why, when he took to the Amateur Athletic Union circuit and played with black inner-city kids, he found himself compared unfavorably with Webber: "I kept hearing 'He's too soft' or 'He's not an athlete.'" His high-school coach was aware of the problems he had when he moved from white high-school games to the black A.A.U. circuit. "I remember trying to add some flair to his game," Keener says, "but it was like teaching a classical dancer to do hip-hop. I came to the conclusion he didn't have the ego for it."

Battier was half-white and half-black, but basketball, it seemed, was either black or white. A small library of Ph.D. theses might usefully be

devoted to the reasons for this. For instance, is it a coincidence that many of the things a player does in white basketball to prove his character — take a charge, scramble for a loose ball — are more pleasantly done on a polished wooden floor than they are on inner-city asphalt? Is it easier to “play for the team” when that team is part of some larger institution? At any rate, the inner-city kids with whom he played on the A.A.U. circuit treated Battier like a suburban kid with a white game, and the suburban kids he played with during the regular season treated him like a visitor from the planet where they kept the black people. “On Martin Luther King Day, everyone in class would look at me like I was supposed to know who he was and why he was important,” Battier said. “When we had an official school picture, every other kid was given a comb. I was the only one given a pick.” He was awkward and shy, or as he put it: “I didn’t present well. But I’m in the eighth grade! I’m just trying to fit in!” And yet here he was shuttling between a black world that treated him as white and a white world that treated him as black. “*Everything* I’ve done since then is because of what I went through with this,” he said. “What I did is alienate myself from everybody. I’d eat lunch by myself. I’d study by myself. And I sort of lost myself in the game.”

Losing himself in the game meant fitting into the game, and fitting into the game meant meshing so well that he became hard to see. In high school he was almost always the best player on the court, but even then he didn’t embrace the starring role. “He had a tendency to defer,” Keener says. “He had this incredible ability to make everyone around him better. But I had to tell him to be more assertive. The one game we lost his freshman year, it was because he deferred to the seniors.” Even when he was clearly the best player and could have shot the ball at will, he was more interested in his role in the larger unit. But it is a mistake to see in his detachment from self an absence of ego, or ambition, or even desire for attention. When Battier finished telling me the story of this unpleasant period in his life, he said: “Chris Webber won three state championships, the Mr. Basketball Award and the Naismith Award. I won three state championships, Mr. Basketball and the Naismith Awards. All the things they said I wasn’t able to do, when I was in the eighth grade.”

“Who’s they?” I asked.

“Pretty much everyone,” he said.

“White people?”

“No,” he said. “The street.”

As the third quarter began, Battier’s face appeared overhead, on the Jumbotron, where he hammed it up and exhorted the crowd. Throughout the game he was up on the thing more than any other player: plugging teeth-whitening formulas, praising local jewelers, making public-service announcements, telling the fans to make noise. When I mentioned to a Rockets’ staff member that Battier seemed to have far more than his fair share of big-screen appearances, he said, “Probably because he’s the only one who’ll do them.”

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half with Sam Hinkie, the vice president of basketball operations and the head of basketball analytics in the Rockets' front office. The game went back and forth. Bryant kept missing more shots than he made. Neither team got much of a lead. More remarkable than the game were Hinkie's reactions — and it soon became clear that while he obviously wanted the Rockets to win, he was responding to different events on the court than the typical Rockets (or N.B.A.) fan was.

"I care a lot more about what ought to have happened than what actually happens," said Hinkie, who has an M.B.A. from Stanford. The routine N.B.A. game, he explained, is decided by a tiny percentage of the total points scored. A team scores on average about 100 points a game, but two out of three N.B.A. games are decided by fewer than 6 points — two or three possessions. The effect of this, in his mind, was to raise significantly the importance of every little thing that happened. The Lakers' Trevor Ariza, who makes 29 percent of his

3-point shots, hit a crazy 3-pointer, and as the crowd moaned, Hinkie was almost distraught. "That Ariza shot, that is really painful," he said. "Because it's a near-random event. And it's a 3-point swing." When Bryant drove to the basket, instead of being forced to take a jump shot, he said: "That's three-eighths of a point. These things accumulate."

In this probabilistic spirit we watched the battle between Battier and Bryant. From Hinkie's standpoint, it was going extremely well: "With most guys, Shane can kick them from their good zone to bad zone, but with Kobe you're just picking your poison. It's the epitome of, Which way do you want to die?" Only the Rockets weren't dying. Battier had once again turned Bryant into a less-efficient machine of death. Even when the shots dropped, they came from the places on the court where the Rockets' front office didn't mind seeing them drop. "That's all you can do," Hinkie said, after Bryant sank an 18-footer. "Get him to an inefficient spot and contest." And then all of a sudden it was 97-95, Lakers, with a bit more than three minutes to play, and someone called timeout. "We're in it," Hinkie