

Shooting in A Dark Gym

Playing Strat-O-Matic Computer Basketball Without the Cards

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When Strat-O-Matic announced that it would add a college version to its pro basketball computer game, I was very excited. My first introduction to computers, almost 20 years ago, was inspired by a college basketball simulation on a teletype machine. I enjoyed that game so much that I later wrote my own college basketball program to change all of the things I didn't like about the teletype version.

The biggest difference between SOM's new college version and its pro basketball game was that there was no board game and no player cards underlying the college simulation. As I began playing the college game, I immediately became filled with questions about what the player cards might look like for these teams. Several of my strategy decisions were made more difficult by the lack of player cards and I found this somewhat frustrating. Even though SOM has decided to discontinue the college version, there is much that can be learned about the strategy information provided in the computer game from my experience playing with the college teams.

STRATEGY INFORMATION

Any analysis of the strategy information provided by SOM must begin with the simple observation that SOM provides far more information in its games than its competitors do in their computer versions. No other game comes close. Of course, SOM is distinguished from its competitors in that each player is rated in such categories as individual defense (separate ratings for four different shot types), passing (fastbreak and normal), shooting (five different shot types) and offensive and defensive rebounding. The issue to be discussed here is to what extent the computer game provides gamers with enough of this information so that it can be put to use in making strategy decisions.

Before playing any games, a coach must become familiar with his players. There are two sources of player information: the player roster and the individual scouting report screens.

The player roster provides ratings for

individual defense, press defense, intimidation (block rating) and offensive and defensive rebounding. These ratings are in numeric form which makes it easy to compare players on the team with each other. The intimidation is even easier to understand because it is the same as the player's block rating on his card. Because all players on the team are listed at once on the screen, it is easy to determine which players are your best and worst.

More detailed player information such as shooting and passing ratings can be found in the Scouting Report section. This section shows all of the ratings for one player at a time on the screen. Ratings are displayed using a bar graph method in categories such as offense, defense, and shooting.

SHOOTING FOR VICTORY

Shooting, always the most important category, uses the bar graph to display each player's ability in each of the five shot categories. By reducing each shot's rating to one bar graph, the game fails to distinguish shooters by the percentage of fouls they draw. Some shooters score mostly baskets while drawing few fouls and other shooters draw a large percentage of fouls while scoring fewer baskets. During a game, when a shot attempt occurs, a coach can view a detailed result chart (again in bar graph form) which does distinguish between baskets and fouls drawn. However, the only way to get that information is to play a game and observe it. It is not available from any of the ratings screens.

One observation that jumped out at me immediately upon viewing the shooting ratings of various players is how many of the college players were significantly better at 3-point shots than at outside or penetration shots. By significantly better, I mean that after viewing these bar graphs, a coach would always select the 3-point shot, even if the player was open or was on a switch.

Arkansas is the best example of this on the college disk. This team, which made the Final Four that season, has very little shooting talent at all from the "normal" shot ranges. Other than Corliss Williamson and Scotty Thurman, the 3-pointer is almost always the

best option. This is probably a consequence of the statistical realities of the college game, but it takes a little bit of the fun away to know that there is no point even considering any of the other types of shots for many shooters.

The other crucial rating displayed on the scouting report is the Fastbreak Passing rating, also shown in bar graph format alongside the Normal Passing and other offensive ratings. By displaying this rating in one bar graph, the game fails to distinguish the different types of passers. This distinction is crucial to a coach deciding whether or not to use a fastbreak offense.

The two "types" of point guards who run the break effectively are those who have all dazzlers, despite higher turnovers, and those who create mainly fast break shot opportunities, but with fewer turnovers. Once again, Arkansas is the best example, although many other teams have the same situation, because each of its guards appears to be equally proficient at fastbreak passing. If you look closely, you can see small differences, but that does little to explain which type of passer each player is. When you are behind, you prefer the all or nothing high risk/high reward player. When you have the lead, you want the player who will not turn the ball over. If you are coaching the Razorbacks, the bar graphs do not distinguish between these two types of players.

Another example can be illustrated by playing games with my alma mater, Georgetown University. Georgetown played an aggressive fastbreak style most of the time that season, led by out-of-control Allen Iverson. After playing many games with the Hoyas, I am fairly certain that Iverson has a high turnover rating to go with a large number of dazzlers — a fair reflection of his abilities. However, having learned this, I have found that Georgetown can be very effective in a halfcourt offense where the turnovers can be minimized. Although it would be unrealistic to use this offense most of the time, it can be a very effective strategy maneuver when used at the appropriate points of a game. However, because the single rating for fastbreak passing does not make this distinction clear, I was only able to figure this out by trial and error because.

The most significant drawback to the Scouting Report feature is that only one player can be displayed at one time. This

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limitation makes it impossible for the players on a team to be directly compared to each other. Unless you have a fantastic memory, you will need to write down each player's rating in each of the shooting and passing categories to determine how your shooters compare to each other. If you display each player's rating in a particular category in a list on the screen, the bar graph display would be much more useful in evaluating the relative strengths of the players.

This problem is further complicated by the fact that shooting and passing ratings are not given a numeric equivalent like ratings for individual defense and rebounding. Thus, not only are you forced to write each rating down, but you may have to estimate the position of the bar graph in determining what the rating is.

ANALYSIS

The ratings information provided by the computer game fails to allow gamers to take full advantage of the many important ratings features included in the game. This is exactly why SOM recommends that gamers play with the cards. I agree. However, when the cards are not available, the game could do much more to provide additional information.

First, each rating should be reduced to a numeric equivalent of the bar graph. This includes shooting for each possible shot category as well as normal and fastbreak passing. Next, these numeric ratings should be displayed as part of the roster so that a coach may easily compare each of the players on his team in each category, especially shooting. A super feature would be the ability to view the bar graphs of each player in a given category alongside each other. This is really the most effective method for using a bar graph.

Third, ratings for shooting and fastbreak passing should be subdivided into two categories. For shooting, each player should be rated for his ability to draw fouls as well as his ability to score baskets. For fastbreak passing, separate ratings should be given for the passer's ability to create baskets (dazzlers) and the passer's turnover frequency. This could be done, very simply, by giving each player a turnover rating equal to the number of turnovers (1-20) on his fastbreak passing card and a great pass rating equal to the number of dazzlers (1-20). This method is used for intimidation and would be appropriate here, too.

Another very useful feature would be the ability to print each team's game plan which is generated before each game. These game plans are useful because they provide coaches with a guide to how players should be used and also with suggestions as to when to fastbreak. I confess I am confused as to how the computer makes this determination, because it seems that identical lineups are sometimes in fastbreak mode and in halfcourt mode at other times.

However, without the ability to print these game plans, it is hard to draw any conclusion. I have often spent several minutes writing down each team's game plan before a game just to have a sense of how the players should be used. A simple print option would be very helpful.

Each of these changes would help gamers make better coaching decisions. The true beauty and joy of SOM's excellent basketball game is the manner in which each player's different individual abilities are reflected in the detailed rating system. These ratings, of course, are best viewed as part of the player's card.

The computer version needs to reflect this detailed information as well as possible in order for SOM gamers to get the most enjoyment out of it.