

Changing Basketball Rules

Tinkering Makes a Good Game Even Better

By Dick Hunt

One of the best features of all Strat-O-Matic games is flexibility. This includes the ability to break up real-life teams into a draft league, the ability to play teams from different seasons or eras against each other, and of course, the ability to tinker with the game's rules.

The latter is probably the most common variation on the Strat-O-Matic theme. Even leagues who use "straight" teams like to toy with the game company's rules on occasion. And draft leagues always seem to do so. My American Tabletop Basketball League (ATBL), which I operated from 1986-1989, was certainly no exception.

Following are a couple of variations my league used for SOM's basketball game. The fact that there are so few is indeed a tribute to the game company, for until the super-advanced rules came out last fall, the ATBL had more than a dozen rules for situations that weren't covered by SOM. Strat-O-Matic's new rules, however, beautifully covered all of the areas in question except for those included here.

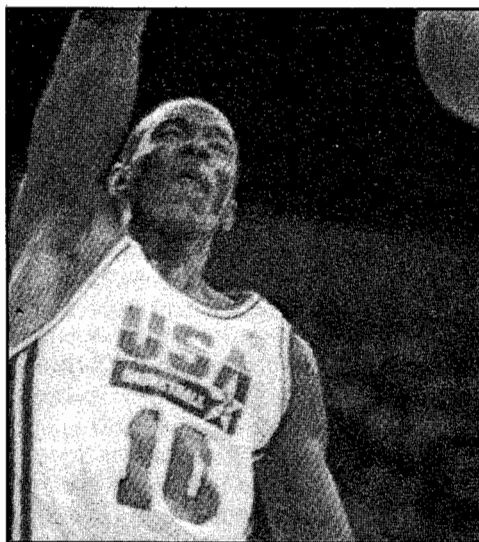
Along with the variations are some consequences that can be expected as a result of their use, for as Isaac Newton said, "for every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction," or something like that.

FASTBREAK GOVERNOR

The Variation: The fastbreak governor was devised because almost all of the ATBL's member coaches felt that SOM made it too easy to build and run a devastating fastbreak in a draft league. To combat this problem, ATBL teams were allowed to fastbreak for only 30 minutes in one game (with three extra minutes per OT). Furthermore, you couldn't run the break any time you led by 15 or more points.

The league used this rule because we felt it was unrealistic for teams to fastbreak from opening tip to the final buzzer. Even the most run-and-gun team in the world will try to kill the clock a bit when they're way out in front in the fourth quarter. This rule also discourages the unsportsmanlike practice of running up the score unmercifully.

Contrary to the game company's claim on each season's roster sheet, running the fastbreak in Strat-O-Matic when you have a huge lead will *not* jeopardize your lead. It will



CLYDE DREXLER: Fewer fastbreaks?

cause you to turn the ball over more, as SOM says, but not enough to make up for the extra dazzlers any decent point guard will dish out.

Another reason for our fastbreak governor was that our scores were unrealistically high. Not only did our top offensive teams average more than 130 points per game, our *worst* scoring squads would average 110.

The Consequences: As predicted, the ATBL's scores came way down. We suddenly started seeing many games where neither team broke 100, something the NBA has also seen in recent years.

Strategy seemed to be more important, and competition seemed fiercer, since you now could win without a great fastbreak, unthinkable in our first two seasons. The bad news was that if you fell behind early in the game, you tended to burn up your 30 fastbreak minutes before your comeback attempt was completed. So there you are, down by 10 with five minutes to go — and suddenly you're plodding up and down the court because you "used up" your allotted fastbreak minutes. The governor probably needs to be trashed during late comebacks.

DOUBLE-TEAMING

The Variation: In the ATBL, we outlawed the use of the double-teaming rules. Our first reason for this variation was playability. This rule added so much reading and writing to our PBM instruction sheets that we found it easier to do without it.

Our best reason, however, was that we felt

that SOM's old double-teaming rules were too hard on the offense. Taking away all the X's and D's will make even Michael Jordan a bum. Of course, with SOM's new and greatly improved system, we may have to give it another try.

The Consequences: Unfortunately for my league, we found that this change in SOM's rules had the opposite effect of the fastbreak governor. That is, ignoring double-teaming added points to the scoreboard and to the individual averages of our star players. *Never* being able to double-team Jordan was unrealistic, but it was definitely the lesser of two evils.

HOME-COURT ADVANTAGE

The Variation: In the last season of ATBL play, we started reversing the "Home" and "Visitor" readings on the action deck.

This idea came from one of our coaches who thought the league's winning percentage at home was too high. When I checked it out in our stats over our first two seasons, I found that the ATBL's home winning percentage was about .667, very close to an average NBA season. However, for some reason, our third season's percentage shot up to over .700. So we went with this change.

The Consequences: In our case, the home winning percentage dropped like a stone, a bit *too* much, in my opinion. It wasn't even .600 for our last season. But my coaches loved it; they were working like dogs trying to win at home, and enjoying themselves immensely. I personally didn't care for giving up most of my easy home wins in exchange for dog-fights. I probably had more fun, though.

These are only a few of the ATBL's more important variations on SOM's basketball rules. We also had detailed rules for playing people out of position, but space prohibits me from including them here. Those rules took up two pages of our 15-page constitution, and were the least-used rules in the whole thing!

Anyway, you get the point. Don't be afraid to tinker with a game. Who knows, if you let enough people know about your variation, you just might live to see it become an official SOM rule. For instance, when Bob Winberry was working on the Super Advanced basketball rules introduced last year, it was me who suggested the "sequence of play" rule that is now in the book.

That's my claim to Strat fame.