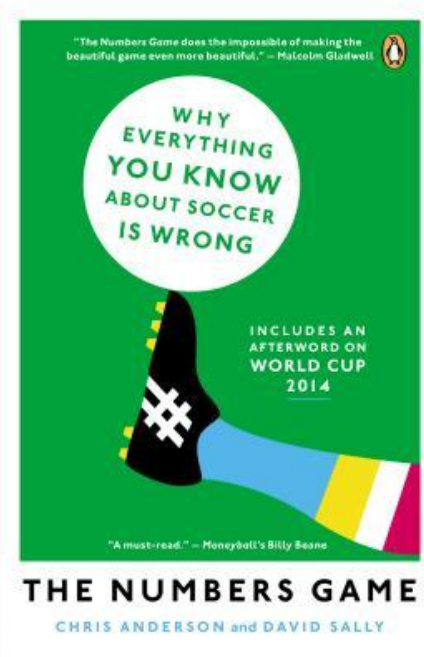

The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong

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The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong Chris Anderson , David Sally ***Moneyball* meets *Freakonomics* in this myth-busting guide to understanding—and winning—the most popular sport on the planet - now with a new afterword on the 2014 World Cup!**

Innovation is coming to soccer, and at the center of it all are the numbers—a way of thinking about the game that ignores the obvious in favor of how things actually are. In *The Numbers Game*, Chris Anderson, a former professional goalkeeper turned soccer statistics guru, teams up with behavioral analyst David Sally to uncover the numbers that really matter when it comes to predicting a winner. Investigating basic but profound questions—How valuable are corners? Which goal matters most? Is possession really nine-tenths of the law? How should a player's value be judged?—they deliver an incisive, revolutionary new way of watching and understanding soccer.

The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong Details

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Paul Brunger says

Some interesting ideas in here, and a big reminder of how much stats I have forgotten, but some parts I enjoyed more than others.

Some of the most interesting pieces of thinking (for example that the level of the worst player in a team has more impact than the average ability, or the differences between turnovers and possessions) felt under-pursued - I'd like to have seen where they end up and the impact made more clear.

Some other pieces felt to me too much like declaring relationships causal rather than correlated. Does changing the timing of substitutions improve performance or is there something underlying the situation that actually drives the situation?

Whether this is valid criticism of the stats or not not sure I'm qualified to answer any more, but certainly this book doesn't explain itself as well as say Freakonomics. That said, it's interesting that a lot of the Goodreads reviews ask for less interpretation and less description! This must be the real statisticians!

Will Once says

Meh.

I had such high hopes for this book, but somehow it didn't quite deliver. The basic premise is fascinating and undoubtedly correct - the use of statistical analysis is fundamental to success at the highest levels of football.

But the execution is unfortunately quite turgid. We get page after page of argument which alternates between repetition and incomplete analysis. In one second the authors are telling you the same point over and over again. In the next breath they are making a deductive leap that I simply could not follow.

There are nuggets in the book - although not many that you probably don't know already. But does it live up to the hype of "why everything you know about "soccer" is wrong"? No, I'm afraid it doesn't.

Great premise, slick marketing, slightly dull book. Shame.

Eitaporra says

It tries too hard. The data collected are, by themselves, interesting enough, no need to tamper or primp them. However, the authors had to spice them up to artificially make the findings more impressive.

Three exemples come up: 1) They used Spiegelhalter's study to state that chance, alone, is responsible for roughly 50% of a team's successs. The original researcher himself had concluded that only 26% of accomplishment was due to pure randomness. The trick? "Lying with statistics". Spiegelhalter measured

variance, which is technically more appropriate. Sally, on the other hand, used standard deviation, as to inflate the number.

2) To support, once again, their thesis that skills account for only 50% of success, Sally and Anderson pointed out that good teams only win 50% of matches (comparing it to a flip of coins). Well, they could have very well pointed that bad teams percentage win is about 25% (the rest is composed of draws). It's not a flip of a coin since the good ones are twice as likely to win.

3) Recalling Martin Lames' theory that 44.4% of goals originated from luck. What's wrong with Lames's study? Nothing. However, they contradicted their own motto stated on the preface: information should be used to find the truth, and not confirm one's own bias. Why not recall studies that doesn't corroborate their assumptions?

Anyway, I recommend everyone to read "How to Lie with Statistics" before getting on The Numbers Game.

Mugren Ohaly says

I had high hopes for this. Sadly, I’m disappointed.

Many of the statistics just don’t make any sense with regards to their argument. An example of this is when they calculated that such an oddly high percentage of players in soccer go for years without ever recording a single shot on target. Yes, they’re called goalkeepers and defenders, which is an average of 3 players per team!

The authors had some intriguing ideas, especially in the introduction of the book. Unfortunately, these were buried under mountains of confusing data.

Kdawg91 says

I get obsessed about things, I find something I like and delve face first into it till I am full of it, or tire of it or run out of things to know. I never liked sports eventhough I come from a family of sports lovers. A few years ago I jumped off into hockey and last year I fell in love with the beautiful game.

(Yes, that's alot of pointless exposition, but there is a purpose sorta)

Being a book whore, and having a new subject to pore over, I found several books on my new subject. The Numbers Game, being a study on a sport I was just learning and numbers (which I suck at)..common sense says I shouldn't enjoy this, But I did.

This book shows me in no uncertain terms why I enjoy this sport as a new fan. It is truly a beautiful game, there is a magic in the stats and a "beauty" in the skill and the players.

If you are a stat head, or just want to understand a great sport better, this is for you.

Michael Powell says

Soccer where 0 > 1 !! The 15% that was fascinating outweighed the 50% that was too complex and repetitious. 35% very strong. Since a book is (IMHO) a strong-link enterprise, this means this is a very good book.

Ben says

So I'm not a soccer fan, but I had this mentioned on a Malcolm Gladwell podcast, and it sounded pretty interesting. In particular I was interested in the discussion of weak links versus strong links, especially as it relates to sports teams, and how in some sports, the best player matters more (such as basketball), and in others, like soccer, it makes more of a difference how strong your weakest player is.
However, because I'm not a soccer fan, I never was particularly interested in what they wrote about. I was hoping that the material would transcend the sport, but I never really felt like it did. So it's probably a very good and interesting book if you're a soccer fan, but for a non-fan like me, not so much.

Ngee Poo says

Quite a few misleading interpretations of statistics provided.

- Soccer was compared to basketball, baseball, american football and handball, and that only favourites have "only" slightly over 50% chance of winning.
- but in all the other sports mentioned, there are no draws!
- Flipping this around, with odds of drawing around 25%, it means odds of favourites winning are twice that of odds of underdogs winning. That's significant.
- Comparing this to coin flipping is erroneous. Coin flipping has only 2 outcomes, soccer match 3 (unless in the case of cup matches).

- Authors also stated that some goals scored mean less compared to other goals, but what about goal difference? Its only true if we look at each match individually, and that matters for cup games, but not so in the league.

- Again, misleading interpretation. Authors quote that 51% of teams who score the most go on to win the league. This is again not a coin flip. In fact, in a league of 20 teams, this makes the highest scoring team the favourites by far .

- On managers: authors postulate that less goalies and defenders become managers because of less appreciation for defending. But doesn't this ignore the fact that there are less goalies and defenders plying their trades professionally to start with?

-long ball ratio to shots: teams that play more long balls and fewer shots tend to finish lower on the table. But is this a result rather than a cause? Perhaps weaker teams play long balls and shoot less BECAUSE they cant keep possession, rather than as a deliberate strategy?

Nick Davies says

This was a very interesting book - combining football and mathematics (two of my favourite beautiful things!) in order to tease out some of the aspects of the game which could be enhanced, 'Moneyball style' by modern analytical statistical techniques.

There's a lot of content, and the book will certainly stand up to repeated re-readings. If I had one criticism, however, it would probably be that the subjects chosen for data analysis felt a little less novel than in other books of a similar ilk ('Moneyball', 'Why England Lose' and some other more sociological economics type ones I've also read) and hence the conclusions drawn were less quirky and less surprising. I did also find myself slightly itching to shout "correlation is not causation!" at various points, when page after page claimed X caused Y (as opposed to, as I suspect, is just correlated with it). In addition, the massive role of luck and wealth in the game made me wonder just how big a difference analytics could make to the small amount of 'readily influencable' stuff left.

Erik Surewaard says

This book discussed the analytical side of soccer. It is quite a thick read, which in my opinion is caused by including too much graphs and “analysis”. The analysis is however limited too looking at graphs and drawing conclusions from them. I can even say that there are statements made that I think are not correct.

Overall, I still intend to give this book three stars. I don’t think it deserves more than this. It would have been worth a star more in case the content would have been limited to 200 pages instead of the current double amount: this by removing many of the so-called “analysis” it includes. This book is too bloated in its current setup.

If you want to get a good read on the analytical side of soccer, I can recommend “Soccermatics” instead of this book.

Jackie Chang says

amazing book

Yousif Al Zeera says

Chris and David are pioneers of 'football analytics'. Former goalkeeper and baseball pitcher respectively before turning into football statistics gurus.

Their book is for the "Big Data" folks, unleashing the "freakonomics" within them. A thought-provoking book that will completely change your understanding of the game, challenge your assumptions and, most importantly, ignite your passion towards the most popular game in the world.

Shall corners be taken short? Are teams as good as their worst players? Does changing manager affect anything after all? Is the game 50% luck? Is ball possession something valuable? What is the guerrilla style of playing? Why Stoke City were doing good for a decade with seemingly slow players? How many scouters do Udinese have? What is the futuristic formation that will put the 4-4-2 and 4-3-3 into the bin for good? How does Xabi Alonso view tacking? What is the Maldini Principle? Does a dog that don't bark make any sense?

Questions will not end. Because when they do end in the book, you will continue probing new ones yourself.

Disclaimer: You will start watching football in a different way. Unsure if this is a good or bad thing!

Paul Brewer says

I first encountered 'sabermetrics' in 1987 when I bought a Bill James Baseball Abstract from the long-lamented Sportspages book shop in Charing Cross Road. I quickly followed that purchase up with the Historical Abstract and then the 1988 Abstract. Since then I have been interested in 'sports analytics' as applied to other sports.

This book attempts to outline some discoveries 'soccermetrics' or whatever one wants to to call it have made about football. Unlike baseball, football is a game of near-constant motion and minimal statistics, so trying to translate the sabermetric approach to football is a bit of a Fool's Errand. One is basically reduced to taking the weakest element of sabermetrics -- the measurement of pitching and fielding in a team context -- and applying it to the entirety of the game. The Numbers Game doesn't really go even that far.

The basic elements it covers are:
1) What counts most in winning a football match, skill or luck?
2) How valuable are goals?
3) Is it better to have a great attack or a great defence?
4) Where do you want the ball before it goes into the back of the net?
5) How important are coaches?
6) What is the future of 'football analytics'?

My breakdown doesn't exactly mirror the chapters, but it does give a broad idea of the themes handled here. The answers are rarely surprising, except for that to (4), where the pioneering work of Charles Reep is not completely dismissed. But its value is in very specific circumstances.

It's not a difficult read, but unlike Bill James in 1987 it didn't completely change my appreciation of football matches. (The bit about corners probably had the biggest impact in that regard.) It seems all a bit too basic still, even compared to Bill James relatively unsophisticated research given the data baseball sabermetricians can use today, but despite that remains recommended for the thinking football fan.

Abhinav says

"The Numbers Game" by Chris Anderson & David Sally has quite a few insightful observations & interesting theories about football (0>1 or the 58>73>79 substitution rule, to name a couple of them that

spring to mind) but mostly gives the impression of being a handbook for propagating the concept of 'Moneyball' into the workings of the Beautiful Game as well.

Nevertheless, this book should appeal to aficianados of football statistics & analytics, akin to the kind of insight provided by Simon Kuper & Stefan Szymanski's "Soccernomics". Recommended.

Gumble's Yard says

The book is packed with interesting insights (some confirmatory, others counter-intuitive) backed by third party or the authors' own analysis.

Examples include: 3 point for a win encouraged long clearances and yellow cards not goals; a clear recognition that the beauty of football is the rareness and decisiveness of goals (and an excellent comparison to scores and chances of favourite winning in other sports); that key statistics (corners, shots, long passes, short passes, fouls) are identical across major leagues; corners only produce a goal every 45 or so corners; ; that possession and not losing it is important and that Stoke play a possession game, just one based on possessing the ball out of play; that in a game the weakest link is as important as the strongest player (especially as natural ability starts to come up against a barrier) but that over a squad and season having a range of abilities is optimal if the strongest players can inspire the weaker ones: having an ex player as a manager works where the player is of a better standard than the team he coaches; that sacking a manager produces an apparent upturn in results but that this is simply mean reversion and would be replicated by not sacking the manager; that an average player has possession of the ball for less than a minute.

However what is disappointing (at least in the early stages of the book) is that the authors are guilty of either incorrect or at the least sloppy characterisations of many of their findings.

Examples include: describing football as a game of 50/50 when that actually means 50 percent is luck and 50 percent skill (so more like 75/25); stating that the best team only wins a little over half the time, but ignoring the draws (at one stage they quote a finding from a very different study that the worse team wins 45 percent of the time as being the same thing); saying that 1 goal equates to 1 point on average means a goal "virtually guarantees a point. Similarly some of their recommendations are unrealistic – for example that teams should not allow a new manager to have any new players to as to produce a controlled experiment on their skill.

Interesting analysis of football – as well as reproducing lots of insights as above the book has a strong theme about the growth of data and analytics (interestingly its closing contention is that the next generation weaned on football simulations will think this is automatic – AVB being one manager who apparently learnt his skills this way).
