TEACHING THE ECONOMICS OF SPORTS

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IT’S NOT JUST ANOTHER ELECTIVE

• Sports has an appeal that other sub-fields lack
• Monetary theory does not have a segment on the local news
• It is a way to attract students
  • Generates credit hours in itself
  • Stimulates interest in the major
• But –
  • It shares difficulties with other sub-fields
  • It has a unique set of problems
OUTLINE

• Preliminaries – how to structure your approach to the material
• Students – confronting a unique set of challenges
• Technology – proves to be particularly useful in a sports class
• Inclusion/exclusion – sport serves as a metaphor for society
WHAT IS THE COURSE ABOUT?
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• Is it a course about sports?
  • Use economic tools to analyze sports
  • Structure the course around sports, leagues or teams
    • Why is the NFL so much more successful than the NHL?
  • Sports analytics
    • Is James Harden overrated?
WHAT IS THE COURSE ABOUT?

• Is it a course about sports?
  • Use economic tools to analyze sports
  • Structure the course around sports, leagues or teams
  • Sports analytics – Is James Harden overrated?

• Is it a course about economics?
  • Use sports as a Trojan horse to teach economics
  • Structure the course around economic concepts
  • The industrial organization/public finance/labor economics of sports
MAKE YOUR CHOICE KNOWN!

“I promised her I wouldn't talk sports at least until the reception.”
TEXTBOOKS

• At least 4 textbooks emphasize the *Economics* of sports
  • Blair; Fort; Kesenne; Leeds, von Allmen, and Matheson
  • All cover IO and Labor
  • Kesenne does not cover PF – perhaps because it is Euro-centric?
• Whatever you choose – it will be obsolete by the time you use it
  • 2020 alone saw: the 2020 Olympics cancelled – and “Russia” banned; brief strikes in several major sports; and two franchises’ changing their names
  • Teaching only from the textbook is not an option!
SETTING EXPECTATIONS

• Particularly important in this course

• Many (mostly male) students are overconfident because they think:
  • The course will be easy because they are big sports fans
  • We will spend the class talking about the local sports team

• Many (mostly female) students are terrified because they think:
  • They will fail because they do not know the infield fly rule

• You must warn/assure them that they will be tested on the Economics
DEALING WITH DIVERSE SKILLS

• One of the joys of the course is the wide range of students it attracts
• This also means that you have huge differences in interests and skills
  • MathEcon majors who want to develop a new sports analytics algorithm
  • Journalism majors who want to be sports reporters
  • English majors who are on the gymnastics team
• You must develop a class that will interest and challenge all of them
• You should plan on spending a lot of time in office hours
TECHNOLOGY: GETTING STUDENTS UP TO SPEED

• Students often have forgotten or never knew basic concepts
  • This is a problem for all electives
  • But it is especially acute here
  • Time spent reviewing basic theory is time not spent on course material

• One solution – record “mini-lectures”

• Give an incentive with short quizzes on LMS
  • Due before the relevant class
TECHNOLOGY:
FILM CLIPS

• They can impress economic concepts
  • Rank-order tournaments: Kevin Costner’s monologue in *Bull Durham*

• They can make the past more immediate
  • Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* as an introduction to the “Nazi” Olympics
  • Chart racial attitudes in boxing with Jack Johnson and Louis v. Schmeling

• They can be an entertaining “ice-breaker”
  • George Carlin on baseball v. football
TECHNOLOGY: ACCESS TO DATA

• Sports have abundant data

• This makes empirical papers easy to assign
  • Economics of Sports can be a good “writing intensive” course
  • But diverse skills even greater when it comes to econometrics

• One good “middle ground”: *pechakucha*
  • A stylized slide presentation
  • 20 slides for 20 seconds each
  • Only pictures - no words – I amend to allow 4 slides with data/graphs
  • Best for small classes
EXPANDING STUDENTS’ HORIZONS

• Most students are US-centric
  • They know little about foreign sports or foreign societies
  • If they know any foreign sport – it is likely the English Premier League

• Sports can introduce students to foreign cultures

• Example – Nippon Professional Baseball can teach students about Japan
  • Why can NPB games end in ties?
  • Why does experience play such a large role in NPB salaries?
  • Why don’t most NPB teams have cities in their names?
TACKLING DIFFICULT ISSUES

• Sports have allowed me to treat discrimination in an “arms-length” manner
  • Kahn and Scherer (1988) on racial discrimination in the NBA
  • Students responded very enthusiastically

• There are, sadly, always new examples
  • Black Lives Matter
  • Franchise name changes

• One issue that has affected my outlook – gender identification
  • Need for a binary classification
  • Runners like Castor Semenya and Dutte Chand do not fit easily