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Difference Makers In The Playoffs: Key Positions

By Paul Mroczka

In baseball, hockey, football, and basketball, there are key positions that tend to be the dealmaker

or breaker when the game is on the line. This doesn't negate the fact that the four sports are true team efforts, with each position and player being important. Still, there are certain positions that more times than not are central in controlling the game when everything is at stake.

If you're into wagering, understanding the importance of these positions in each game will give you an edge when analyzing teams or performing head to head evaluations. In this article, we're going to focus on two positions from each sport, considering why they're so important when it comes to big game performance.

BASKETBALL:

In basketball the central positions are point guard and center. Both call for very different players in terms of skills and physical make-up. Fans also perceive them differently, with the center drawing the most focus and the point guard often being overlooked.

Although point guards shoot the ball, it's not their primary responsibility. Point guards run the offense when the team is on the court and for this reason this player must have good basketball sense and instincts and an ability to see the entire floor.

Thinking of the point guard as being a quarterback or an on-court coach may help you understand this position. To be successful, this guard has to possess the qualities of a QB or a head basketball coach. They must be calm under pressure, be able to read defenses and improvise in a split second.

Skills must include an ability to make plays by passing, dishing off, and penetrating the defense. The point guard needs quick hands and feet as he often controls the tempo of the game. An ability to make quick, seamless transitions when going from offense to defense is essential. The point guard is the ultimate, unselfish player whose importance and contributions are often overlooked by spectators.

Difference Makers In The Playoffs: Key Positions

When one thinks, "Center," they usually envision a tall, big and dominant player. Great centers are good ball handlers, aggressive rebounders, and tough mentally. They actually have to be a little selfish, using their powerful position to control the boards. A center should be able to hit a mid-court jump shot. On defense, it's the player in the center position who becomes the quarterback. Defensive rebounds are essential, which means the player in this position must be able to box out, be a strong jumper, and control the ball in tight situations.

If a team features both a premiere point guard and a strong center, chances are, if the game is close, they'll have a good chance of winning it in the end. Take a second look at one-on-one match-ups in these important positions before wagering.

BASEBALL:

In a game of ball, it really comes down to pitching. It's true that the thrills are often when the ball is put in play or poked over the fence. The sports moment considered by many to be the greatest of all time

occurred on October 21, 1972, in the 72nd World Series when Carlton Fisk hit Pat Darcy's slider around the Green Monster foul pole in the bottom of the 12th inning. Fisk was a hero—yes. But the fact was Darcy's arm was aching and tired. He had nothing left in him. It was as much a poor performance by Darcy as it was a clutch play by the Boston catcher.

In baseball, you're considered to be a great hitter if in every ten at bats you get three hits. That figure alone denotes the dominant position pitching holds in a game where the hurler stands above everyone else on his mound. If a pitcher is on, even the best batsman will have a tough time hitting him.

Then there are the names we give these commanding players—the stopper and the closer. A stopper is a starting pitcher who has the reputation of being able to "stop" a team's losing streak. Think Roger Clemens, Bartolo Colon, or Pedro Martinez, to name a few. Stoppers give their team confidence, because the other players know that all they need is a minimum number of runs to win. One guy can control the outcome of a nine or 10-player game when the stopper is due to pitch.

Perhaps the most successful closer over the last 10 years has been the New York Yankee's Mariano Rivera. For most of his career when he's come into a game in the ninth inning with a one run lead, the game was over. Still, when a final inning thrower can't close the deal, the loss goes to him, while the win goes to the other team.

Solid pitching wins championships and that means a team with a stable of starters who can go deep into the game and a "lights out" closer is almost impossible to beat.

HOCKEY:

Check out a goaltender's save percentage and average goals allowed per game and you'll get a good idea of a team's chances of winning. Of course in order to be successful, a goalie needs some heads-up defensemen. But if a tender has allowed a low number of goals in the net and saved a high percentage of shots, chances are his ability to step up in pressure situations has been the key. If a

Difference Makers In The Playoffs: Key Positions

goalie notches a ninety-percent save rate and 1.9 goals against, then that's someone you can bet on.

The other thing about a great net minder is if his team knows he's going to keep them in the game, they will gain confidence and believe that they can win. Great goaltending also frustrates opponents, making them press harder and taking them out of their game.

The second position, and this one creates a new dynamic in the offensive zone, is the center. Centers need to be able to win face-offs, lead the transition quickly from defense to offense, and create scoring opportunities by both shooting and passing. In hockey, passing and getting an assist is as important as scoring a goal (there's a reason a player gets a point for either an assist or a goal—they're both essential to winning).

Center Wayne Gretzky—the Great One—ended his amazing career with 894 goals and 1,963 assists—about a 1 to 2 ratio. When evaluating centers look for that goal to assist relationship; it says the team has a real playmaker that can create game winning situations in numerous ways.

FOOTBALL:

Football is a complex game of strategy, patterns, planning, and improvisation. In baseball everyone comes in contact with the ball. It's the same for basketball, and in hockey all players manipulate the

puck.

Football's a whole other game. There's an entire group of players on the gridiron that rarely touch the ball; in fact if they do come in contact with it, chances are something has gone wrong. The one position that always has contact with the football is quarterback.

The QB is typically the playmaker. He must be able to comprehend a changing situation, analyze it, and react to it. In the 2006 playoffs, Peyton Manning had a difficult time adjusting to surprises created by the Pittsburgh Steelers, taking him out of his game. Quarterbacks who have a reputation for staying calm under pressure include New England's Tom Brady and Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger, while Dallas signal caller Drew Bledsoe's gaffs have actually inspired the term "a Bledsoe moment." A Bledsoe Moment occurs when pressure is at its greatest and the QB has a chance to win the game, only to fumble, throw an interception, or get sacked.

The other player who often has the game in his hands, or rather on the tip of his toe, is the field goal kicker. The Colts' Mike Vanderjagt missed a game tying kick against Pittsburgh in the 2006 playoff game, which Indianapolis lost. Former Patriot and now Colt, Adam Vinatieri is considered to be the ultimate big game, pressure kicker because of his numerous last moment playoff field goals that have won games.

Ironically, field goal kickers probably have more single moment pressure on them than quarterbacks. Consider the fact that when a kicker comes out on the field, they have usually been put in a position by the offense to score. It's expected that they will score. If they miss, they've lost an opportunity. If a quarterback throws an incompleting on second down, he's got another chance to make good; if a

kicker shanks his field goal, there's no second chance.

To be a high–pressure kicker, the player does not have to be a great athlete, but he does need to be an accurate kicker with a strong leg. The other requirement is an ability to focus and perform under extreme stress. In fact, the player really has to relish being in that situation.

Kickers usually either possess or don't possess this ability. This quality links kickers with goaltenders and closers. In each of their individual sports, these players are considered to be a unique breed—able to be completely calm while performing at optimum levels under unrelenting stress.

Next time you're comparing teams, especially in playoff and tournament situations, look closely at the specific positions that we've highlighted. More often than not the performance of these players will be the difference between victory and defeat.

This article was written by Paul Mroczka for

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The NFL Needs a New Tie–Breaker

By Terry Mitchell

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After enduring that disgusting final weekend of the NFL season, I have come to the conclusion that a new tie–breaker is needed. How a team performs during the final weekend should be the first tie–breaker, with all the current tie–breakers falling in line after that. A team that won its final game would hold the first tie–breaker advantage against a team they're tied with that lost its final game. If they both lost, both won, or both tied their final game, then the current tie–breakers would take effect in the order that they currently exist. That would accomplish at least three of positive things.

First, a team with a one game lead for a playoff spot, headed into the final weekend, would have more difficulty "backing in" to the playoffs the way Minnesota did this year. By all rights, New Orleans should have made the playoffs instead of the Vikings. They finished with identical records. However, the Saints won their final game, while the Vikings lost theirs. In fact, under the NFL's current crazy tie–breaker system, the Vikings' loss, while ultimately not damaging their own playoff hopes, ironically

Difference Makers In The Playoffs: Key Positions

was one of the major factors that kept the Saints out of the playoffs! Under my proposed rule, the Saints would have been in and the Vikings would have been out.

Second, it would keep more playoff berths/positions open going into the final weekend and maintain more excitement and suspense all the way to the end. Currently, a team with a one game lead for a playoff berth, bye, home field advantage, and/or seeding can have that position clinched before the final weekend if they own the tie-breaker over the team(s) they lead. Under my proposal, that would not be possible. That position would still be open through the final weekend of the season. For example, the Pittsburgh Steelers would not have clinched the home field advantage in the AFC until they beat Buffalo in the final weekend, instead of having it already clinched going into that game.

Third, it would also keep teams with one game leads from having de-facto "byes" during the final weekend. Take Indianapolis for example. The Colts' game against Denver this weekend was meaningless to them, even though it meant everything to the Broncos. Although the Colts had only a one game lead over San Diego for the number three seed in the AFC, they owned the tie-breaker over the Chargers. I don't care what anyone says, the Colts, with their lack of effort, effectively rolled over and allowed the Broncos to win, which wasn't fair to Jacksonville and Baltimore, the teams competing with the Broncos for the final AFC playoff spot. Under my proposal, the Colts would have had to win to maintain their third seed in the playoffs.

Terry Mitchell is a software engineer, freelance writer, and trivia buff from Hopewell, VA. He also serves as a political columnist for American Daily and operates his own website – <http://www.commenterry.com> – on which he posts commentaries on various subjects such as politics, technology, religion, health and well-being, personal finance, and sports. His commentaries offer a unique point of view that is not often found in mainstream media.



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