



Introduction to Sports Wagering

A Seven-Part Series by Hansel Wei

Part Five – Giving Yourself the Inside Advantage

A lot of people like to play up sports wagering as a field ruled by experts, where it's impossible to beat the people who know what they're doing. The truth of the matter is that all the tools you need to get a leg up on the competition are right at your fingertips. Think of making sports wagers as studying for a test: bettors who wager on "instinct" or "feel" are going into the test cold, when a little studying can go a long way.

The Inside Advantage is available to anyone looking in the right places. It doesn't require any crystal balls or voodoo. Here are some of the types of things that most people wouldn't think to read up on before they wager, but can make a big difference:

Injury reports – We all knew about it when Terrell Owens got hurt in 2004, but how many people know about it when a defensive linebacker leaves the game with a strained muscle? Browse at least one newspaper for injury reports, and you'll start to get an idea of which teams are hurting, which teams have guys sitting out, which teams have guys coming back from injuries, and so on. Read multiple game recaps, because different news sources will consider different aspects of a game important and report them. Another source for this information is team websites. Everyone is going to hear about it when a star player goes down, but if a lesser-known starter has to sit out and an inexperienced replacement has to take his place, it could be just as important.

Watch out for the "day-to-day" listing. "Day-to-day" is a professional sports team's way of hiding their cards and revealing very little about a player's situation. "Day-to-day" could be something relatively minor, but it could also be Shaquille O'Neal playing on a bruised knee at about 40% effectiveness. By listing their player as "day-to-day" teams keep their opponents guessing, but unfortunately, many bettors assume that when a day-to-day player ends up suiting up, he will be at 100%. Particular when the player in question is a key contributor, and *especially* if that player has a history of injury, think twice before you wager on their team.

Game Previews – Make an effort to read multiple previews of upcoming matchups you're considering wagering on. It is particularly important to read at least one preview written on each side; that is, if the Lakers and the Celtics are playing, don't just rely on what the Lakers' beat writers have to say or what is reported on the team website. Beat writers are specifically told by their team's management to play down negative aspects of the team. However, in game previews, they may touch on some negative aspects of the *other* team that can be valuable. Get both sides of the equation.

It deserves a brief mention that a serious bettor should *never* put too much stock in how a player assesses his team's chances. In today's era of attitudes and trash-talking, most players will be extreme optimists when asked by the media for predictions. However, pay attention for when players "call out" opponents or otherwise insult them. Players who talk with fire about their opponents often get burned.

Emotional Factors – How much a team wants to win is often very underrated. Clinching a playoff berth or keeping a team in the hunt for the post-season is important to take note of, especially in instances where the opponent has already clinched their division or secured a playoff berth, or conversely, in instances where the other team has been eliminated for weeks and has no reason to play hard.

Another emotional factor is revenge. Did someone from one team slam the other team in the media leading up to the game? Did one team win a heart-stopping overtime thriller the last time the two teams met? Do the teams have a history of meeting up in the playoffs?

Perhaps the most famous rivalry in sports today is between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees. In the summer after the Red Sox came from three games down against the Yankees to win the pennant and eventually the World Series, it was revealed that the opening game to the 2005 season would feature the two teams at Yankee Stadium. Immediately this became a great game to bet on the Yankees. This was long before any free agent signings or injuries had a chance to affect which players would actually take the field that day, but regardless, the Yankees were an excellent bet. This only increased when the Red Sox players began ripping the Yankees (particularly Alex Rodriguez) in the media in the months that followed. The Yankees had all winter to think back to the painful loss and to fume over the insults from the World Series champs, and as predicted, they came out firing, chalking up a 9-2 victory on 15 hits. When the two teams played again in Boston a week later, the Red Sox were presented with their championship rings before the game. As one might have predicted, the Red Sox were motivated by their home crowd, the championship ring ceremony, and the painful loss the week earlier, and thrashed their rivals 8-1.

A brief comment should be made about home advantage and road disadvantage. In the long run in the NFL, home-field advantage has been shown to be worth about 2.5 points. However, bettors should be aware of teams that have particularly rowdy home crowds, or particularly poor home crowds. In their final season, the Montreal Expos played in front of a home stadium that would routinely have 80% of the seats empty. Not surprisingly, the team went 35-45 at home and finished last in the National League East division. However, if a team has a particularly good home crowd, it can make an immense difference. Take the 2003-04 Sacramento Kings, for instance. The Kings developed a reputation as having one of the toughest arenas to play in as a visiting team, and their record proved it. The Kings went 34-7 at home that season, making them the best home team in the NBA, compared with their unimpressive 21-20 record on the road. While the Kings were certainly a good team, they were almost unbeatable at home.

Particularly in today's era of ever-increasing salaries, a final emotional factor that should be considered is impending free agency. When a player is in his "contract year,"

he will often respond with career numbers, especially in the playoffs. Carlos Beltran, formerly of the Houston Astros, presents a perfect example. In the 2004 playoffs, Beltran almost single-handedly led his team to the doorstep of the World Series, losing in seven games to the St. Louis Cardinals. During the Astros' playoff run, Beltran clobbered eight home runs and a whopping 18 hits, which went a long way to securing him a maximum deal from the New York Mets. When it comes to the playoffs, don't underestimate how badly soon-to-be free agents will want to impress potential employers.

Finally, a brief word about an emotional element that might not be quite as important as it's often played up to be: all-time histories. Almost every news outlet reporting on a game will bring up the all-time record between a club, and while it's a cool statistic, bettors should not pay attention to anything other than at most the past one or two seasons when making wagers. In today's era of free agency and blockbuster trades, it is uncommon for the core of a team to remain in place longer than one or two seasons. If none of the same players remain with either team, what does it matter whether Team A is 13-2 against Team B since 1986? Statistics can be a friend or an enemy; don't be fooled into making a bad decision because of a meaningless number.

Until next time, do yourself a favor...

Keep doing things Hansel's Wei.