

## A Sad Way to decide a series

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I am a Cavalier's fan living in Israel. Because of the time difference, I need to get up around 5:30 am Israel time (which is 10:30 pm EDT in the US) to watch the second half of the NBA playoff games. But this is the NBA finals, so I planned to watch every game despite the early hour.

After game 1, I never watched another second of the series!

Many other fans tuned out as well – and many who remained lamented that the series was boring. I did not tune out because of boredom. I turned out because of the highly questionable referee decision near the end of the game one.

Game one of the NBA finals could have been one the best games in the NBA finals in the last 30 years. If the Cavaliers had won, the headline would have been something like:

“Lebron's superhuman play propels Cavaliers to historic game one upset.”

However, it did not happen. Instead, a highly questionable referee decision based on an absurd rule essentially gave the game to the Warriors.

The rule is that a charging/blocking call can be reviewed in the last two minutes of a close game if the referees first check to see if the defensive player was in the restricted area.

It is clear that the rule should be changed. The referees should only determine whether or not a player was in the restricted area. Hopefully the NBA will change the rule this summer.

But back to the call. It was strange to even review the play, since LeBron clearly was out of the restricted area when the collision took place.

However, even after the review, the initial call should have stood. Why? There was not conclusive video evidence to reverse the call.

Steve Javie, a respected former NBA referee, remarked on National Television that the charge should stand because in his opinion, Lebron was in a legal guarding position. Others shared that opinion as well.

The point is that the video evidence is not conclusive. Hence, the original call should have been upheld.

The National Football League (NFL) gets it right in the way it conducts reviews. In NFL reviews, there are three possible outcomes:

1. The call is clearly confirmed by visual evidence
2. The call is clearly overturned by visual evidence
3. The ruling on the field “stands,” because there is not indisputable vide evidence to reverse a call.

In this case, with all that was riding on this game and the lack of indisputable video evidence, the referees should have allowed the call to stand. This was not a pre-season game or a regular season game. This was the NBA Finals after all.

Is such a review conducted often? A “FiveThirtyEight” sports” article<sup>1</sup> quoting The Pudding’s Raw “Last Two Minute” report data, says that the NBA has reviewed 32 block/charge calls near the restricted area in close games since March 2015, and just nine were overturned. That is nine reversed calls in three years. Although I could not find the data, my guess is that there was NEVER such a review and reversal in the playoffs.

And how much did it matter? We will never know for sure. However, an article from Zack Kram in the Ringer from April 18, 2018 presents interesting data on the importance of game one.<sup>2</sup>

From the data in his article, since the playoff field expanded to 16 teams in 1983-84, teams that hosted Game 1 and won that game went on to win the series **86** percent of the time. For teams that hosted Game 1 and lost that game, only **44** percent won the series.

That is, on average, the probability of winning a series swings by more than 40% depending on the outcome of game one. That is a lot!

It is important to understand that the whole complexion of the series changed following that call. Everything that happened afterwards might have been different had the Cavaliers won game one. To have a referee call essentially determine which path we go down is very unfortunate.

Think about something else. Golden State is not used to losing the first game of a playoff series. In the sixteen (playoff) series in which they played in last four years, Golden State lost game one just ONCE. That was against Oklahoma City in 2016. They did come back to win that series after being down 3-1, but the point is that maybe the game one loss changed the way that series played out.

Maybe Golden State would have been flustered had they lost game one to the Cavaliers this year. Maybe not. However, we will never know.

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<sup>1</sup> See “Everything Was Strange About Game 1 — Except The JR Smith Gaffe,” by Chris Herring, available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/everything-was-strange-about-game-1-except-the-j-r-smith-gaffe/>

<sup>2</sup> The data are from Zack Kram’s article in the Ringer, available at <https://www.theringer.com/nba-playoffs/2018/4/18/17250494/lebron-james-cavaliers-pacers-game-1-loss>

