Batting First Versus Last: Implications for the Home Advantage

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During regular season competition, the phenomenon of home advantage has been shown to exist for all major team sports at both the college and professional levels. For example, Schwartz and Barsky (1977) found a favorable home win percentage of 53% in professional baseball, 58% in professional football, 60% in college football, 64% in college basketball, and 64% in professional hockey. Similarly, Edwards (1979) reported a home win percentage of 54% in professional football, 59% in college football, and 56% in professional baseball. The most dramatic effect was reported by Varca (1980), who found that college basketball teams won 70% of their home games. And finally, in a comprehensive study across a wide cross-section of sports, Pollard (1986) observed that home teams had a winning percentage of 54% in professional baseball, 55% in professional football, 56% in English league cricket, 60% in professional hockey, 63% in professional basketball, 64% in professional soccer (England), and 65% in professional soccer (North America).

In an attempt to provide some rationale for this consistent pattern of results, Schwartz and Barsky (1977) offered three general explanations: learning factors, travel factors, and crowd factors. The learning explanation evolves around the home team’s familiarity with the playing surface and its component parts, which is gained through numerous practices and games. The travel explanation refers to the fact that visiting teams experience fatigue and a disruption in their routine because of extensive travel. The third explanation, crowd factors, refers to the positive reinforcement and social support the home team receives from its partisans.

Three additional possibilities were advanced by Pollard (1986): referee bias, the use of special defensive tactics by the visiting team, and a self-fulfilling belief in the home advantage. These appear to be practical manifestations of the previous explanations rather than explanations themselves. Referee bias may result from an official’s personal identification with a particular team or from intimidation by a boisterous crowd.

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Insofar as the use of special tactics is concerned, visiting teams are often accused of playing a defensive or conservative game in order to moderate the effects of the home advantage factors (e.g., take the crowd out of the game, become familiar with the playing facilities, not allow fatigue to play a part). But these defensive tactics can inhibit a team’s ability to perform offensively. For example, a hockey team that continually shoots the puck out of its own end to avoid an opponent’s offensive pressure is not able to score points for itself. A self-fulfilling belief in the home advantage probably stems from the personal perception of athletes that playing at home does make a difference.

Another possible explanation for the home advantage may be that in some sports the nature of the rules explicitly favor the home team. For example, in baseball the home team has preferential practice times on game day, the opportunity to submit its player roster last, the opportunity to bat last, and enforcement of the home league’s designated hitter rule in the World Series.

Due to the difficulties in controlling home advantage variables, most conclusions on their relative importance have been inferential. For example, Schwartz and Barsky (1977) have argued that home advantage is almost totally unrelated to travel factors; for instance, if fatigue is an important factor, the home advantage should be greatest during the second half of the season when the negative effects of travel accumulate. However, when they compared first-half to second-half season data, Schwartz and Barsky found that this was not the case.

Schwartz and Barsky (1977) also argued that the learning factors are unimportant because their analysis showed that the home advantage was more pronounced where conditions of play are most uniform (e.g., in basketball and hockey). As a result, they concluded that the psychological factors such as crowd support are most important in contributing to the home advantage.

An inferential approach was also used by Pollard (1986) to dismiss a number of possible explanations for the home advantage. For example, he suggested that the visiting team’s fatigue is unimportant to the home advantage—a view that is consistent with Schwartz and Barsky’s (1977)—because “travel for professional soccer has become progressively faster and more comfortable over the years, but home advantage . . . has not changed at all since 1946” (p. 245). In contrast to the conclusions of Schwartz and Barsky, Pollard eliminated crowd support as the most important factor for the home advantage, stating, “there is little evidence that the size of the crowd affects the magnitude of home advantage. In baseball and especially American football, with large vociferous audiences, home advantage is no greater than in County Championship cricket in England where crowd support is virtually non-existent” (p. 245). Through a process of elimination, Pollard suggested that learning factors may be the most important determinant of home advantage. However, he also acknowledged that this explanation is only inferential and not easily tested.

As mentioned earlier, a major limitation in the conclusions concerning the etiology of home advantage is that they are inferential. Because of the nature of the situations examined, there was no opportunity to control any of the home advantage variables. What is needed is a systematic evaluation of the home advantage explanations in order to determine the validity and relative contribution of each.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of rule factors on the home advantage in slo-pitch softball. Specifically, archival data were used