

Professional athletes perform better against their former clubs, according to research

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Credit: Ben Sutherland / Wikimedia Commons

A team of Russian researchers affiliated with the HSE University, RANEPA, and NES has found professional athletes to perform better against their former clubs. At least in some circumstances, emotions seem to have a greater effect on their performance than knowledge of the opponent's tactics. The study's findings are published in the *Journal of Behavioural and Experimental Economics* and may be useful for

coaches, sports managers, and bookmakers.

By hiring a competitor's former employee, companies bring in their social capital, knowledge and skills, potentially weakening the competition. Since measuring employee performance may be difficult in a typical business environment, this study examined the sphere of professional sports, where such data is abundant, to track changes in athletes' performance against their former teams.

The study used econometric models on game data of the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Hockey League (NHL), and six major European football leagues, available from the NBA.com, Hockey-Reference and Understat. The authors examined player performance data over time, taking into account history of transactions and players' matches against their former clubs. The variables included the dates and venues of the games, players' home and opposing teams, playing time, basic individual game statistics, and several more advanced performance indicators.

Artur Assanskiy, Daniil Shaposhnikov, Igor Tylkin, and Gleb Vasiliev found [professional athletes](#) to show better individual attacking performance in matches against their former clubs. Basketball players scored more points, ice hockey players made more shots, as did footballers in the English Premier League, while footballers in the Italian Championship scored more often. The researchers assumed that the knowledge of opponents' tactics and the additional motivation both contributed to athletes' better performance against former clubs. While these two factors are likely to complement each other, the researchers ultimately found emotions to prevail over a better understanding of the other team's game.

Playing against former teammates can be a source of additional motivation for athletes. According to American football defensive tackle

Barry Cofield, "Realistically, it's not like any other game, especially when you first play that former team." These matches arouse strong emotions, causing athletes to give the game their best. Apparently, emotions such as anxiety and anger have the greatest effect on loaned athletes' performance.

Individual success can matter more to transferred players than their overall team's victory. They perform better in quantitative rather than qualitative terms, i.e., they make more shots but not necessarily more accurate shots. These athletes tend to act selfishly, choosing to shoot rather than pass, making them less team players.

The athletes performed better against former teammates in venues that used to be their home stadiums compared to new venues: [basketball players](#) took more shots, hockey players shot more pucks. According to the researchers, this may indirectly indicate the effect of emotions rather than knowledge of the opponents' tactics, since the latter would have helped players perform just as well in their current home stadium.

Basketballers and English Premier League footballers who had been given little playing time in their former teams made more shots in matches against them. Likewise, hockey players shot more pucks against their former club if they had been given secondary roles and moderate playing time there. The results reaffirm that motivation and emotions are the key factors affecting these elite athletes' performance. Those who felt they had been treated unfairly by former coaches were more committed to proving them wrong. The circumstances of the players' transfer, i.e., whether they were waived or had to accept a wage reduction, also played a role.

The effects found by examining [competitive sports](#) may be applicable to most situations involving an employee's performance in competition against their former employer and can thus be relevant to sociology and

management theory.

"Employees are motivated to perform better against their former employers. Situations in which one's former and current employers compete are not limited to sports but include bidding for contracts, power struggles between political parties, and marketing campaigns. An additionally motivated employee can turn things around in such confrontations and increase their current employer's chances of success," according to HSE Laboratory of Sports Studies researchers.

Coaches can benefit from a better understanding of player motivations by changing game tactics when someone on their team plays against their former club. Sports managers should keep future matches in mind when they sell or loan players to a competitor, and bookmakers could use these findings to adjust betting odds.

More information: Artur Assanskiy et al, Prove them wrong: Do professional athletes perform better when facing their former clubs?, *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socec.2022.101879](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socec.2022.101879)

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