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Houston's streak a matter of Rocket science



Tracy McGrady (1) and the Houston Rockets go for their 22nd second straight win Sunday afternoon against the Los Angeles Lakers. (Matt Slocum/The Associated Press / March 15, 2008)



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When you ask Daryl Morey a question - such as, why have the [Houston Rockets](#) won 21 consecutive games? - you get the feeling he is punching numbers into a multi-dimensional statistical grid before he gives the answer.

And that's not too far from the truth for the 35-year-old general manager who has brought "Moneyball" to the [NBA](#).

The Rockets are good. Only Morey knows how good they are. And trust me, he knows precisely.

"If someone asked you how warm it is and you didn't have a thermometer, you might not be able to tell if it was 98 degrees or 95 degrees," Morey said. "Quantitative analysis can sometimes figure that out, and that small difference means winning and losing."

Morey knows what the temperature of his team is at all times, and right now it is scorching. The Rockets will go for their 22nd consecutive win Sunday against the [Los Angeles Lakers](#), in large part due to a revolutionary approach that Morey has pioneered.

He is the leader of a new breed of NBA executives who don't trust what their eyes see unless the numbers bear it out.

When a trade proposal comes his way hours before the deadline, Morey can instantly punch up hundreds

of statistical comparisons that help him pinpoint whether Kirk Snyder-for- [Gerald Green](#) is a good deal. When he's on the clock at the draft, Morey has already reviewed hours of precisely catalogued video to help him determine whether Carl Landry will be just another sap or Paul Millsap.

He has a computer science degree from Northwestern and an MBA from MIT. Though the jury is still out on his PhD in NBA, Morey is forcing other teams to rethink how they evaluate and acquire players.

"Until we win titles, I don't think we really deserve tons of credit or to have people focused on what we're doing too much," Morey said.

His competitors, however, are taking notice.

Three years ago, only four NBA teams subscribed to an over-the-top data and video collection service provided by Synergy Sports Technology - Miami, Indiana, Dallas, and Boston, where Morey was working as an operations guy. Last year it was nine, and this year 20 of the 30 NBA teams are clients. The other 10 better climb aboard.

Synergy, founded by former Suns video coordinator Garrick Barr, has 11 full-time employees and about 80 loggers who pull down every NBA game from satellite TV and log statistics and video from each and every play. Within a half hour of the final buzzer, coaches and scouts can download streaming video of every offensive and defensive possession to a laptop or mobile device.

By noon the next day, teams have what Barr describes as a "boxscore on steroids" with hundreds of sequences cataloged with accompanying video. With a click, they can watch every one of [Eddy Curry's](#) post moves from the right block, or every one of [Zach Randolph's](#) turnovers from the left block.

[The Knicks](#) began subscribing to the service this season, a fact I warned Barr he might not want to advertise.

"This is their first year with it," Barr said. "You know it takes a while for this stuff to take effect."

Morey also uses another statistical service founded by his friend and former co-worker in the financial consulting business. When he was working for [the Celtics](#), Morey lured Dartmouth MBA Matt Marolda into the sports world to create computer applications for his data. Stratbridge Inc. was born and is now used by about half the teams in the NBA.

Case in point: Morey's analysis told him that Luis Scola was responsible for extra possessions, and thus extra points, when he was on the floor in international play. Once he watched all the video to confirm how he did it, acquiring Scola from the Spurs last summer was a no-brainer. The Argentine power forward has been one of the biggest reasons for the Rockets' success.

All this analysis hasn't replaced human scouting. But Morey, a disciple of baseball stat guru Bill James and a close friend of "Moneyball" GMs Billy Beane and Theo Epstein, wouldn't think of trying to win 22 in a row without it.

"You can give someone an unlimited gift card to [Home Depot](#)," Marolda said, "but that doesn't mean they can build a house."

At least the Rockets have poured the foundation and have the right tools.

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