FOREWORD

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Sports analytics experts understand that The Game is still human. It is why they got into the field in the first place. It is what all the formulas, numbers, and analyses are about—measuring, managing, and making the most of the *people* who get to play The Game.

That may not be explicit in Ben Alamar's book, but it is implicit. He was a sports fan who was analytically inclined. I was, too. We rooted for teams and players. A lot of people like us wanted to play sports at the highest level but ran out of physical gifts somewhere below that. The passion to do something competitive, to understand and improve on The Game—that kept us watching. The ability to understand data, work with data, and think analytically about sports—that is what created the field that Ben is writing about.

Sports analytics didn't exist as a real job description until long after it was a job for people like Bill James, Pete Palmer, and Tom Tango. They, among others, took to writing about baseball and using numbers to better understand players and tactics roughly in the 1970s. There were other books about numbers in other sports that followed, but these failed to achieve the following of the baseball books. People like Ben read those, learned what to do and what not to do.

The Internet came about in the mid-1990s and allowed so many more people to write, people who may not have had connections to

other people but had connections to the world electronically. And many of them had ideas for sports. A lot of sports fans produced websites. A few of those sports fans produced the science of sports analytics that you will see here.

Ben Alamar was an economist who found himself in a fortunate position. That MIT kid who went to Vegas and played blackjack—that was Jeff Ma, and he started up an Internet site when everyone was making gobs of money on Internet sites. His site involved bringing a number of sports minds together to try to build a marketplace essentially for trading fantasy players. He wanted an economist, and Ben was in the Bay Area where all this was coming together. Ben got his taste of sports and how he could apply his economist tools to it, and he found a direction. Though that original company disappeared long ago, it provided Ben with connections and the beginning of a reputation.

He and I didn't meet in the real-world sense for a while after this, but we knew of each other through work we posted online. He applied his tools to data on NBA draft picks. He worked with people on football-player evaluation. And our paths nearly intersected when I left the Seattle Supersonics to join the Denver Nuggets. The person who followed me in Seattle was Ben Alamar. He was part of the organization as they became the Oklahoma City Thunder of Kevin Durant, Russell Westbrook, and James Harden. No one person ever takes full credit for team success—that's part of sports analytics—but Ben was part of important decisions that led to the success of this organization.

Since those early days, we have been rivals and allies, something that happens in the birth of an industry. We competed as part of opposing NBA teams before it was popular to do analytics in basketball. We worked together to build the Total Quarterback Rating that is on much of ESPN's coverage of the NFL—this was at the dawn of sports analytics in the mainstream media.

There aren't many people with the experience to talk thoroughly about sports analytics. There still aren't a lot of classes in it across the country. There aren't a lot of the parents telling their

math-inclined children that they can do this as a job. From collecting data, to developing new metrics, to integrating analytics into the decision making of sports franchises, Ben can provide insight on this new occupation. This book is written by someone with great sports-analytics experience for people who want that same experience.

Finally, I should add that sports analytics is not just for people who are already analytical. I have worked with nonanalytical people in the NBA and with ESPN. The "old-school" people who are sometimes portrayed as out of touch—many of them are very smart about the sports they work with, and their feedback into analytics is one of the most important ways to improve analytical methods. The people I worked with on George Karl's staff in Denver sometimes didn't agree with what analytics could tell them. In working closely with Coach Mike Dunlap—now coach of the Charlotte Bobcats—who was very open-minded, I refined methods for evaluating opponents' tendencies, and those reports got more focused and better, found the right questions to ask. That is, in many ways, the value of analytics (in sports and otherwise): they force you to ask more and more refined questions. Those questions do not improve results just for the sports-analytics expert—they can help everyone in the organization find better and better ways to play The Game.

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