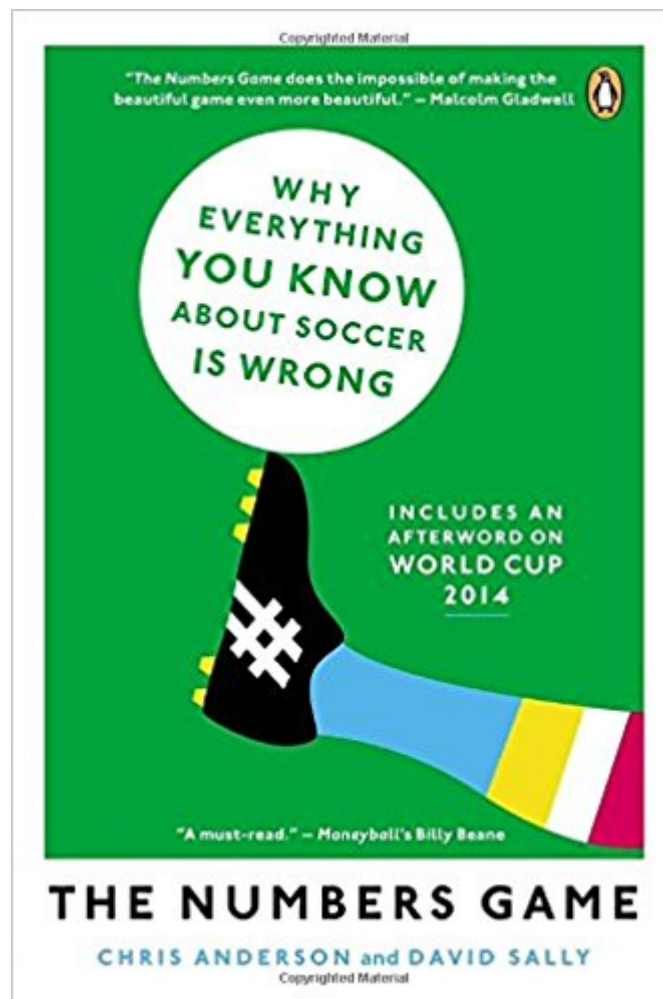




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The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong



Synopsis

Moneyball meets Freakonomics in this myth-busting guide to understanding and winning the most popular sport on the planet. Innovation is coming to soccer, and at the center of it all are the numbers—a way of thinking about the game that ignores the obvious in favor of how things actually are. In *The Numbers Game*, Chris Anderson, a former professional goalkeeper turned soccer statistics guru, teams up with behavioral analyst David Sally to uncover the numbers that really matter when it comes to predicting a winner. Investigating basic but profound questions—How valuable are corners? Which goal matters most? Is possession really nine-tenths of the law? How should a player's value be judged?—they deliver an incisive, revolutionary new way of watching and understanding soccer.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review It's a truism that soccer resists statistical analysis due to its free-flowing nature and few set plays. But times, and technology, are different, and now almost anything can be measured. To the recurring refrain of phrases such as "Our data show," the authors subject the beautiful game to a gimlet-eyed accounting, determining which cherished beliefs are true and which are wishful thinking. And what do the data show? That luck plays more of a factor than most managers like to admit—but that managers are more important than many think. That regional differences in playing style are overstated. That weak players are actually more influential than talented stars. And that's just for starters. Coaches should read this closely, though it may prove dispiriting for fans. After all, arguing about ambiguities is half the fun. Occasionally, the

authors get lost in the weeds (as in their close reading of what it means to "possess" the ball), but no matter. By any standard, this is a landmark book, scrupulously researched and bound to be influential. Although it's not light reading for casual fans, it may eventually change the game they watch. We compared *Soccernomics* (2009) to *Moneyball* (2003), but this hits even closer to the mark. --Keir Graff

"The Numbers Game" does the impossible of making the beautiful game even more beautiful." - Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink* "Chris Anderson and David Sally have the ability to see football in a way few have before them. Be warned: The Numbers Game will change the way you think about your favorite team or player, and the way you watch the beautiful game." -- Billy Beane, Manager of the Oakland A's and subject of *Moneyball* "I learned a lot, and it's hard not to applaud a project that is bent on the disenchantment of football's internal conversations and archaic practices, while simultaneously acknowledging an ineradicable core of the unpredictable and random at its heart." - David Goldblatt, author of *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer* for the Times Literary Supplement "North American soccer fans would do very well to pick up this book. It will not only help them understand the game better, but it will also stimulate new ways to analyze and think about the game." -- Forbes "This is the book that could change the game forever." -- The Times (London) "By any standards, this is a landmark book, scrupulously researched and bound to be influential." -- Booklist (starred review) "Witty and thoughtful should appeal not just to soccer fans, but to readers of Malcolm Gladwell and *Freakonomics*." -- Kirkus Reviews "Their rather innovative and revolutionary way of looking at the game makes for fascinating reading." -- The Library Journal "A highly original contribution to our understanding of what we are seeing at a match, their book is unbeatable." -- The Independent on Sunday "Pundits, armchair fans and professionals, will find that several of their long-cherished truisms are not true at all." -- The Guardian "Superb" -- GQ

On the plus side: "The Numbers Game," to paraphrase Mark Twain, makes a lot of good hamburgers out of sacred cows. Anderson and Sally provide us with much food for thought regarding assumptions about soccer that we may never have questioned before. One great example is the strong evidence they provide that the game's outcome is about half determined by

luck. They go a little too far when they say this means soccer is a "coin-toss game," but still, it is a revelation to realize that so much is out of the hands (or off the feet) of the players and coaches. It makes you wonder how much else in sports--and in life--is determined by chance. There's also a connection here to much later in the book, where the authors address the issue of "regression to the mean." Again Anderson and Sally provide us with examples that question how much control coaches and players really have over the game they are trying to influence. It was astounding to learn that in many cases, whether you replace a manager or not can be irrelevant--a team can "regress to the mean" and start improving their play just as much by keeping the manager as by firing him. (The same goes for whether the manager screams at them for losing or calmly explains how they can play better--though the latter, they suggest, is better for morale.) One final point I thought was very important was the evidence the authors provide that money alone does not rule soccer--they prove that there are "plenty of clubs [...] that outperform their salary tab in any given season." This is akin to the argument made about Billy Beane and the Oakland A's in "Moneyball." It's heartening to know that the underdog can still win, any given Sunday, with the appropriate strategy and a bit of luck. On the minus side: One thing I found a little disappointing about the book was that it didn't really have one or two main heroes to root for like Billy Beane or Bill James in "Moneyball"--in fact the book probably mentioned those two sabermetricians almost as much as any other single soccer statistician, manager or player. I think it would've made the book's narrative more compelling overall if the authors had spent more time getting to know say, Tony Pulis of Stoke, Arrigo Sacchi of AC Milan or less famously, Jimmy Davies of Waterloo Dock AFC. All three men were mentioned as fascinating examples of managerial insight, but were only given a few pages to shine. I suppose we'll have to settle for the pioneering role of Wing Commander Charles Reep for now...

I liked both this book and Soccernomics, but I thought this one actually focused better on the game and the impact of data. Soccernomics spent more time than I would have like discusses fans of soccer.

Son loved it. Heard about this book in speech given my Malcolm Gladwell.

Broadly, this is a good book. As other reviewers noted, maybe not as solid as Soccernomics or as math heavy as Beautiful Game Theory: How Soccer Can Help Economics but still well worth the price and can be read in a day or two. The positives I will leave to the 4-5 star reviewers because in

general I concur. Instead I'd like to add some negatives that other low-star reviewers have not yet addressed:

1. The authors' insecurity towards professionals in the field riddles the book. My edition is 338 pages. Way too many of these pages are wasted on the authors attempting to advocate that their very approach -- that is the studying of soccer via improved statistics instead of relying merely on the 'gut feeling' of professionals. I understand the reason for this, after all, here are two 'nerds' trying to change the game, and unlike Billy Beane they are not former professional players or current managers. But the author's desperate need leaks of the pages and definitely interferes with the enjoyment of the book.
2. Some of the statistics. This is dangerous that all pop-science -- and this is what this book truly is -- face. Famous papers become obsolete or in some cases reversed. Specifically I am referring to the "Hot Hand Fallacy" by Tom Gilovich. The authors spend almost 3 pages lovingly describing the paper and also use it as a little cudgel against those unscientific old hands. Unfortunately, the paper has been recently challenged by Jeffrey Zwiebel and Brett Green who have in fact marshaled convincing evidence that Gilovich was mistaken. Now there is nothing wrong with that, papers are published after books are sent to the printers but it raises the question of what other research the authors cite in the book has also been challenged by new developments (if any?).
3. Some of the claims the authors make contradict their own claims. To me the most glaring is the argument that all soccer at the top end looks the same -- I don't wholly disagree with the claim, the best teams can't afford to leave stylistic concerns in the face of the pragmatism of winning. But the author's evidence sometimes is contradicted by their own evidence: the four top leagues are the same...but the Spanish league has more fouls and in the German league scoring goals has much less predictive power than in England or Italy..and the Spanish league has a preference for the 4-2-3-1 and the English for the 4-4-1 or the 4-5-1..This is all from their book and these statements all seem to me like differences in the game. Still, all in all as someone who has fallen into the trend of buying these pop-science books for soccer it's pretty fun.

Great book. It was very easy to read and a rather enjoyable experience for a football fan like me. I think experienced punters can learn a thing or two from this book. This is definitely the best book about football statistics and betting I have read so far.

I gained a new perspective on analytics reading this book. It definitely made me want to spend more time pouring over numbers with my own teams and players. The analytics game is expanding daily in the soccer world. Get on the train or get left behind.

Excelent read for any curious person who likes soccer and sports.

I get it. Yes, the beautiful game can be reduced to numbers. Luck is still a part of the game. I learned a lot about the way managers CAN think. But thankfully, not all managers play by the numbers. I'm a soccer fan, not a statistics fan. Recommended read, with a warning. This book is not exciting.

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