FROM WASHINGTON'S STREAKING BULLETS TO "WASHINGTON'S GREAT WIZARD DELUSION": THE WINNING AND LOSING DISCOURSE OF THE WASHINGTON BULLETS AND WIZARDS

by

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From Washington’s Streaking Bullets to “Washington’s Great Wizard Delusion”: The Winning and Losing Discourse of the Washington Bullets and Wizards

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Abstract

FROM WASHINGTON’S STREAKING BULLETS TO “WASHINGTON’S GREAT WIZARD DELUSION”: THE WINNING AND LOSING DISCOURSE OF THE WASHINGTON BULLETS AND WIZARDS

Jamel Lavine, M.S.

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Thesis Director: Dr. Pierre Rodgers

The Washington Wizards are one of several franchises to have won a championship in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Although the franchise achieved this during a decade of consecutive postseason appearances, it has been recognized more for its tendencies to falter and underperform. The Wizards have compiled season after season of losing records with the occasional glimmer of hope that the upcoming season will be markedly different from seasons past. The purpose of this research is to offer an explanation as to why the franchise has been among the worst performing in the NBA when there are systematic opportunities each year to improve either through the NBA Draft, free agency, or development of players in the off-season. The focus of this research will be on the Wizards, formerly the Bullets, performance in the 1970s and 2000s. By analyzing discourse of sportswriters hailing from the Baltimore Sun and Washington Post,
themes were generated from their discourse which highlight the franchise’s prolonged struggles. Research from these selected decades represents key periods at which the team moved from a perennial playoff contender to the lower rungs of the NBA. The examined discourse from these decades serves as a basis for understanding how pronounced the franchise’s struggles have been through the years and presents points suggesting why they are continually stuck in the rebuilding stage.
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Success and failure are unavoidable yet distinct outcomes of professional sports. What contributes to both are the hours spent evaluating players, assessing trade opportunities, developing plays, or analyzing game film which occurs long before a win or a loss can be determined. In sports, many details are scrutinized and very few statistics or actions go undiscovered. Entire careers are quantifiably judged by accumulated statistics and championships, often replete with ample criticism. The Washington Wizards have had a propensity for losing throughout much of the last thirty-five years. In fact, the franchise recorded a majority of its highest winning percentages per season from 1968 to 1989 and has had its share of losing seasons ever since.

The franchise has a checkered past with such low points as the Gilbert Arenas gun wielding incident, multiple instances of 30 or fewer total wins in a season, multi-year gaps between playoff appearances, and experiencing a franchise record 0-12 winless streak to begin the 2012 season (Fendrich, 2012; Lee, 2011). With the exception of 2004, each Wizards season with 45 or more wins has occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to 1978, the Wizards had just three seasons of 30 or fewer wins, yet since then fourteen of the last thirty-five seasons have resulted in 30 or fewer wins, including each of the last five seasons through 2012-2013 (“NBA Teams: Washington,” 2013).
Problem Statement

This research explores multiple components that have contributed to the Washington Wizards’ failings and misfortunes throughout much of their history. There has been cyclical success each decade and yet they have continued committing the same mistakes each year. One can see the franchise’s struggles; however, having a greater understanding of root causes provides for a more informed narrative. Players signed in free agency have led to more busts than fan favorites and draft picks often fail to develop and eventually depart or get traded to other teams. The Wizards have cycled through multiple coaches each decade, yet few changes have generated sustainable success since the 1970s and 1980s.

History

The Wizards began as the expansion franchise Chicago Packers in 1961. As the Chicago Packers, owned by Dave Trager from 1961 to 1963, they played home games at International Ampitheatre and later Chicago Coliseum (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013). In 1962, they were renamed the Chicago Zephyrs. Soon afterwards, the franchise underwent its first major transition by relocating in 1963 to Baltimore, Maryland where it became the Baltimore Bullets. Dave Trager sold the Zephyrs to Arnold Heft, Earl Foreman, and Abe Pollin in 1963 for a then record $1.1 million (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013, p. 70). The newly finished Baltimore Civic Center, its home from 1963 to 1974, was viewed as a permanent venue that was situated in an area more enthusiastic for basketball. The move to Baltimore was influenced by low attendance, quality of the stadium, and low performance in Chicago, all aspects that the owners believed they could remedy. The
relocation made economic sense given these reasons along with the uncertain permanency of NBA teams at the time. Despite the optimistic forecasts, the franchise struggled on the court and with fan attendance which placed them at the middle of the NBA’s attendance figures throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013, pp. 83, 181). Much of the Bullets’ struggles on the court stemmed from poor trades and underperforming draft picks which compounded the rising cost for basketball operations. These issues have plagued the franchise for years, although there was a decade long respite in the 1970s.

Much of the franchise’s initial performances were lacking due to underperforming draft picks, low returns on trades, and the emergence of the American Basketball Association (ABA). The ABA and NBA competed for the same talent pool which reduced the flow of players into the NBA as players sought better opportunities via bargaining. Both leagues hosted college drafts which meant they competed for the exact same players and the ABA even actively sought current NBA stars. In 1968, there was friction between the three owners of the Bullets which ultimately resulted in Abe Pollin becoming the majority owner of the team and extending the team’s presence in Baltimore by several years (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013). The Bullets needed quality players; finally when they drafted Earl “The Pearl” Monroe in 1967, Wes Unseld in 1968, and acquired Elvin Hayes via trade from the Houston Rockets in 1972, they began to control their destiny and dictate the fortunes of the team (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013). With the exception of Monroe leaving for the Knicks in 1971, these players formed the nucleus that led the
Bullets to consecutive playoff appearances each year from 1968 to 1980. They went to the NBA finals four times in the 1970s and beat the Seattle SuperSonics in seven games to win the 1978 championship. The Bullets recorded just three winning seasons throughout the 1980s which inherently diminished their television viewership. Then and now, the lack of star power on the team compared to the likes of the Celtics’ Larry Bird, the Lakers’ Magic Johnson, and the 76ers’ Dr. J contributed to the team’s average attendance and regular season record. The playoff consistency in the 1970s has been missing throughout much of the next thirty years. Having a nucleus of players to guide the franchise is fundamental in the NBA; consistency breeds successful performance.

Traditionally, Abe Pollin elected for smaller rookie contracts and avoided signing many free agents. The majority of draft picks in the 1960s through 1980s were traded away and or out of the league after several seasons. When Chris Webber signed in 1994, he was their first high profile free agent since Bernard King in 1987 (Abrams & Mazzone, 2013). The Wizards have rarely been a team that effectively capitalizes on free agency. As the 2012 season came to an end, the last marquee free agents that also led the team to the playoffs were signed in 2004: Antawn Jamison, Caron Butler, and Gilbert Arenas. Several strong regular season performances and playoff appearances boosted franchise expectations; however, those positivistic attitudes would eventually dissipate as these players were off the team by the end of the 2009-2010 season for a variety of reasons.
Critically assessing the Wizards requires an extensive look into the organizational structure of the team as well as its performance through the years. Each level of the organization is responsible to a varying degree for on-court performance. One of the most consistent figures is their former owner, Abe Pollin. Front office staff is responsible for handling the business dealings and ensuring their actions are guiding the franchise towards success. Rookie and free agent scouting each contribute to success as much as front office decisions—or indecisions. Coaches are responsible for maximizing the talent on their roster to the best of their abilities and failing to do so can be harmful to the future of the organization. The performance of the team throughout the season hinges on these various components within an organization. One issue that has plagued the franchise since its expansion years is the discernible lack of quality new talent. The franchise has struggled with developing draft picks, which has led to fewer young players growing into star players. Former draft picks underperform as they have struggled significantly with developing key young players. Although talent migration is expected in professional sports, draft picks rarely change the culture of losing due to a variety of factors such as low production from teammates or the overwhelming pressure to be the savior for a franchise that just experienced a losing season.

In 2010, Monumental Sports & Entertainment bought the team (“Monumental Sports & Entertainment,” 2013). The company is headed by Ted Leonsis and three primary partners. The person primarily responsible for player acquisitions is General Manager Ernie Grunfeld. He is responsible for basketball operations which include
acquiring and managing free agents and draft decisions. His decade long tenure with the Wizards includes orchestrating trades which brought in Gilbert Arenas, Antawn Jamison, and Caron Butler in 2003 and 2004 (“Ernie Grunfeld,” 2013). With these players and the coaching of Eddie Jordan, the Wizards appeared in four consecutive playoffs from 2004-2008. Prior to the 2004 playoffs, there was a seven year gap from their last playoff appearance in 1997 and an eight year gap preceding that playoff appearance. Under Grunfeld’s lead, there has been gradual progress albeit not without setbacks. The team has been unable to escape the stigma of being in a perpetual rebuilding phase. Dialogue from the team has ranged from conciliatory—“All we can do is keep going, keep getting better and get ready for next season” to anecdotally optimistic—“I think that for the first time, you’re really getting to see how good we can be” (Steinberg, 2013, p. D2). To further emphasize these points, members of the organization provide regular feedback relating to these sentiments. Ernie Grunfeld was interviewed after the 2012 season ended and stated “We had good chemistry going forward and there is no question that our goal for next year is to make the playoffs” (Lee, 2013).

Taken individually, these comments are intended to be reassuring; however collectively, they begin to illustrate how little has changed through the years. Members of the franchise repeating these comments through different seasons reinforce the lack of absolute change. From 2008 to 2012, the Wizards have failed to produce a playoff berth, .500 win-loss record, experienced a 26 game road losing streak, and have completed some of the worst seasons in franchise history (Fendrich, 2012; Lee, 2011). It is
important to followers of the franchise that these reassuring comments are made in a public fashion. However, the organization loses credibility as it continues defaulting on these promises.

People invested in sports value the uncertainty of outcome in each game as there is no simple way to predict the demands of a game or season. Teams begin each off-season aiming for the NBA title and these hopes gradually depreciate due to poorly developed team chemistry, injuries, and mismanagement by the front office. Few teams can manufacture championship caliber rosters or sustain high performance consistency over successive seasons due to the previously described factors as well as player aging and decreased performance. Free agency and player injuries in professional sports can transform a championship caliber team into a below .500 team in a moment’s notice or impede a team’s progress. Of the 63 NBA champions in league history, 18 of the current 30 NBA teams have won the title and the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers are responsible for 33 titles (Linden, 2012; Zegers, 2012). The number of teams having won the NBA championship is significant; however, the disproportionate amount of wins between major cities such as Boston/Los Angeles and the rest of the NBA is not unlike Major League Baseball and the National Hockey League. Teams that have won multiple NBA titles remained healthy, played consistently throughout the playoffs, and mastered free agency and the NBA Draft. Much of the Wizards’ history has been not included these elements as the consistent failure to execute substantially impact performance.
The NBA Draft is a systematic implementation that allows teams to address their roster concerns by acquiring young talent; yet the Wizards have failed to effect change throughout much of its recent history. When examining past performance, a losing year resulting in a high draft position leads to no significant change in win-loss records for several years at a time. This means that the Wizards have been unable to attract talent and develop a core group of players for a length of time. There is no scientific outline to master player development; yet teams like the Oklahoma City Thunder and Golden State Warriors have capitalized on the draft with key draft selections and years of player development encouraged by their coaching staff. Coaches have the responsibility of optimally using talent although some coaches have endured criticism for misusing talent. For professional sports, draft picks often takes several years to develop elite skills; however, multiple instances of five to eight year spans between playoff appearances illustrates a lack of success in philosophy and execution.

The Wizards’ playoff history consists of early exits in addition to multi-year gaps between playoff appearances which have resulted in frequent top fifteen draft picks. First round draft picks receive the most financial support from teams which increases their value or burden on the team. The likelihood of success for second round draft picks is low given the high value placed on elite athletes, playing time, and practice time. Many former picks are no longer playing with the team nor are role players for other teams. Talent migration and poor win-loss records have impacted their performance over the years just as much as underperforming draft picks. By constantly expecting young talent
to contribute early, an organization may create the undesired and unintended effect of lessening their potential.

Losing teams attract negative headlines for their performance, attendance records, and lack of star appeal. Media scrutiny has persisted as the Wizards’ performance has declined over the years. The Wizards have struggled to acquire quality star talent, which reinforces and even feeds back into the cycle of poor performance. Game summaries from local media tend to comment more on the team’s antics than the milestones it achieves. Marquee games recounted by the media are often written off due to overarching season performance. Discourse when elite teams lose to the Wizards is akin to “How did [insert team] lose to the Wizards?” When the franchise loses to teams in the top eight to ten spots in either the East or West conference, critics have panned it as an expected outcome; yet when facing the rest of the league, writer’s dialogue frames these match-ups as a “battle between the NBA’s worst performing franchises.”

The franchise does not command, because of their inconsistent history, the same enthusiastic responses as visiting opponents. On December 4th, after the Wizards secured their second win despite starting the season 0-12, Fendrich (2012) wrote the Wizards “perhaps inspired by the courtside presence of Washington Redskins rookie quarterback Robert Griffin III” beat the Miami Heat, who was at that point one of the top teams in the league with a record of 12-4. Another quote details that “the Wizards, surprisingly, were the ones being patient, making the extra pass, finding the teammate with an open look” which subconsciously informs the reader of the level of play typically expected of the
Wizards (Fendrich, 2012). These are a few examples of criticism that reinforces the culture of losing the Wizards have been known for through the years.

Developing a top NBA team involves a considerable amount of planning and a dose of luck. The issues plaguing the franchise have been the same issues facing other teams unable to crossover into the NBA elite. Some of the most successful NBA franchises are located in major American markets and small markets teams have historically faced more troubles achieving equivalent levels of success. Teams like the Charlotte Bobcats and Cleveland Cavaliers are franchises that have experienced extensive droughts between winning seasons or playoff appearances. Until recently, the Los Angeles Clippers were located in a notable major market team that has struggled with extensive losing seasons and droughts between postseason appearances in similar fashion as small market teams.

The most notable transitions within the league occurred when a generation-defining athlete emerged, for example the transformative impact Michael Jordan had with the Chicago Bulls or LeBron James had with the Cleveland Cavaliers (Hughes, 2013). Both of these players redefined the image of NBA athletes due to their on-court performance and media marketability. These are two instances where the NBA Draft effectively changed the landscape of NBA basketball with athletes who eventually became global icons with mass marketability, athleticism, and value. For every superstar drafted, there are countless draft miscues and busts that have transpired over the years. The 1996 trade which featured the Charlotte Hornets’ first round draft pick Kobe Bryant
being traded for Los Angeles Lakers’ Vlade Divac is an example of a draft scenario gone vastly different for two teams. The Hornets received a marginally good yet aging player and Bryant became a five-time NBA champion with accolades longer than most players’ entire basketball careers.

The NBA Draft is one of the premiere ways in which talent is distributed and yet there are teams like the Wizards who have failed to gain momentum in this area. Often times, small market franchises are perceived as weaker franchises that face higher barriers to success. Often times, these franchises have no better option than to build through the NBA draft which presents challenges on its own. With certain franchises, rookie contracts often result in that same talent eventually migrating to larger market franchises once their contracts expire and their value has increased. Some franchises endure extensive periods of stagnation before wholesale parity becomes a reality. The turning point often begins with new ownership of the organization; for others, it begins with player acquisitions. The Wizards reached the pinnacle of NBA success culminating in a championship in 1978 yet have been largely inconsistent since then. Two of the most successful seasons in franchise history are 1977-1978 and 1978-1979, when the Bullets won the 1978 NBA championship and then returned to the NBA Finals a year later. Since these two NBA Finals appearances, the franchise has regressed. Although the Wizards have had several challenging seasons, the extent of the issues that affected the 2008-2010 campaign led to the Wizards’ setting the worst record over a two year period in franchise history.
The issues examined within this research highlight aspects about the Wizards that have contributed to a culture of losing. Historically, their player personnel decisions for free agency and the NBA Draft have been ineffective and subpar. Personnel decisions, regardless of the coaching system in place, have extended the drought between winning seasons. The 1970s is the franchise’s most successful decade due to an overall record of 472-348, playoff appearances each year, four NBA finals appearances, and an NBA championship. The franchise experienced a decline in performance which resulted in 294-494 overall record in the 1990s and 334-486 record in the 2000s, six total playoff appearances, and one conference semifinals appearance.

This research provides a specialized look into ideological discourse on the Washington Wizards and how that discourse shapes the images associated with the organization. Chapter 1 provided an introduction of the Washington franchise and presented background commentary about the franchise. Chapter 2 is a review of related literature connecting the following themes: fan identification, organizational efficiency and safety, sport as a resource, competitive balance, firm performance, competition law vs. monopolistic practices, coaching effectiveness, beyond winning and losing, competitive balance, and sport analysis. Chapter 3 frames the critical lens and presents the methodology of this research. Chapter 4 is an in-depth look at the ideological themes generated from The Sun (Baltimore Sun) and Washington Post newspapers. The newspaper resources are limited to 1977-1979 and 2008-2010 because these selected periods represent two extremes of winning and losing from the franchise’s history. The
themes generated from these historical reports string together a narrative outlining the franchise’s decline since the 1970s. Commentary will highlight the status of the team, the league, and criticisms of the franchise’s missteps over the selected years. Chapter 5 will conclude with an epilogue and discussion on implications for future research.
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Professional sports are constantly evolving given the pace of technology, the present economic state and forecast, political influences, supply of talent, and league competition to name a few factors. Organizations must manipulate and adapt in a manner that is conducive to their business operations, partners, and constituents. The success of the Washington Wizards significantly impacts consumer attitudes and media coverage of the team and ownership. Fan perception of professional organizations is a valuable concept for organizations, researchers, and future leaders in sport as fans and the media generate and sustain interest. This literature review intends to connect several themes to assist with the results of this study. Monumental Sports & Entertainment and the Washington Wizards’ business and success as prominent sports organizations are tied to the communities within Washington D.C., Maryland, and Virginia. The following reviewed literature presents an argument for these themes: utilizing sport as a resource, resource management, firm performance, coaching efficacy, beyond winning and losing, competitive balance, and sport analytics.

**Sport as a Resource**

Utilizing sporting events as a means of controlling resources and business has framed the groundwork of a “sporting event” (Smith, 2006, pp. 80-83) Maximizing profits while minimizing costs allows professional organizations to prosper and evolve,
while building fan interest. The components of business, allocating resources, human capital, workplace efficiency and even the ideal of a mission statement allow businesses to operate with hopes of longevity and accruing financial stability. The article by Desbordes and Hautbois (2010) explored the efficiency of using sport as a “goal” in mega events such as the Le Mans 24 Hours. Observing the image of the organization responsible for putting on these events and its state of conducting business will highlight any weak points and allow the organization to grow from them productively (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010).

The marketing of franchise assets (players, coaches, emblems, traditions) for festivals, public relations events, or community programs is incorporated into the image and history of a franchise. In this study, the researchers chose to observe how the Sarthe Department, located outside of Paris, France, incorporates the Le Mans 24 Hours motor endurance race into its business philosophy (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010). This event was first created in 1923 and almost matches the Tour de France in terms of French prestige and publicity (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010). The researchers conducted a qualitative study via interviewing five of the top representatives of the Sarthe Department across a one year period from September 2007 to June 2008 (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010). The interviews lasted two hours and discussed the following subjects:

1. general information on the person interviewed and this structure
2. the marketing strategy of the structure
3. the specificities of the Le Mans 24 hours marketing strategy
future directions

Then the interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the researchers. The findings revealed that the Sarthe Department realizes that in this region, the city of Le Mans “represents half of its population” and thus the department can reap the benefits of its labor by capitalizing on this vast population market (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010, p. 234). Developing a foothold within the region of geographic exclusivity is a common sports practice that professional teams utilize. The Wizards are in a high value market but do not presently have the economic demand of large market NBA teams. In fact, one of the most popular franchises in the city is the Washington Redskins which has not been an elite team in recent years.

Based on these three objectives “increase its equity,” “enhance its image” by becoming a “modern department leading the way in several areas,” and “boost its economy”--the department aims to implement and capitalize on its relationship to the Le Mans 24 Hours (Desbordes & Hautbois, 2010, p. 234). Ever since the Sarthe department and Le Mans 24 Hours partnership was created in 1923, there has been continued emphasis on “sport partnerships,” “promotional/advertising actions,” “hospitality packages,” “infrastructure investments,” “creation and development of related business ventures,” and ACO organizing the annual competition (pp. 234-235). The fact that this four day race reaches approximately 635 million viewers worldwide supports the utilization of sport as a “goal” and as a “tool” (Desbordes & Haubois, 2010). Each year, mega events such as the Super Bowl, World Cup, Olympics, and Pan American Games
are orchestrated in part to provide a showcase of professional talent but also to further commoditize and exercise sports as a resource.

Andrew Smith’s (2006) qualitative piece on Tourist Consumption and interpretation of sport event imagery discusses sport being used as a tool for encouraging tourism. Smith touches on the “re-imagining of cities” as a means of improving the lesser developed areas (pp. 77-79). The geographic distribution of sports franchises is intentional and allows surrounding areas to become more affluent and accrue value over time. Smith observed the ways in which sports is used as an identity where the location becomes embodied by sporting images, examples include “Lake Placid...Winter Sports Capital of the United States” or “Edmonton’s marketing slogan ‘City of Champions’” (p. 80). The relationship between cities and brands or “brand locations” is evident in the tourism guides and ads displayed across various tourist locations (Smith, 2006). The effectiveness of these tactics relies on the images and themes presented by Smith’s emphasis on two themes “Synecdoche” and “Connotation.” With “Synecdoche,” an aspect of an object becomes the representation of another (i.e., the Eiffel Tower symbolizes Paris, France). Smith also discusses connotations as sports have taken on various identities representing values like toughness or heroism.

Smith (2006) uses these themes to research the English cities of Birmingham, Manchester, and Sheffield to reveal if and how these cities have “used sport events to enhance their image” (pp. 78-80). Smith observed that through various sporting events, these cities each had used sport as a tool and continued financial support of sporting
events and stadia as time progressed. Interviews were performed to examine the effects sport images has in these areas, with 54 tourists (interviewees) from nine electoral wards across three parts of England (Smith, 2006). Participants were chosen based on location and proximity to the cities so that they were not overly familiar with the cities (Smith, 2006). Participants were randomly selected from electoral registers and interviews took place at their homes. The interviews were conducted in two parts, one part focusing on “Synecdoche” and the second on “Connotation” (Smith, 2006).

Smith’s (2006) interviews found evidence that suggests Birmingham had produced no image change. None of the interviewees mentioned the 1992 Olympic Games or recent sporting events as reasons that their perception of Birmingham had changed. Smith noted that there were few positive moments recollected. Manchester had much more profound results as 23 interviewees mentioned football in their description (Smith, 2006). Several interviewees noted structural expansion within Manchester as a reason for their viewing of Manchester. When examining Sheffield’s image, there was a significant number of interviewees that referenced sport in their imaging of the city however, no interviewee mentioned recent sporting events in relation to visual images of Sheffield (Smith, 2006). There were instances of “synecdoche” and “connotation” across the three cities but more so in Manchester and Sheffield. Smith states “despite certain individual motives, fears and reticence, linking sport and the city is generally perceived positively” (pp. 91-92). Smith took notice that some individuals had neutral responses in regards to sport enhancing their perception of a city; an aspect that if reproduced with a
larger sample size may require further exploration. Smith found evidence that suggests
sport directly and indirectly influences images and perceptions of a location in varying
levels for individuals. These observations on city imaging constructed by sports suggest
information that city officials, tourist companies, and sports franchises can utilize to
further sports influence.

Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys (2001) researched the “Economic
Consequences of Professional Sports Strikes and Lockouts.” The work stoppages may
potentially negatively influence revenues, jobs, economic stability, and community
growth (Coates & Humphreys, 2001). The researchers used empirical analysis to assess
the effects of work stoppages in both professional football and baseball as a means to
understand the potential effects of the NBA lockout (Coates & Humphreys, 2001). Prior
work stoppages did not result in the loss of an entire season in either sport; so when using
recent history, one could infer the NBA lockout would result in an equal amount of games
lost. The second approach was to examine the effects of when a team relocates and if they
affected the local economy after a work stoppage. The researchers noted there was little
research on work stoppages as the effects takes several years to determine and
retroactively define (Coates & Humphreys, 2001). The researchers note that many of the
“ill effects” of a lockout in regards to money and entertainment options are reallocated to
the pre-existing business and the observed effect is essentially what would occur had the
franchise not existed (Coates & Humphreys, 2001). Coates and Humphreys go on to state
that in order to appropriately examine a long term effect of lockouts, there must be a
study performed after some years have passed. Their evidence did not support the notion of work stoppages proving significantly detrimental to a city’s economy.

The relationship fans create with an organization, the organization’s business practices, safety concerns observed by the organization, and utilization of sport as a resource each factor into the perception of an organization. The use of sport as a tool in tourism images and culture allows a city to stimulate interest in its sporting businesses and foster tourism. The elements discussed within this literature review serve to link this study to established concepts.

**Resource Management**

Bill Gerrard’s (2005) research in this study focused on the effectiveness in which organizations utilize their strategic resources in order to maximize their “level of sporting and financial performance” (p. 144). Gerrard stated there are “two aspects to the effectiveness with which organizations utilize their resources,” allocative efficiency and technical efficiency (p. 144). Allocative efficiency is a situation where organizations that deal with balancing trade-offs in varying levels of complexity must balance their overall performance by effectively optimizing the available resources relative to its goals. Technical efficiency is when an organization maximizes its available resources at an attainable level.

This empirical study observed FA Premier League teams and their level of on-field success (Gerrard, 2005). This study found evidence that suggests teams with greater management of their resources performed better than those that did not. However, this evidence was not wholly conclusive beyond more than there being supporting evidence
of ownership status and financial performance of teams within the league. Gerrard stated that because these teams are publicly listed, there may be incentive in the form of having better access to team required resources, management benefits, and/or financial rewards from the higher level of accessibility of these teams. There is more of a business oriented model with teams that are publicly listed versus teams that are privatized, which as suggested could lead to the difference in performance. Gerrard found no clear distinction of causality but did so in regards to team ownership status and financial efficiency. The financial gains from being listed on the stock market have clear benefits to teams as there is another level of motivation to perform better as a higher number of investors can direct additional funds to these teams than if not publicly listed (Gerrard, 2005).

**Firm Performance**

Team owners balance profits vs. win percentages as a means to guide their business moves. This is more of a continuum rather than an absolute; teams balance varying degrees of both sides to produce results. Their respective market and team abilities are evaluated and certain owners control these teams and even orchestrate talent by their belief in profit maximizing or win percentage based strategies. Teams in American markets, compared to international markets, often focus more on profit maximizing which some contend leads to competitive imbalance.

Rodney Fort and James Quirk (2004) sought to determine the effects of winning percentage (WPM) focused owners vs. profit maximizing (PM) owners on competitive balance. The price of talent and how much owners spend on teams within the English Soccer league is different for the teams at the top of the league when compared to the
more profit-maximizing focused owners of teams on the lower rungs of the league (Fort & Quirk, 2004). Teams available on the stock market are profit-maximizing clubs, their incentives lie in how much profit they can create yearly. The difficulty in this study is that empirically comparing a league of profit-maximizing teams vs. a league of win percentage focused teams, there must be constants in the following areas: “different leagues serving the same markets with the same cost functions” (p. 27). They state that new leagues are a better choice for empirical observation because the rival league would be of a differing philosophy while being based in similar, or the same, cities as the pre-established league which may impact talent prices (p. 27). The price of talent could also fall in American cities with hockey and basketball if profit maximizing teams replace win percentage focused teams. They believe there may be evidence to suggest that as European teams become more “American-style PM leagues” that the price of talent will decrease (p. 27). Ultimately, Fort and Quirk note that becoming more PM or WPM based can impact competitive balance given the respective market demand for talent. The price for talent is as great in both PM and WPM focused leagues. Whether the emphasis is on one method versus the other, they believe, should be based on fan welfare and how much the fan stands to gain.

Mason A. Carpenter (2002) tested the effects of education, work experience, and tenure on performance for top management team (TMT) based on strategic and social context (pp. 275-276). Their study tested two hypotheses and two null hypotheses: the first measured whether there was a strong relationship (hypo) or weak relationship (null)
between top management team heterogeneity and firm performance (p. 277). The reasoning for the hypothesis was that having a diverse makeup within teams would allow for a wider lens to address obstacles and to develop a wider array of strategies and alternatives (p. 277). The null hypothesis states that having diversity within a team may lead to incompatibilities between one another based on decreased team cohesion and teams may be at a higher risk of decision paralysis especially when facing high level decisions. The second hypothesis and null hypothesis measured TMT heterogeneity and firm performance being strongest in short-tenured (hypo) or long tenured (null hypo) top management teams.

The study by Carpenter (2002) utilized 247 companies in its final sample which generated 472 company years of data that could by analyzed (p. 278). The study was conducted using cross sectional period from the years 1990 and 1995, however only 225 of the original 247 companies were still in existence by 1995. The dependent variable measured was return on assets; independent variables were education, functional background, and TMT tenure heterogeneity (pp. 278-279). Larger firms are known to have greater resources so organizational size (total employees) was used as a control along with industry membership, degree of diversification, average tenure, international work experience, and TMT nationality.

For the first hypothesis, Carpenter (2002) found evidence supporting heterogeneity’s positive relationship with performance at low levels of complexity which means less diversity within the team equated to greater work cohesion. This contrasts
with past views of heterogeneity. For the second hypothesis, he found evidence that short tenured teams were more affected by demographic effects than long-tenured teams. What this means is that, as teams gather more experience with one another, they become less affected by their differences.

**Coaching Efficacy**

Robert J. Schinke, Gordon A. Bloom, and John H. Salmela (1995) sought to categorize elite coaching career stages by utilizing both the coach’s athletic and coaching careers. Six basketball coaches were chosen by Basketball Canada as they were deemed “the most successful in the country” (p. 51). Their peers chose them based on win/loss percentage at the university or national level (p. 51). Ages ranged from 42 years to 64 years, each had a minimum of 10 years of coaching experience, and the group consisted of five males and one female. Their achievements were widespread, including two former men’s national coaches and two former women’s national coaches. The participating coaches were interviewed on their “experiential knowledge and coaching philosophy” as well as their overall development (p. 51). These individuals were widely regarded as some of the best in their field due to peer recognition. Coaching is a valuable aspect of sports and the rapid turnover of elite coaches in the NBA is inevitable. The Wizards have been one franchise with many issues; some dealing with coaching and others with player personnel. This study may serve to point out some traits to look for in elite coaches that could potentially influence future coaching hires and success.

Interviews were based on the following subjects: early sport participation, national elite sport, international elite sport, novice coaching, developmental coaching,
national elite coaching, and international elite coaching (Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995, p. 53). The study used Bloom’s three stage progressive processes as a basis for their responses (p. 49). In stage one, individuals are introduced to their sport and the coach provides a good first impression with positive feedback. In stage two, individuals become more focused and self-guided with their sport, so they seek greater challenges within the sport either through demanding coaches or opponents. Finally in stage three, total commitment to their sport and actively seek ways to improve. The researchers of this study found that Bloom’s first stage was their six participants’ novice coaching stage. This study’s developmental coaching level was the equivalent to Bloom’s second stage. This study’s national and international coaching stages equaled Bloom’s final stage. Despite these similarities, there were differences between both studies. The current study employed a chronological approach of coaching careers, stages in sport development were more defined, and performance results took priority over everything else (Schinke, Bloom, & Salmela, 1995, p. 59). The study found that coaching early within one’s career was the period in which they produced the least number of successful athletes. With their results, they found that coaches could not be labeled as experts unless they reached the national or international level. The researchers noted that their study could be most beneficial to aspiring coaches as an example of how one group of elite basketball coaches progressed throughout their careers. Choosing a highly respected elite coach is one of the areas the organization has needed throughout its history. The most successful seasons in the NBA often are a result of elite coaching along with a unified and effective team.
The study by Sergio Ibanez, Javier Garcia, Sebastian Feu, Alberto Lorenzo, and Jaime Sampaio (2009) discussed the differences in game statistics between winning and losing teams for an under-20 league. Their data was collected from 223 games played from 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 in the Spanish Basketball Federation, however they utilized a sample of five games for this study. The researchers were observing the differences between the following statistics: “two and three-point field goal (made and missed), free throws (missed and made), offensive and defensive rebounds, assists, steals, turnovers, blocks (made and received), fouls committed, ball possessions and offensive rating” (p. 559). To account for game pacing, the researchers normalized the statistics to 100 ball possessions.

Their data was collected from games played consecutively, to determine the differences in performance between winning and losing teams. What they found is that winning teams had the best statistics in every category except three-point field goals and free throws missed and turnovers committed (Ibanez, Garcia, Feu, Lorenzo, & Sampaio, 2009). This inferred that the decrease in turnovers between games two and three could be due to the athletes placing increased significance on these remaining games. The researchers were able to find some significance in relation to fatigue and performance, citing that three-point performance increased for the winning teams. Their improved performance in converting three-pointers along with the losing team’s inability to convert as many suggests there may be differences in conditioning between the two teams. Since the three-point line is a further distance from the basket requiring more energy than two
point attempts, successful attempts would decrease for teams that are less conditioned and would remain constant or increase for better conditioned teams (Ibanez, Garcia, Feu, Lorenzo, & Sampaio, 2009, p. 460). The researchers did state that in-game substitutions counteract the fatigue factor from having permanent effects. They noted that by the third game, if there is less defensive pressure at the three-point line, athletes may shoot better. The effects of rebounds and two point shots made have a significant impact on games, as higher rebound totals allow for more second chance scoring opportunities which leads to higher scoring efficiencies for winning teams.

This research could prove useful for NBA teams as they face road trips and consecutive game nights on a monthly basis. The frequency of these games increases from the youth, collegiate, and professional ranks. Professional teams that can improve their game statistics in two and three-point attempts, rebounds, and steals can increase their chances of winning. Although there is an 82 game season, teams are ultimately playing for playoff contention; so there is always pressure to perform on a nightly basis. There is difficulty with applying these findings for losing teams as they often have the biggest hurdles to overcome when improving game performances and increasing their chances of winning.

**Beyond Winning and Losing**

The explorative research provided by Cliff Mallett and Jean Côté (2006) discussed ways in which to evaluate high performance coaches. “High performance coaching” involves “higher levels of commitment, more stable coach-athlete relationships, and greater focus on medium- to long-term planning, monitoring, decision-
making, and management skills to facilitate control of performance variables” (Mallet & Côté, 2006, p. 213). In high performance sports, these coaches often take responsibility for the team’s record regardless of the factors surrounding their performance. They discuss various measures of evaluating coaching effectiveness. The Leadership Scale for Sport and Coaching Behavior Questionnaire were two studies that utilized questionnaires to “examine how coaches’ behaviors can influence athletes’ outcomes such as enjoyment, satisfaction, and anxiety” (Mallet & Côté, 2006, p. 214).

Mallett and Côté (2006) transition to the process of using athlete feedback (perception) as a driver for evaluating coaches. They note that this is “critical to the understanding of the quality of the athlete-coach relationship in elite sport” (p. 215). Using the Coaching Behavior Scale for Sport (CBS-S), developed by Jean Côté, John Yardley, John Hay, Whitney Sedgwick, and Joe Baker is one such tool recommended by the researchers. The CBS-S is based on seven dimensions of coaching behaviors as rated by coaches and athletes (Mallet & Côté, 2006). These dimensions are: physical training and planning, goal setting, mental preparation, technical skills, personal rapport, negative personal rapport, and competition strategies (Mallet & Côté, 2006). It can be given to athletes at multiple points during the season, without the presence of their coaches, to provide for more truthful responses via anonymity. The presence of coaches during these moments would generate data that is not reliable due to coaching pressures. Collecting this data at two different points of a season can allow the coaches to make adjustments for the remainder of the season or for the following season (Mallet & Côté, 2006). The
process consists of providing the form CBS-S forms to athletes, collecting and analyzing the data using an independent team, then returning this analysis to the administrative staff for the exchange of feedback with the coaching staff. Executing this effectively is healthy for coaching development as well as furnishing the potential for adjustments in coaching tactics and behaviors.

Some factors requiring consideration with this approach include the need to use multiple athlete evaluative data, use of multiple evaluative results before adjusting coaching competencies, as well as ensuring majority of athletes have responded to the evaluation of a coach. These are a few factors to consider when conducting coaching evaluations as they can detrimentally impact the results and the administrative staff’s decision making. Through this research, the researchers are presenting alternative ways to evaluate high performance coaches by not focusing on winning and losing. The aim is to help coaches improve their strategies on a year to year basis and to aid administrators in evaluating a coach’s effectiveness which could benefit professional teams and amateur athletics. Professional teams could utilize resources such as the CBS-S as a way of determining how effective the coaching staff is with the team. Exercising this option could lead towards better communication between all levels of the sports organization.

Kruse’s (1981) article entitled “Apologia in Team Sport” discussed the forms of apologia in sports and how meaning is conveyed through its existence for sports followers. Following sport is similar to following religion in that followers of a team internalize the successes and failures of the players and team as their own. There are
ethics within sport: no individual is greater than the team, one must show absolute
devotion and commitment to the team and sport, never criticize the team, never concede
defeat until the game is finished, and sportsmanship is relative (Kruse, 1981, pp. 273-
274). These ethics guide athletes in all levels of sports. In the eyes of the public, any
infractions create a division between the violating athlete from the team and the fan.
Cases on Don Sutton, Pete Rose, Tony Dorsett, Garry Templeton, Calvin Griffith
highlighted five instances where these individuals broke these codes of ethics.

Apologia in sports, as detailed by Kruse (1981), is multi-faceted due to the
numerous transgressions that have transpired with athletes. Sports figures present
apologies and reassurances to fans that the issue was a solitary instance to enhance their
apology. The apology should be made publicly depending on the nature of the issue and
the reason for the issue should be conveyed. Failing to do so will leave questions about
the athlete’s character which appears to others as though they are not committed to the
team and symbolically to the fan. The timing of the apology is critical as well, providing
an apology prior to a game may satisfy the viewing audience, however those in
attendance are alienated as they are unaddressed and uninformed. The most serious
criticism is reserved for those “who indicate they are not playing to the best of their
abilities” (Kruse, 1981, p. 277). The morality of admitting one is intentionally sabotaging
their play instantly discounts their credibility to fans and media. Lost trust is difficult to
gain back from fans and the bad publicity potentially could follow that athlete throughout
the remainder of their career if a similar circumstance is presented.
This piece generated themes of differentiation, denial, and one’s own dedication to their sport as discourse from past sports apologia (Kruse, 1981). Kruse (1981) notes that the use of these differing strategies are employed by all apologists (p. 280). During these conflicts, reaffirming one’s allegiance to the team and thus the fans necessitates an immediate, publicized, and detailed response. The sports figures’ seek to avoid becoming spoil-sports, “those who endanger the reality of the game” (p. 279). Remorse and regret aimed at those offended parties reveals that the sports figure has accepted their actions and actively seeks change in their behavior. This “recantation” is a key element for apologia which contrasts with those who fail to properly clarify the events that transpired (p. 281). Kruse concludes that the components of apologia: demonstration of moral value, reassurance that everything is back to normal, remorse, concise, qualify sports as an institution worthy of study.

Trujillo and Ekdom (1985) connected themes from their work: “Sportswriting and American Cultural Values: The 1984 Chicago Cubs.” They identified six cultural themes employed by sportswriters: winning and losing, tradition and change, teamwork and individualism, work and play, youth and experience, and logic and luck (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 262). Sport is a social construct that shares many of the same “values, beliefs, and ideologies” within the surrounding societal structures (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 263). The researchers analyzed the 1984 Chicago Cubs due to their unpredictable rise to the top of their division and the reception the team received from sportswriters. The adoration for baseball as the nation’s past time stems from its deeply
imbedded history with newspapers and capacity to reaffirm American ideas and ideals (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985). Sportswriting has enabled baseball to transfer its power not solely on the attendee, but on the public at large. They surmise that although the aim for sportswriters is not to make socially critical commentary a focal point of their writing, they do in fact present pieces that are ideological. Sportswriters “present and affirm social consensus on a broad set of cultural values” when they project their discourse and beliefs onto the reader (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 264).

Winning and losing discourse was notably unique throughout the 1984 season compared to prior years. Sportswriters narrated wins as detailed, ceremonial victories, “blowouts,” “cliff hangers,” or “masterpieces” with a cast of heroes (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 266). Sportswriters gradually evolved the “winning” concept throughout the season. Early season victories were discredited with skepticism and sarcasm and later adapted with the use of terms like “Miracle Cubs” and “Cubs Win, Cubs Win” by season’s close (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 267). Losses took the same narrative, being “heartbreaks,” “blowouts,” “masterpieces,” or calling to the Cubs’ ineffectiveness with remarks like “No More Miracles” as the season concluded (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 267). The history of Cubs losses initially precluded sportswriters to redistribute these themes during early season losses. Losing narratives changed as the season progressed as well, growing from an expectation to just a mere bump in the road. Elongated losing streaks were regarded as opportunities for motivation to improve. Tradition and change was another theme generated from sportswriters discourse. The Cubs were habitual
losers, so there was a culture of losing on the field, in all capacities, which was often referenced in writing. The 1984 Cubs were labeled as outliers from their storied experiences, with contrasts and comparisons on all levels. The changes spurred by the team led to new and old fans, a phenomenon known worldwide that results as a team finds success. Tradition and change, and in this case the sense of delayed losing, influences sportswriting and their belief in the Cubs’ abilities to continue succeeding. Teamwork and individualism, but more so, instances of both carried additional effect to the team. Writers described the team as a group of selfless players who sacrificed for the team. Individual game heroes throughout the season provided specialized narratives that color their season of breakthrough. Players recognized for individual achievements, to sportswriters, reinforced the team dynamic as a driver for success.

Sportswriters commented on the work and play aspect of sports and the team. Athletes work at every aspect of their game and they work in sport, which is traditionally viewed as an activity that the common person plays. There is a duality of work and play, work for the athletes constitutes a competition although that competition is “leisure” for many viewers (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 274). Articles referenced the team as hard workers individually and collectively whether healthy or playing injured. Players were put on pedestals as they played injured, which is a display that one is supremely loyal to the team. The players were simultaneously quoted and mentioned as playful either through jokes, by nature, or situational circumstance. This playful side of the team balanced, humanized, and further normalized the players. Work and play would be
utilized at once in sportswriting to detail the season’s experiences and player journeys. Wins were playfully celebrated and losses required the team to work harder to continue its successes. Youthful players balanced the team with energy in games whereas the more experienced players handled the daily issues and taught lessons. Sportswriters commented on the balance of youth and experience, as an effective manipulation of the roster’s age to influence performance. The 1984 Cubs had “grizzled veterans” who were “mature and experienced players” matched with younger players (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985, p. 276). Despite the weaknesses that are associated with an imbalance of young and old players, they were frequently depicted as complementary values. Logic and luck are the final theme summarizing the 1984 Cubs.

Game time strategies and decisions are executed throughout each game and series to present the best opportunities for the team. Sportswriters utilized quotes from team members about the specific strategies utilized throughout the season. Managers evolved their strategies as the season concluded. The random benefits from luck, chance, and superstition were regarded as necessary components to the Cubs history. The chance happening of that 1984 season was backed up by the miracle plays and game heroes. Sportswriters believed that their Cubs team capitalized on risks in 1984, this contradicted their prior dialogue given the losses and setbacks of years past. The magical performances in 1984 were rationalized via sportswriters’ dialogue describing how each game was played. Trujillo and Ekdom (1985) were able to connect multiple themes to the 1984 season generated from sportswriters’ retellings and descriptions of the Chicago
Cubs. Sportswriters influenced and projected meaning onto the journey of the 1984 Cubs and consistently measured these achievements against their prior teams to showcase excitement and hope.

Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989) discussed the value of winning and losing in “Rhetoric of Winning and Losing: The American Dream and America’s Team.” There are numerous ways that winning is emphasized given how the culture of winning and acts of winning can influence job security. The authors identified success as either an end result of competitiveness or byproduct from performing at your best. The most significant distinctions being one of occupational achievement and the other of human success (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 207). Our society places a greater emphasis on occupational success, as athletes generate worth from all phases of their game. In Texas, football and winning are synonymous and this philosophy is transposed onto the Dallas Cowboys. Vande Berg and Trujillo utilize a five phase approach to classify the Cowboys winning ways.

During the Cowboys’ expansion years, they were labeled as “sacrificial victims” (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 210). Local media did not label them as losers because they were expected to lose given the dearth of talent. Players were “spirited,” “scrappy,” or “barely escaped with their lives” when media covered these teams (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 211). Success was a process for these teams, which accompanied their struggling and despair. Beginning in 1966 with their first non-losing season, Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989) termed the phase “Days of Wine and Roses” to match sportswriters
descriptions of the team as no longer rookies in the league (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 212). The team had begun to formulate the framework for success and this represented their arrival in the league. The next phase, “Always a bridesmaid, never a Bride,” spanned 1965 to 1970 as the team was unable to win a title (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 214). Narrative dictated that games became business and some victories were “evaluated as failing efforts” based on team performance (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 214). They experienced two games in the NFL championship back to back and their first loss in the Super Bowl in this five year span. One sportswriter even wrote, “Dallas was destined to be the most talent-blessed bridesmaid in NFL history (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 215).

Vande Berg and Trujillo (1989) titled the fourth phase beginning in 1971 as “Cowboys look to dynasty” (p. 215). Once they broke through and won the 1971 Super Bowl, the team appeared in eight NFC championship game and four Super Bowls which is a high period of success for any professional team. They won another Super Bowl in this series and local sportswriters greatly contrasted their current team from the expansion Cowboys. These Cowboys were defined via machine-esque metaphors to represent the business mindset of the franchise. This was supported by the Cowboys experiencing twenty consecutive winning seasons which allowed them to become a nationally recognized success. Their inconsistence in 1984, 1985, but moreso the 1980s shaped the backbone for the fifth phase, “Didn’t this Used to be America’s team?” (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989, p. 217). Commentary employed the use of themes such as “Legends die
“hard,” being spoiled, and becoming mortal given the descent from success (p. 217). Sportswriters questioned the Cowboys’ ability to succeed again, which reinforces the importance of winning in Texas. The Cowboys were beginning to experience “winner’s disease” as they no longer could be viewed as the best (p. 218). Their character was evaluated on multiple occasions to symbolize how foreign the team was increasingly becoming as they were referred to as leaderless. Writers “poeticized” reality using metaphors and depictions of the team as more than just a football figure (p. 220). Vande Berg and Trujillo note that some metaphors can become overused as time passes. The focus on winning and history are two additional viewings on sports. Writers often place performances in the overall frame of the Cowboys history through winning and losing. The sportswriter is the most prominent voice of the team’s travails and accomplishments. Vande Berg and Trujillo noted that there is a need to explore the lack of “reflection and self-reflexivity” in sportswriting due to the overemphasis on winning and its mechanical nature (p. 222).

Llewellyn’s (2003) work, “Coachtalk: Good Reasons for Winning and Losing,” examines coaching rhetoric after wins and losses. What coaches say influences the fan/follower’s interpretation of the game experience. This research utilized coach’s post-game feedback from the National Collegiate Athletic Association spanning 26 years (p. 142). He hints that Americans are not used to losing and he bases this on former undefeated stretches in military events. Although coaches are the influential primary rhetoric speaker, they do not have free reign to speak openly and candidly on any subject
without backlash. The thinking behind winning ways is that “Defeat is worse than death because you have to live with defeat” (p. 145). The study focused on four winning themes: elevation, humility, value reinforcement, and suffering. There were four losing themes: deference, justification, redefinition, and suffering.

Coaches and teams illustrate elements of winning by expressing statements that support fans, show humility, emphasize the values learned, and reveal the act of enduring the season’s obstacles. Losing themes centered on comments respectfully acknowledging their opponent, poor in-game decisions, inability to beat fate, or the discomfort that comes from losing (Llewellyn, 2003, p. 148). Only winning coaches can redefine wins and losing coaches begin to lose credibility if they attempt to redefine the meaning of winning. Akin to historical records, winners are granted the opportunity to redefine success not losers. Losers’ understand who won, acknowledge their loss but still seek winning ways, and suffer in their defeat. Winning and losing themes, according to Llewellyn (2003), are contradictions of one another. Winners remain humble and highlight their contest whereas losers acknowledge the winners and create their own alternate construction of winning (p. 150). Both sides credit and express their respect for one another regardless of the outcome, which is an expected postgame occurrence. However, some coaches refuse to accept losing and personalize the outcomes as a fault of improper execution of their perfect system. Statements such as “What you did was refuse to lose...I would have been just as proud of you if you had lost” would not be accepted if they were said to a losing team (Llewellyn, 2003, p. 151). Balancing expressions
indicative of humility and overconfidence, or respect and disrespect can color how opposing teams view the coach’s words within the media. No coach is safe from scrutiny however their character may stand as an outlier in the winning and losing rhetoric similar to former coaches like Bobby Knight. Winning is the only thing according to the media however “repetition compulsion” leads to the watering down of recent wins in the hopes of achieving future success (Llewellyn, 2003, p. 154). This research presented information on the messages from coaches in the media and how their world is volatile based on their comments, handling of wins and losses, and the expectation of winning.

**Competitive Balance**

Joel Maxcy and Michael Mondello (2006) examined the level of competitive balance of the top four American sports leagues (MLB, NHL, NFL, and NBA) using empirical research. This study was sought to examine the relationship between labor market restrictions and competitive balance (p. 346). They found evidence that suggested free agency decreased competitive balance for the NBA whereas in the MLB and NFL there was improved competitive balance. Other variables such as “free agent rights with other labor market and league rules” could impact the rate of competitive balance (p. 362). Each league has noted different background histories with free agency rules. Examples such as the Rozelle Rule in NFL to the reserve system in the MLB which both inherently restricted player movement to the team that drafted or first signed the player unless that team traded them away. The steps taken since then and agreed upon in various collective bargaining agreements have also contributed to how well competitive balance is supported.
Maxcy and Mondello (2006) noted that talent moves quickly from team to team, which is a double sided aspect of free agency, and thus their results are far from conclusive and restricted to the NFL. The NHL is in a more precarious situation given that rival leagues can take talent in addition to rival teams within the NHL. Weaker teams may be subject to longer stretches of unbalanced play due to talent leaving for better opportunities. This alters the level of competitive balance within the NHL more so than in other leagues. The NHL and NFL had instances that revealed fewer restrictions on player mobility marginally improved competitive balance (Maxcy & Mondello, 2006, p. 363). Free agency does not appear to directly determine competitive balance although its impact is more noticeable, negatively, in the NBA and more positively in the NHL and NFL.

Staw and Hoang (1995) conducted a quantitative study on whether NBA playing time and time on a team is influenced by player salaries. They found that higher draft picks were given the greatest number of opportunities to prove their potential and salaries. “Sunk cost” refers to when there is a choice between multiple options; the individual chooses the resource which they have contributed the most resources to. If someone has resources dedicated to one option and the alternative requires fewer resources from them, the individual will still commit to the option they already allocated their resources to. If sunk costs were influential factors, teams would also keep higher paid talent longer than they should when they are underperforming. The researchers sought to determine if NBA teams were following this practice. The researchers
hypothesized that draft NBA order predicts the most productive players on a team (Staw & Hoang, 1995, p. 477). Their null hypothesis was that draft order would not serve as a prediction of playing time. They used three tests: the role of sunk costs in playing time, sunk costs as a predictor of the length of a player’s NBA career, and sunk costs effect on whether players were traded from their original team (p. 477). They observed players drafted in the first two rounds of the 1980-1986 drafts.

Playing time was impacted by the statistics players generated throughout their games, injury, and position. The sample size for this test was 241 players selected from the 1980-1986 drafts that received contracts and played a minimum of two years (Staw & Hoang, 1995, p. 478). Scoring and draft order were noted as the main performance variables whereas traits like quickness, toughness, and position were not rated as high contributing factors to minutes played. Their regression analyses found evidence suggesting that player statistics decreased as the draft order progressed. Second round draft picks saw an even greater reduction in statistics compared to first round picks, which is another indication that sunk costs played a role in minutes played.

They hypothesized that career length was a sunk cost based on performance criteria. Of the 275 players sampled, 184 were cut from teams by the 1990-1991 seasons. The sample population of draft choices required that players played a minimum of one season in the league. The researchers noted that trades and injuries can significantly impact a player’s career. They included a hazard rate, which was a measure that allowed the risk of being cut to increase or decrease over time (Staw & Hoang, 1995, p. 481). Evidence was found
that suggested being chosen later in the draft resulted in shorter NBA careers, which supported the hypothesis. The hazard rate also increased as a player remained in the league. Players traded were often cut in the year after their trade and subsequently were out of the league.

The third test of sunk costs focused on player trades and their draft position. This test was used to determine if draft position influenced when a player was traded. They used a sample of 241 players and found that 157 were traded within the time frame ending in 1991. Their data found players were often first traded at 4.8 regular seasons. Evidence was found that suggested “draft number had a significant, positive effect on the hazard rate for being traded” (Staw & Hoang, 1995, p. 484). They noted that moving from the first to the second round saw an increase of 72 percent in the likelihood of a player being traded and that players on winning teams were traded less frequently. The researchers found evidence that significantly suggests sunk costs playing a role in player potential in the long run. For teams like the Washington Wizards, draft choices do not always provide immediate returns. There are many instances where players underperform and still occupy roster space which is not supported by their productivity. Losing franchises must maximize the talent they have and take risks on their potential panning out over time. This mindset is supported by comments from coaching staff or front office personnel supporting player development over successive seasons and the “rebuilding phase” taking such prominence in their dialogue.
**Sport Analytics**

Sport statistics provides teams and fans the ability to comparatively assess game performance through any stretch of time. This dialogue and exchange of information grows increasingly essential as leagues progress and, to a lesser extent, as interest in fantasy sports increases. Modern technology and ease of access to sports data places more information in the hands of fans than ever before. Sport analytics is presented in many forms such as the Sloan Sports Conference, Stats INC, or Sports References in a detailed yet comprehensible fashion. Sport analytics has had such an impact on sports because it has been converted to a language that is transferrable to the public and between organizations around the world. Businesses have been specializing in sport analytics; meanwhile reliance on statistics from all forms of sport has greatly influenced how a sport is presented to the public. The importance of television and internet availability has energized the push for sports analytics since sports have grown into a global industry. These major broadcasts incorporate data from as far back as the early years of sports leagues to enhance the information on display for viewing or listening audiences. Easily accessible sports data allows users to critically and collectively spark up dialogue and conversations further expanding the knowledge of others. The high demand for sports content coupled with the achievements of today’s athletes necessitates data from all periods despite rules changes or advancements in performance. In some cases, the data is not comparatively equal such as when exploring point’s averages before and after the NBA’s institution of the three point line. The modern shot clock is another revolutionary distinction that sports analysts’ reference when comparing stats throughout the history of
the NBA. One of the most significant limitations to current statistics is the timeline in which the statistic was introduced. Statistics from before and after major rule changes makes direct comparisons with some current statistic unfeasible.

B.J. Coleman (2012) provided an overview of the major sports analytical journals off the field. He calculated the number of articles produced, citations of each article, and institutions that these articles were supported from. Coleman (2012) ranked 1,146 sports analytical articles from 140 journals which he collected from electronic databases and Google Scholar. These journals represented 28 years of operations research practice literature which demonstrates the field is experienced and continually expanding. He noted that since 1989, there had been a rapid growth of journals on sports analytics (Coleman, 2012). Applied economics journals represented four of the top seven journals or 42% of total articles (Coleman, 2012, p. 113). He found that “7 of the top-10 most cited institutions were not US based” which aids in demonstrating how widely researched sports analytical data has come to be (p. 115). His research also found evidence suggesting that school’s contributions often came from one or a small number of authors. Coleman stated these observations mean sports analytics is predominantly represented by a small but “widely distributed group of individuals” (p. 117). According to Coleman’s (2012) data, about 30 of the 140 journals examined represented the highest quality and quantity of articles contributed to the field (p. 117). Lancaster and Salford in the UK were two of the most prominent schools on this list; they produced the highest number of sports analytics articles and citations from the list of international schools (p. 115).
Coleman (2012) noted the prominence of more articles stemming from non-US schools could be an indication of the greater level of acceptance sports analytics research has around the world.

Fry and Ohlmann (2012) provided an overview of the “Special Issue on Analytics in Sports.” They discussed the implications that “Moneyball” has had on sports analytics in that sports teams are now proactively searching for people with backgrounds in statistics to assess their teams. Events such as the Sloan Sports Conference provide a medium through which sports analytics can be the center focus and provide material spanning a wealth of topics presented and attended by prominent figures in sports. The ultimate goal in sports has always been reaching success and teams are more aware that comprehensive statistics on players and league performance allow them to more effectively realize this goal. Situationally based behaviors and player traits can be isolated from any game and studied analytically in the hopes of gaining a competitive advantage. Sports analytics provides relevant information for greater effectiveness in scouting, reviewing current rosters, and examining players from across any given league—especially youth and collegiate. Ideally, teams want to use statistics to create the “optimal lineup of players at different positions to defeat the opposing team” (p. 107). The constant flow of information within sports necessitates the growth of sports analytics. The use of specialized sports analytics for teams serves as one of many reasons for businesses to seek more extensive access into sports leagues and franchises. The
partnerships that can accompany data analysis are immeasurably comprehensive when businesses can align themselves with professional leagues.

**Summary**

The themes selected in this section present an alternative viewpoint of the Wizards. The literature providing fan association of a franchise, organizational efficiency, competitive balance, and winning and losing as themes that dictate how effective a team is being operated. The fan identification and organizational safety themes connected the fan’s association with brands to the management of a team’s brand. The sports as a resource theme ties into the competition law and monopolistic practice themes as businesses and corporations own sports franchises for the purposes of financial gain, expanding their brand, and competitive success. Sport analytics and the winning and losing themes tie into one another as teams utilize a variety of resources to analyze data and determine how to maximize their efficiency. Sport analytics has always been a key variable in the NBA. The Wizards, along with the rest of the league, are continuously expanding their research on player development and acquisitions. Sport analytics can pinpoint trends or tendencies that teams can continue to utilize to improve performance. The free agency and coaching efficacy themes provide insight on the on-court advantages and disadvantages that teams must balance. The Washington franchise has endured many seasons of subpar performance and these selected pieces will supplement the discourse observed from the *Baltimore Sun* and *Washington Post*. This research seeks to perform a critical analysis from newspaper discourse on the Washington Wizards with supplementary information on organizational operation and cultural influence. This
research will present comparisons of the late 1970s and the late 2000s supported by themes projected from sportswriters as an argument that the Washington Wizards are the cause of their own woes.
CHAPTER 3: Methods

The goal of this research is to compare sportswriter’s rhetoric in hopes of revealing tendencies that may potentially influence future decisions for the franchise. Local media are critical of the team because they have observed many changes over the years that have not categorically improved on-court performance for the Wizards. There is some evidence supporting the notion that the franchise is in stagnation: frequency of losing seasons, lack of players selected to the NBA All Star game, frequency of new coaches, and average attendance figures throughout the season (“NBA Attendance Report,” 2013). Teams endure losing streaks, injuries, team chemistry issues, and behavioral missteps. However, it became apparent during this research that the Wizards have been unable to overcome factors that have plagued them since the 1980s.

Research was collected using George Mason University’s online library access to The Sun (now, Baltimore Sun) and Washington Post archives. This research utilized data from August 1 through June 30 to encompass an entire NBA season, from preseason through the conclusion of the NBA Finals. For example, with the 1977 and 1978 seasons, the range of included newspaper articles spanned from August 1, 1977 through June 30, 1979 and the same timeframe was applied to the 2008-2010 period. To find articles from The Sun (Baltimore Sun), access George Mason University’s library website.
(library.gmu.edu), select “Databases” then search under the “Subject” option for “Baltimore Sun.” The result should be “ProQuest Historical Newspapers” and the next search query should be made for “Washington Bullets.” Next, set the publication title to “The Sun” and limit the document type to the following: Article, Banner, and Photo Standalone. Select “Enter a specific date range” and type 08/01/1977 and 06/30/1979, at which point the result will be 511 items. For Washington Post articles, navigate to the George Mason University library website (library.gmu.edu), click “Databases” and “N” to display results that begin with “N,” then select “Newspaper Source Plus.” Prior to searching for “Washington Wizards,” set the Publication Date to August 2008-June 2010, set the Publication as “Washington Post,” and set the Publication Type to “Newspaper.” This will result in the 423 articles used in this research to represent the Washington Post archives. Articles were organized from oldest to newest in publication date order which resulted in 511 articles from The Sun for 1977 to 1979 and 423 articles from the Washington Post spanning 2008-2010. Through analysis of reports from both newspapers’ archives, themes were generated from sportswriter’s opinions and statements about the franchise during 1977-1979 and 2008-2010.

According to Sonja K. Foss (1996), rhetorical criticism is defined as “a process of thinking about symbols, discovering how they work, why they affect us, and choosing to communicate in particular ways as a result of the options they present” (p. 3). One approach to rhetorical criticism is ideological criticism. Foss defines ideology as “a pattern or set of ideas, assumptions, beliefs, values, or interpretations of the world by
which a culture or group operates” (p. 291). There are four steps towards creating this ideological criticism: “(1) formulating a research question and selecting an artifact, (2) selecting a unit of analysis, (3) analyzing the artifact, and (4) writing the critical essay” (Foss, 1996, p. 296). Additionally, sportswriters covering a sports franchise develop a hegemonic ideology as they analyze the team’s experiences. These ideals are framed within a season, yet they are simultaneously weighed against the franchise’s historical ideologies. Although the writer may not always express a critical view of the team, their extensive and direct access to the team grants their assertions value especially if their colleagues are drawing similar conclusions. Their articles ascribe credibility that the reader understands extends beyond press releases, the locker room, and post-game interviews. Developing themes for this research requires the use of beat writers’ criticisms of the Washington Bullets and Wizards. Guided by the critical approaches suggested by Trujillo and Ekdom (1985) and Vande Berg and Trujillo (1984), I compared newspaper coverage of the Bullets in 1977-1979 with that of the Wizards from 2008-2010. Drawing similarities and differences via newspaper writers opinions may provide insight for potential changes the organization could make with the aim of redefining the franchise’s pre-existing cultural narrative. This could prove useful as the organization continues to rebrand and market itself in its regional markets of Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.

The following themes were generated from this researched data: coaching, in-game execution, season statistics, off-court distractions, and injuries. Articles with
content discussing pivotal game elements or statements that illustrated team performance were recorded with APA citation of their respective article. Many articles contained information by the writer that amounted to a game summary so they were excluded from the recorded data. As research was obtained, it became necessary to color code important quotes extracted from articles by highlighting key text for faster recognition of themes on subsequent viewings of the data. Themes were color coded as follows: coaching is grey, in-game execution is green, season statistics are purple, off-court distraction is yellow, and injuries are red. Pink was assigned to any article that contained a considerable amount of critical statements or introspective discussion about some aspect of the franchise. Excluding pink, the coded colors sole function was for faster recognition of themes and they contained no additional meaning. Themes were color coded once data collection was complete for that respective day. This ensured an efficient management of time was delegated between data collection and the categorization of data.

Given the growth of sports, the relationship between the media and sport teams is a fundamental aspect of professional sports. Commentary from the media whether in newspaper, radio, television, or online, often present insight about the inner workings of professional sports that the public has little access to. This research may reveal sportswriters’ beliefs on how much of the winning and losing discourse is accredited to players, coaches, or front office members. What I believe is that players have the greatest effect on team image from their conduct, body language, and comments which all carry meaning. In order to provide a historical dialogue, newspaper columns and editorials (i.e.,
opinion pieces) were collected to call attention to insightful statements. By citing recurring criticisms, themes were assembled that narrate the franchise’s experiences in these selected periods.
CHAPTER 4: Critique

The Washington Wizards’ relationship with winning is marred by extensive stretches of inconsistency and losing seasons. Throughout much of their history, they have been the underdog, yet the team has recently been unable to sustain tangible success. The 2004-2008 seasons are viewed as the most consistent period in recent years which is supported by 40+ wins per season, four consecutive playoff appearances, and relative competitive standing within the Southeast division and Eastern Conference. Prior to this period, the Wizards last were regular playoff participants from the late 1960s through the late 1980s. In the 1970s, as the Washington Bullets, the franchise appeared in the NBA playoffs each year and advanced to the NBA Finals four times including capturing the 1977-1978 championship. That is a foundation of success that has gone unmatched through the franchise’s ensuing decades.

Newspaper discourse was contrasted between two of the most successful seasons in franchise history, 1977-1979, with two of the most challenging, 2008-2010, to highlight key differences in the franchise’s performance as reported by beat writers. The Wizards had a record of 19-63 in 2008 and 26-56 in 2009 which contrasts significantly with the 44-38 and 54-28 records as well as back to back NBA Finals appearances of the 1977-1979 seasons. There is a longing for success underlined in the discourse of beat
writers as they report and criticize the events of 1977-1979 and 2008-2010. Included in this research is rhetoric discussing the state of the NBA, which contextualizes the franchise’s standing in the league. It must be stated that the NBA did experience growth from 22 teams in 1977 to 30 teams by 2008, which may have influenced the regular season win-loss records of the 2008-2010 Wizards. The 2008-2010 Wizards faced more teams throughout the regular season compared to their 1977-1979 counterparts.

Sportswriters occasionally cited the successes of 2004-2008 when narrating the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 seasons. Conversely, during the 1977-1979 period, writers criticized the Bullets’ performance in prior years in relation to the rest of the NBA and their ability to compete in the playoffs. Alan Goldstein (1977) highlights this sentiment in a season preview article critiquing “There was always a fatal flaw that killed the Bullets in the end, but no two people could agree on the precise poison” (p. C6). Goldstein continues, writing that the “detractors claim they [the Bullets] can never win a championship with Unseld, a defensive-minded 6 foot 7 center. But didn’t the Warriors win in 1975 with the unspectacular combination of Clifford Ray and George Johnson?” (p. C6). Harsher criticism of the team in the 2008-2010 articles than in the 1977-1979 articles are apparent as will soon be discussed in the following sections.

1977-1979 Articles
Themes are categorized into five sections: coaching, in-game execution, season statistics, off-court distraction, and injuries. There are no articles written about off-court distraction during 1977-1979; however, this theme factored significantly into the 2008-2010 seasons and is addressed in that section. Throughout the 1977-1979 seasons, writers
more frequently employed the use of optimistic dialogue than in the 2008-2010 period. Writers often cited the Bullets’ ability to recover from in-game challenges such as opponent scoring streaks or advantages in key statistical areas (e.g., shooting percentage, free throw shooting, rebounding). This contrasts significantly with the 2008-2010 period, as writers were more antagonistic and overtly critical of the Washington Wizards as their on-court and off-court issues escalated.

**Coaching**

The Bullets’ coaching staff was rarely called into question during the period from 1977-1979. Although Bullets head coach Dick Motta was entering his second season, he coached the team through a 44-38 regular season in 1977 and guided them to the franchise’s first NBA championship later that season. The primary focus of scrutiny was centered on the team’s recent history, roster, and ability to perform at crucial moments (Goldstein, 1977, p. C6). Discussions about the coaching primarily focused on Dick Motta’s thoughts about the game or the Bullets’ recent performances. Writer’s main grievances with the Bullets rested on their injuries and maligned performances that contributed to extensive periods of losing and subpar execution. Motta was often depicted as a stoic and fiery figure and his coaching prowess did not go unnoticed, since he was selected to coach the Eastern Conference all-stars for the 1979 NBA All-Star game (“2 Bullets,” 1979, p. C7). Continually fighting for the top ranking in the Central Division and besting rival power teams throughout 1978-1979 likely played a role in suppressing criticism levied against the coach’s abilities. James Jackson (1978b) wrote that despite
having only nine players able to play, “Dick Motta refused to be upset over this,” demonstrating his resiliency to perceived setbacks (p. C6).

Washington’s growth from a middle of the pack team during the 1977 season to one of the premiere team’s during the 1978 season affirms Motta’s coaching prowess during this two year period. The Bullets had raised expectations the following 1978 season and this contributed to their dominant performances all year long which fueled their journey to a second straight NBA finals appearance in June of 1979. Motta’s coaching abilities, while facing the rigors of an NBA season, supplied the Bullets with the resiliency and determination to markedly improve their play between these two seasons.

**In-game Execution**

Writers of the 1977-1979 Bullets frequently depicted the team’s performances positively compared to writers of the 2008-2010 Wizards. Based on writers’ columns, the Bullets performed more consistently and were better able to respond to in-game breakdowns. If their opponent was dominating some aspect of the game, for example by scoring 12 straight points, the 1977-1979 Bullets were able to counteract those runs whereas the 2008-2010 Washington Wizards were more susceptible to falling even further behind. The Bullets of 1977-1978 were a different team in the regular season than their 1978-1979 counterparts, with the differences between their win-loss records and writer’s diction serving as a measuring tool.

From 1977-1978, the Bullets were often viewed as underdogs despite their roster amassing years of experience bolstered by recent playoff appearances. Although several
members of the Bullets’ organization felt that newcomer, Bob Dandridge, “is one new face in [preseason] camp expected to make all the difference,” Alan Goldstein (1977) was a non-believer of any raised expectations (p. C6). Goldstein (1977) severely doubted these additions, writing that General Manager “[Bob] Ferry has supplied almost all of the pieces to the puzzle. But somewhere, we suspect, there’s still that one fatal flaw that will send him scurrying back to the drawing board again next June (p. C6). Goldstein, relying on pre-existing canon for the Bullets, felt justified in doubting any perceived improvements since the Bullets had time and again failed to hoist the NBA championship. Even with their missteps, the roster employed quality players that were widely regarded for their talent when healthy. After a mid-December victory, James Jackson (1977) wrote that the Bullets “have four guards who could start for anyone in the league” (p. C5). His point of emphasis was that (He) “51, or half of the Bullets point production for the night coming from the guard position” (p. C5). The Bullets had scoring coming from all outlets, after an early December game, players Phil Chenier and Kevin Grevey “combined for 53 points at one guard position” to lead the Bullets to their fifth consecutive victory (“Guards Lead,” 1977, p. C4). Behind a lineup featuring Wes Unseld, Elvin Hayes, and Bob Dandridge, the Bullets had players who could take over any game, on any given night. If any players were struggling, key role players like Mitch Kupchak and Kevin Grevey stepped up and carried the load. Versatility was an essential component of their championship run and NBA finals appearance the following year.
The team’s in-game performance over these two years starts with the resilient and experienced roster. It was apparent to writers that Bullets’ team defense and propensity for key players stepping up late in games allowed them to remain competitive and win games late into the matchup. The makeup of the roster and their recent experiences as a playoff team is a key advantage that may have instilled a greater level of confidence among one another even through losing streaks or other such rough patches. Throughout both seasons, writers were receptive to the Bullets’ strong quarter play, often depicting the Bullets’ performance in masculine or overtly physical forms of dominance. Dominance was expressed in multiple instances such as “Bullets, 124; Jazz, 109” (1979, March 23, p. C4) where the “Bullets maintained their mastery over the New Orleans Jazz,” or when James Jackson (1978b, p. C6) summarily wrote that they “looked like they would run the hapless Kings off the court in the first quarter as they raced to a 16 point lead,” or even in Goldstein’s (1978c) review of an NBA finals 1978 matchup as the Bullets “forced a seventh game showdown by crushing the SuperSonics, 117 to 82” (p. C5). The Bullets’ 1978 playoff performance may have been summarized by Goldstein (1978b) as they took a 2-1 lead over the 76ers, “the Bullets proceeded to outhustle, outrun and outfinesse Philadelphia’s favored bully boys, 123 to 108” (p. B5). The team was capable of playing to their strengths whenever they needed to secure a win, whether the lead changed 25 times or they had been trailing by double digits (“Wright Nets,” 1977, p. B4).
**Season Statistics**

Through the first half of the 1977 season, the Bullets generally performed well against the competition, especially at home. While recounting the Bullets winning their 16th home game in 20 appearances, James Jackson (1978c) wrote that the “Bullets left little doubt as to which was the superior team last night as they raced to a 13 point lead in the first half, and led by 19 points (97-78)” with a few minutes left in the quarter (p. B9). Two weeks later, Jackson (1978f) noted the Bullets “wasted little time in taking command...as they scored 37 points in the first period, the highest total in a quarter this year” in a game in which at one point they led by “50 points in the fourth quarter” (p. C7). The Bullets were a tougher team to play at home than away throughout much of the 1977 season. By mid-January of 1978, they had only recorded four home losses, a feat they would again repeat a year later in January of 1979 (Jackson, 1978a, p. C5). Jackson (1978h) critiqued that the Bullets “are not very imposing on the road, losing 12 of their last 16 games on the road, but once they reach the friendly confines of the Capital Centre, they are almost unbeatable” (p. C5). This disparity between home and away performances did not escape the Bullets in the postseason; there was a sense of home court advantage not being as significant of a factor once a playoff game began.

Between both seasons, the Bullets amassed a string of statistics that contrast significantly with their 2008-2010 counterparts. They would spend a large portion of the 1979 season vying for the top spot within the Central Division and riding the strength of their home-court advantage. After trailing the San Antonio Spurs by six games in the conference, the Bullets appeared “to have righted themselves from an early February
swoon which saw them drop out of first place” (Sun Staff, 1978a, p. C9). After beating Houston in early March, this was the “16th straight game the Bullets have won this season when they held the opposition under 100 points and the 12th straight game they have won in the Capital Centre when they played before more than 12,000” (Sun Staff, 1978b, p. C10). The Wizards from 2008-2010 struggled to put together back to back wins and never obtained a three game win streak during this two year period. In 1977-1979, the Bullets won more games at home in each respective season than their 2008-2010 counterparts were able to win in total in each of their respective seasons. The 1977 season was more of a roller coaster experience with highs and lows, whereas the 1978 season revealed a Bullets team focused on taking command of their destiny. By the conclusion of the 1978 regular season, writers and the league knew who the Bullets were as they amassed a 54-28 record and stood atop the Atlantic Division and league as the best team in the NBA (“Bullets Begin,” 1979, April 15, p. C12).

The Bullets would not have performed as well without their key standouts, Elvin Hayes and Bob Dandridge, who would go on to play in the NBA All-Star game for the Eastern Conference as players. Hayes was selected as an All-Star in both 1978 and 1979, Bob Dandridge in 1979, and head coach Dick Motta in 1979 was selected as the Eastern Conference’s coach (“2 Bullets,” 1979, p. C7). The absence of All-Star talent, primarily due to injury, likely played a significant factor in the 2008-2010 Wizards’ results. Elvin Hayes and Bob Dandridge were highly regarded by writers on a consistent basis, especially Dandridge ever since he first joined the team in 1977 (Goldstein, 1977, p. C6).
**Injuries**

Through this two year period, injuries played a significant factor only in the latter half of the 1977 season. The Bullets were a healthy team from the start of the season through January of 1978, at which point their struggles started: “A series of injuries before and during the trip has decimated the Bullets’ ranks” wrote Sun writer James Jackson (1978e, p. C11). Larry Wright (flu), Tom Henderson (ankle), Kevin Grevey (neck muscle) Phil Chenier (hamstring), and Mitch Kupchak (right thumb) were five injured players expected to miss significant time and Jackson (1978d) commented that these “injuries and illnesses have seriously depleted their once deep backcourt ranks” (p. B7). Head coach Dick Motta understood just how critical these injuries were, remarking “It’s tough to win in this league without your two starting guards. Anybody would have a problem” (Jackson, 1978d, p. B7). Alan Goldstein (1978a), however, candidly voiced his displeasure remarking: “The injuries provided a convenient excuse for early-season woes, but the team’s inconsistent play of late goes much deeper than the continued absence of (guard Phil) Chenier” (p. C7). Harking back to an earlier article, Jackson (1978e) reminded readers that the “Bullets once had what was considered one of the finest benches in the NBA, but that was before the recent injuries” (p. C11). The loss of those five players meant the Bullets only had seven healthy players which contributed to a five game losing streak in the middle of January.

By early February, their injury woes contributed to eight straight road losses dating back to January and Sun writer James Jackson (1978g) went so far as to write that three consecutive losses to San Antonio, Cleveland, and Boston “were all horrendous
efforts in which the Bullets were never really in the games after the first quarter” (p. C12). The shorter rotation of players, especially on road trips or long stretches of back to back games, can wear down teams especially those dealing with injuries. Writers attempted to convey players sense of urgency, “Hayes, who has been scoring and rebounding like a man possessed of late, said he started playing with more intensity when the Bullets lost their top reserve” Mitch Kupchak due to right thumb surgery (Sun Staff, 1978, p. C9). Mitch Kupchak, Kevin Grevey, Larry Wright, and Tom Henderson would all come back gradually by mid-April which helped the Bullets return to form.

Battling back from injuries and maintaining a healthy roster were vital to the Bullets’ postseason success of 1977 and subsequent 1978 season. Bob Dandridge boosted their fast break opportunities and his return for the playoffs was identified as a “major reason the Bullets lead San Antonio, 3 games to 1” (Smith, 1978, April 25, p. C11). The following season, the Bullets had a considerably healthier team later into the season through March. The most injury-plagued period came when Bob Dandridge, Kevin Grevey, and Mitch Kupchak were each injured going into a game against the Jazz which they still won 126-107 (“Injury-Riddled,” 1979, p. C10). Having three injured players in 1979 compared to the five players injured a year before meant that the Bullets could play to their strengths and have a more effective game plan that allowed them to consistently dominate. The “injury-plagued” Bullets of the 1978 season were not the same “injury-plagued” Bullets of a year prior who stumbled in the final stretch of the season. This
difference in performance illuminates how crucial it can be for a team to maintain a healthy and high performing roster during an 82-game season.

2008-2010 Articles

Washington Wizards coverage from 2008-2010 seasons featured criticisms that touched on each of the following themes: coaching, in-game execution, season statistics, off-court distraction, and injuries. Coaching changes, off-court distractions, and injuries were the most heavily referenced themes throughout the 2008-2010 seasons. There were fewer instances of these themes affecting the 1977-1979 Bullets to the same extent as the 2008-2010 Wizards. Writers observed numerous games where the team committed mistakes that were characteristic of an inexperienced or overmatched team. Players and coaches often spoke of necessary changes and yet each time any were implemented, the Wizards fell behind in another statistic that dictated the flow of the game. Offensive and defensive lapses often led to small scoring runs by the opposition which swung momentum and affected the Wizards’ play. Writers were more vocal about these frequent lapses in performance and they criticized the Wizards as they crippled their own momentum with their performances on the court.

Coaching

The firing of Eddie Jordan was the most significant front office development during the Wizards’ 2008 season. Eddie Jordan was fired after the team’s 1-10 start and regression on the court despite playoff appearances from 2004-2008. Eddie Jordan’s firing was a key talking point throughout interim head coach Eddie Tapscott’s coaching duties for the duration of the 2008 season and through the eventual hiring of Flip
Saunders during the 2009 offseason (Jenkins, 2008, p. E1). Writers believed that, although coaching was a vital factor in the Wizards’ performance, player effort in games was also a contributory issue. Sally Jenkins (2008) addressed this issue head on: “the Wizards—despite four playoff appearances—were blithely unconcerned with stopping the other team, and that chronic lack of commitment was the undoing of a terrifically nice man and promising young coach” (p. E1). The lack of effort on defense may be a player issue; however it is up to the head coach and his staff to enforce offensive and defensive strategies that improve the team’s chances of winning.

Michael Lee (2009c) opted to summarize Eddie Tapscott’s tenure: “Tapscott went 18-53, and the team tied for the worst record in franchise history (19-63). The Wizards also finished tied with the Los Angeles Clippers for the league’s second-worst record” (p. D2). One year removed from the playoffs and the team was in disarray and conducting a coaching search. They hired Flip Saunders in the off-season prior to the 2009 season in the hopes of establishing order and restoring the team to playoff contention. Early into the 2009 season, Flip Saunders would install a more serious play scheme with a greater emphasis on team and defensive plays. Michael Lee (2009d) highlighted the Wizards stagnation on defense, “With the exception of one season, the Wizards have ranked in the bottom third of the NBA in points allowed and field goal percentage defense since Eddie Jordan first took over in the 2003-04 season” (p. D16). Different coaching philosophies can take shape once the players buy into the system develop a greater level of understanding expectations and their role within the playbook. This two year period
involved two significant coaching changes, first from Eddie Jordan to interim head coach Eddie Tapscott, then from Tapscott to head coach Flip Saunders. These pivotal changes in such short succession inherently require an adjustment period. Coaching effectiveness—in just these two years, particularly when measured against the rest of the league—reveals a franchise unsuccessful in effecting change according to writers. Many elite teams are only able to be elite because their coaches have spent years amassing a foundation of philosophies, playcalling, and trust from the organization. Success is a rigid process in professional sports and coaches’ systematic impact, in the eyes of these writers, had been negligible when assessing the qualitative performance over this observed period.

**In-game Execution**

The Wizards struggled with offensive and defensive intensity throughout many games. These struggles are chronicled in multiple articles spanning the 2008-2010 NBA seasons, where early season doubts warned of potential setbacks. Prior to an early November game, Michael Lee (2008a) wrote that despite having an experienced roster, the Wizards were “playing like a team that was selected for a random pickup game” and “they have been sluggish and often looked confused offensively” (p. E6). Lee (2008b), in a separate article, wrote about an instance where the Wizards claimed a lead late in the game but failed to finish out the fourth quarter and ended with a loss. Lee (2008b) recounts the late collapse: “Stevenson then jumped into Caron Butler as a stunned Philips Arena crowd looked on. It was a premature celebration, because the Wizards don’t have the Eastern Conference’s worst record by mistake” as they went on to lose 91-87 because
“one minute proved to be too long for the Wizards to hang on” (p. E1). Lee (2008b) depicted the Wizards as a “desperate, hard-luck team appeared set to pull out a gutsy road victory over the Atlanta Hawks,” highlighting these early season struggles for a team that would become known for routinely competing in two or three quarters only to collapse in the waning moments of a game (p. E1).

A couple telling statistics about the 2008-2009 Wizards are instructive; they “finished 24th in points allowed (103.5 points) and 29th in field goal percentage defense (48.2)” (Lee, 2009d, p. D16). Lee (2009d) writes that the Wizards defensive efforts rarely improved, “Each training camp, the common refrain was that the team was going to get better defensively, but each season, the Wizards continued to try to have success by outscoring their opponents” and yet they only won one playoff series in four appearances (p. D16). One of the few early season highlights came when the Wizards manufactured a significant comeback, emerging from a 17 point deficit to lead by 20 in the final quarter against a LeBron James-led Cleveland Cavaliers. Moments like these were infrequent during these seasons of struggle and inefficiency. The Wizards, as detailed by Ivan Carter (2008a), provided a plethora of reasons that could also be used to define their season: “spotty defense, disjointed offense, a lack of rebounding and body language that suggested that a few of the Wizards would have preferred to be anywhere but Philadelphia (p. D1). Marc Carig’s (2008) mid-December article, “New Lineup, But the Same Old Outcome,” painted a languished picture of the home game. He noted the “Wizards lost their third straight game by stubbing their toes on all of their usual
obstacles” just shortly after tying the game in the third quarter, “once the fourth quarter started, the Wizards retreated into their customary late-game backslide, which allowed the Pacers to pull away” (p. E1). This marked their 14th game where they “allowed an opponent to crack the 100-point mark, much of which was the result of Washington’s rebounding struggles” and the fans let them know by “booing as the home team languished” (Carig, 2008, p. E1). Carter (2008b) wrote that “the Wizards more resemble a group of strangers thrown together for a recreational league tournament than an NBA squad that had a full training camp, preseason, and opening two months of the season to work things out” (p. E1).

Sportswriters’ retellings of the Wizards firmly established dissenting and losing narratives ranging from morbidity to ineptitude. Sportswriters reserved little praise for the team even in moments of perceived triumph. After the completion of the 2008 season, Lee (2009a) noted that “In a season of hardships and mishaps, there were a few moments this season when the 41 games at Verizon Center lacked a funereal atmosphere” (p. D3). This reprieve from negativity was short-lived as Wizards’ “fans went from doing the wave for several seconds to waving goodbye to one of the worst teams in franchise history” (Lee, 2009a, p. D3). Due to “sloppy and careless ball-handling, questionable shot selection and shotty defense, the Wizards (19-62) were outsored 17-3 over the final 6 minutes 30 seconds” in what Lee (2009a) described as “one of the most awful late-game collapses of the season” (p. D3). As Lee (2009e) would write the following season, the franchise would “remain a dysfunctional unit, unable to do more than one thing well
at a time” by playing a solid half of defense (p. D1). However, they allowed a 30 point lead, allowed a 15-0 run which would become characteristic of the team, and “shot a season-low 33.3 percent and lost for the 10th consecutive time in San Antonio” (Lee, 2009e, p. D1). By November 29th, the team had registered eight losses in double-digits with their most recent occurring in a game of numerous, dubious statistics (Lee, 2009f, p. D4). Every loss seemed to introduce new questions into the mix for the franchise. Their 92-76 loss to the Charlotte Bobcats was contributed to various factors: “their best rebounder (Antawn Jamison) failed to grab a rebound for the first time in more than four years,” “their best player at getting to the foul line [Gilbert Arenas] failed to attempt a free throw,” and they “had more turnovers than assists” (Lee, 2009f, p. D4). Lee (2009f) lamented that the “Wizards and Bobcats staged one of the worst halves of basketball this season,” as both teams combined for 74 point however the “Wizards led the way, as they compiled a highlight reel of lowlights” (p. D4).

Post-game coverage was not exclusively negative, initial articles for both seasons contained measured optimism from writers. Michael Wilbon (2009) was cautiously optimistic, writing after a win: “we saw how deep the Wizards are and how many choices Coach Flip Saunders can utilize when he has a full roster” (p. D1). He reinforced the notion that it takes 20-25 games of any season to make any conclusions about team play, however Wilbon made sure to remark that the Wizards had the ability to compete and dominate with a healthy and full roster. The lack of optimistic articles merely coincides with the dearth of consistency exercised by the franchise throughout this period.
Season Statistics

The Washington Wizards often did not begin seasons on a positive note. According to Michael Lee (2008a), “the team has gotten off to slow starts the past three seasons” as they started 12-18 in 2005, 4-9 in 2006, and 0-5 in 2007 (p. E6). Lee (2008a) further writes pointedly a foreshadowing statement, “the Wizards also are playing like a team that was selected for a random pickup game, not one with a group that has practically been together for the past two seasons” (p. E6). He further lays into the team stating they have been “sluggish and often looked confused offensively, averaging just 97.4 points” (Lee, 2008a, p. E6).

The 2008 Wizards endured a season of consistently poor performances and they matched or set records in various categories. One such franchise record was set a year after Michael Lee’s previous statements; the Wizards “dealt with major injuries to key players and experienced so much turnover that a franchise-record 27 different players have been on the roster” (Lee, 2010e, p. D1). Ivan Carter (2008c) struggled to envision a worse season: “If the Washington Wizards haven’t hit bottom yet, it’s scary to imagine what that might look like” as they dropped to 4-21 which matched the “1966-67 Baltimore Bullets for the worst start in franchise history” (p. E5). The Wizards ultimately set the franchise record for worst start by going 4-23. By late December, Carter (2008d) informed readers that “the only team in the league with a worse record than their own,” the Wizards were 4-23 at this time, were the 3-26 Oklahoma City Thunder (p. E1). Extensive losing streaks during the season meant they failed to obtain consecutive wins through December 28, 2008, the longest stretch since the 1966-1967 Baltimore Bullets.
(Carter, 2008e, p. D1). Their loss just prior to the 2009 All-Star game “guaranteed the Wizards (11-42) a losing final record” with 29 games remaining (Carter, 2009d, p. E3). By mid-February, the Wizards had only “won consecutive games once all season” and by season’s end they had only two stretches where they won consecutive games and both were two game win streaks (Carter, 2009c, p. E7). They were not able to win three consecutive games at any point from 2008 to 2010.

The Wizards continued their woes in a game against the Charlotte Bobcats, where they “fell behind early, couldn’t sustain runs and were picked apart late” (Carter, 2009d, p. E3). Thomas Boswell (2010), in his article titled “Where Failure is Par for the Course,” angrily writes “after half-a-lifetime of sharing in Washington’s Great Wizard Delusion, I could see clearly: The Wizards were on the verge of celebrating 3-4, a .429 percentage. This is exactly where we’ve been with this lousy, miserably run and perennially forgiven franchise since 1979” (p. D1). Boswell continues with his scathing critique: “Right now, the Wizards are buying into the idea that, without Arenas, they are somehow enduring an enormous hardship. That’s typical of the Wizards’ losing culture” (p. D1). One of Boswell’s (2010) most critical assertions is that “In the past 10 seasons, every NBA team, even the Los Angeles Clippers, has had a season with at least 47 wins! Except the Wizards, of course. They haven’t had more than 45 wins since 1978-79. (The Bobcats are in just their sixth season, so they don’t count.)” (p. D1).

The Wizards routinely put forth “all of the usual elements that have been on display during this long and torturous season: a poor start, weak defense, spotty shooting,
too many turnovers and the inability to sustain any kind of run” (Carter, 2009e, p. D5). They had significant difficulties playing against teams in their own Southeast Division, losing 14 consecutive games until earning their first win on March 26 and going 1-15 overall in the division. The 2008 season concluded with the Wizards “matching the worst 82-game record in franchise history” which was set relatively recently in the 2000-2001 season (Lee, 2009b, p. D1).

**Off-court Distraction**

The main off-court distraction in the four years researched is the gun-wielding incident between Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton that occurred in late December of 2009. It was first announced that Gilbert Arenas “stored firearms in a locked container in his locker, unloaded and without ammunition” and that he was being investigated by the NBA (Lee & Williams, 2009, p. B1). Several days later, there was a second report indicating that Gilbert Arenas was being investigated by the NBA “for having firearms at Verizon Center because of a confrontation with teammate Javaris Crittenton” (Lee, 2010a, p. D1). Tracee Hamilton (2010) vehemently labeled Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton as “two idiots in an Old West saloon” and further penned that “Gilbert Arenas has an enemy in the Washington Wizards’ locker room, undermining his confidence, questioning his on-court decisions and confusing his off-court behavior. That enemy is not Javaris Crittenton. That enemy is Gilbert Arenas” (p. D1). She continued her point, arguing that Arenas “has long seemed to crave attention, and he’s about to get his wish, from the D.C. police, the feds, the media, his teammates, opponents and fans” (p. D1).
Arenas and Crittenton would have to face federal investigation because “D.C. has strict gun laws prohibiting bringing guns into the city” (Lee, 2010b, p. D1). This incident marred the franchise for the remainder of a season that had already fallen far below expectation. Michael Lee (2010c) resentfully noted that this incident “serves as the latest distraction for a disastrous season that has been filled with disappointment” (p. D1).

Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton were suspended by David Stern for the remainder of the season and Arenas’ suspension marked the “NBA’s third-most severe non-drug-related suspension” behind Ron Artest’s suspension for the brawl against the Detroit Pistons in 2004 and Latrell Sprewell’s full-year suspension for choking his then-head coach P.J. Carlesimo in 1997 (Lee, 2010d, p. D1). Javaris Crittenton “received one year of unsupervised probation and a $1,250 fine after pleading to a misdemeanor gun charge” (Lee, 2010d, p. D1). Michael Lee (2010d) could not have been clearer when he declared that this is an “incident that embarrassed the Washington Wizards franchise and disgraced two of its players” (p. D1).

The gun-related incident between Gilbert Arenas and Javaris Crittenton unquestionably distracted the team and created an unfortunate set of circumstances that contributed to the ensuing fallout and eventual record of 26-56. There was a significant amount of negative publicity generated by the events of that late-December confrontation and the Wizards organization spent the remainder of the season attempting to endure the storm by trading away players and initializing their rebuilding phase. Boswell (2010) argued the Wizards “have never been a franchise that was ‘cursed’” and yet, what else
could it be called when a franchise has been so decimated by a string of unfortunate events and injuries (p. D1)?

**Injuries**

George Solomon (2008) wrote “if any NBA team deserved some sympathy, it would be the Wizards, who last season endured eight players missing a combined 225 games and will begin 2008-09 with Jamison, Gilbert Arenas (knee) and Brendan Haywood (wrist) sidelined” (p. D2). Michael Wilbon (2008) touched on this same issue when discussing the start of the 2008 season. At their lowest point of the 2008 season, the Wizards were only able to dress eight players. Wilbon proclaimed, “More likely, the Washington Wizards will have to rely on spirit to begin the season because it looks as though once again the flesh isn’t willing” (p. E1). This two year period, where numerous players were injured for extensive periods, greatly impacted performance. Ivan Carter (2009a) drew an interesting parallel to the Miami Heat’s “injury-plagued 2007-08 campaign that ended with the team owning only 15 victories” (p. E7). He writes that “a year later and whether wished upon them or not, the Washington Wizards are living through the exact same kind of season” as the 2007-2008 Miami Heat injury-plagued team that only won 15 games (Carter, 2009a, E7).

Injuries are as common as they are difficult to predict in sports. Unfortunately for the Wizards, the injuries to various players represented the biggest hindrance to the team’s upward swing from 2004-2008. In Ivan Carter’s (2009b) “Hobbled Team With Eight Men In” article, he writes one of the most declarative criticisms: “The Washington
Wizards could win a lot of games just with the guys who did not play against the New Jersey Nets last night. Caron Butler was a late scratch with the flu, so he joined Gilbert Arenas (left knee), Brendan Haywood (right wrist) and DeShawn Stevenson (lower back pain) as regular starters who were not in uniform” (p. E4). At times, even the rookies were given opportunities to play before they were deemed ready however these opportunities resulted in few highlights. Due to injuries to experienced starters, the Wizards were forced to play younger players whom did not have the experience together to establish a firm basis for improvement. A number of their losses and fourth quarter missteps may have been wins if they had even half of their injured veteran players. Writers often mentioned the injured veteran players due to the manner in which games fell out of reach for the undermanned Wizards. These crucial injuries sidelined players for several weeks or months at a time and this influenced newspaper coverage as the team failed to gain traction.

Summary

The included themes highlight multiple contrasting aspects between the Bullets and Wizards. There was a difference between aspiration and reality between both teams in their observed periods. The 1977-1979 Bullets faced scrutiny over their uneven play at times and in-game intensity. This scrutiny persisted throughout the 1978 playoffs, however, their playoff series wins granted them legitimacy even if the basketball world was not willing it to give it them. These two years were pivotal to the culture of the Bullets due to in-game performance, capacity to win major games, postseason appearances, and back-to-back NBA Finals appearances. The Bullets, in the 1970s,
thrived on the court and the culmination of that performance was encapsulated in the 1977-1979 years. I would say that without the 1978 championship, the narrative for the franchise would be more negative in both periods because of their tendency to lose. Teams that have a history of losing have created a narrative that underscores any of their breakout moments.

The 2008-2010 Wizards faced considerable adversity from a high number of injuries, in-game deficiencies, and overtly critical media scrutiny brought about by a 2009 off-court incident involving two players. Writers increasingly admonished the Wizards’ woes and missteps as their seasons progressed because the team became more inept. If the narrative was centered on losing with a healthy roster, then sportswriters may have offered more opinions on how to quickly improve instead of expressing increasingly negative criticisms. Since losing was aided by injuries as well as the unprecedented Gilbert Arenas gun-wielding incident, there was some sense of inevitability given off by the losing narrative. Alan Goldstein (1977) expressed this sentiment, writing that “there was always a fatal flaw that killed the Bullets in the end” (p. C6). There were multiple instances of sportswriters highlighting the inevitability of losing, yet there were a few who did not support this. Boswell (2010), one of the loudest voices against the inevitability sentiment, wrote that “Right now, the Wizards are buying into the idea, without Arenas, they are somehow enduring an enormous hardship. That’s typical of the Wizards’ losing culture. Buck up.” (p. D1). His piece is titled “Where Failure Is Par For The Course,” which is his way of denouncing those who believe in the inevitability factor
of Wizards’ losing narrative. These are traits characteristic of the franchise’s struggles through the years given that they had established a tendency to set records in poor performance.

This research provided ideological criticism that focuses on the contrasting experiences of the franchise in 1977-1979 and 2008-2010 while simultaneously measuring them against the greater context of their last thirty-five seasons. These four seasons have a dichotomous nature in terms of preseason aspirations, achievements, and effect on the popular culture regarding the organization. Sportswriters’ criticisms over a length of time create, modify, and shape the narrative of sport franchises. By creating themes from sportswriters’ opinions, the narrative of the Wizards’ losing can be contrasted over two points of time, one where winning was prevalent and one where losing was prevalent.
Epilogue
At the time of this writing, the 2013-2014 Washington Wizards finished the regular season with a record of 44-38 and have made it to the playoffs for the first time since 2007-2008. There had been a six year gap between postseason appearances and they had eight straight losses in Game 1 opportunities going into their first playoff game against the Chicago Bulls. Mike Wise (2014) recounted an informative statistic after the Wizards’ latest Game 1 win over Chicago: “Look, this win can’t be overstated. It was Washington’s first Game 1 playoff series win since, yes, 1986.” The organization chose to rebuild through the draft beginning with the 2010 NBA Draft as they selected John Wall with the first overall pick. This is the first year that the Wizards have had a winning season and also the first time they have recorded at least 40 wins since 2007-2008. One major reason why they were forced to rebuild came as a result from the Gilbert Arenas suspension in 2010. Due to the issues leading up to the 2010 NBA Draft, they failed to win 30 games in each of the next five seasons including the 66-game lockout shortened 2011 season.

The 2013 Washington Wizards are not finished with their season, but they have been able to achieve important milestones. The 2013 campaign has not been without its struggles; but the Wizards managed to persevere through injury, losing stretches, and
overcoming .500 for the first time in 355 games spanning four years (Associated Press, 2014). Getting over .500, on their eighth attempt at doing so this season, was a significant achievement of the regular season and maintaining a winning record by the end of the regular season was equally as important in that it helped secure a playoff spot (Associated Press, 2014). The 2013 season has been a successful venture in large part due to veteran leadership and adaptability of the team. As Jason Reid (2014c) succinctly wrote, “They’re headed to the playoffs, point guard John Wall has emerged as a star and there’s stability in the locker room,” stability that had largely been missing in recent years (p. D1).

Even with these milestones, there are concerns facing the franchise going forward. One concern is their performance against teams with winning records. The 2013 Eastern Conference had a number of teams struggling to maintain winning records throughout much of the season whereas the Western Conference had about eight to nine teams with greater than .500 records all season. Reid (2014a) highlights this, writing “In the pathetic Eastern Conference, only the Indiana Pacers, Miami Heat and Atlanta Hawks have more victories than losses. If the playoffs began today, the 14-15 Wizards would be seeded fifth in the eight-team field.” (p. D1). Furthermore, Reid (2014a) voices the need for better play: “The Wizards have proved they can defeat weak teams. Fortunately for them, there aren’t many strong ones in their neighborhood. For the Wizards to reach the heights they hope to achieve, though, they’ve got to perform better against the game’s best” (p. D1). If the Wizards had been a member of the Western Conference, there is a
strong likelihood that they would not have reached .500 this season due to the strength of that conference.

There are concerns over the viability of winning in future seasons. The choice to rebuild has been met with some criticism. Principally, “Vesely, Trevor Booker, Kevin Seraphin and Chris Singleton - all former first-round picks - spend most of their time on the bench” despite the importance of first round picks in years prior (Reid, 2014b, p. D7). In February of 2014, after the Wizards traded 2011 sixth overall pick Jan Vesely, Reid (2014b) remarked, “in shipping out Vesely, the Wizards continued a disturbing trend: They’ve drafted too many players who have failed to develop and wound up dumping them for little in return” (p. D7). The lack of significant playing time of first round draft picks and also of last year’s first round pick Otto Porter, Jr., whom Reid (2014b) compares his “rookie season has basically been equivalent to a redshirt year in college” is a troubling trend for the organization’s handling of player development (p. D7). Lee expands on views about the organization’s handling of draft picks, as Porter, Jr “would rarely get the chance to learn through his mistakes during games, just as John Wall and Bradley Beal - the team’s previous top-three picks - did in their first seasons” (Lee, 2014). For Porter, Jr., he will need more time and opportunities on the court to develop especially since he started his rookie season with an injury that kept him out of the preseason.

**Conclusions and Implications**
The views offered by sportswriters cultivate ideological processes of winning and losing. These processes, whether for the Bullets or Wizards, fuel the beliefs and attitudes
of writers as they address the culture of the franchise. The writing between the two periods suggests a drastic shift in rhetoric from winning to losing. What one can learn from both periods is a duality of performance, two sides of the same coin. Prior to winning the NBA title, Bullets’ writers were reluctant to depict the team as a dominant force because it was only dominant at home, sporadically dominant when in road games, and was susceptible to postseason collapses based on postseason performance in prior years. They were regarded as postseason losers whom writers had reservations about being league champions. Wizards’ writers initially hoped that the team could master their rivalries, improve their defensive play, and compete in the playoffs. These aspirations were never reached because the Wizards regressed to a state of perpetual futility through two seasons of injuries, inconsistent performance, and a harrowing off-court incident that contributed to key personnel being traded away. There is a distinguishable difference in language between newspaper coverage for the Bullets and Wizards that is cautiously optimistic towards the Bullets and aggressively dissenting towards the Wizards. The difference in aggressive language and tone could be an effect of the increasing importance sport has within our society in the 2000s compared to the 1970s.

In order to create an exhaustive historical summary, an individual would need to allocate a significant amount of time, research, and resources to pinpoint compelling and engaging trends. The implications drawn from this research will not immediately affect the franchise’s business operations or its ideological status. However, it could be utilized to inform others about tropes and themes that have plagued the franchise or even provide
coaches with information that allows them to better prepare their players for possible
distractions from outside sources in the social or professional media. One limitation to
this study is the availability of critical information from early in the franchise’s history.
Outlets have become more verbally critical of a team’s performance over time in
comparison to the early years of sports coverage. This research is not intended to be an
exhaustive summary of the franchise. The scope of this research needed to be limited to
four years to ensure it would be focused. The Baltimore Sun and Washington Post are two
credible and valuable resources containing a wealth of sports coverage for the
Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia areas. These two resources are highly favored
and essential publications.

These snapshots highlight areas that followers of the franchise can refer to as
distinctive portrayals of performance by contrasting key high and low moments in
franchise history. I hoped that, by undertaking this research, I could develop a unique and
specialized case with which to better understand a franchise that has stagnated to the
point of constant misfortune. The sporting world presents a highly competitive arena that
explicitly and contextually demands winners and losers. It is in this way that individuals
or teams can become seasoned losers or seasoned winners in sport. This contributes to
losing narratives for teams, such as the Washington Wizards, where underperformance
becomes ingrained in the local culture.

Winning was normalized for the 1977-1979 Bullets; it was achieved in the years
prior to head coach Dick Motta and extending throughout his tenure. The Washington
Bullets had a resilient and talented roster whom writers felt could be starters on any team’s lineup, which could also be said of the 2008-2010 Wizards. Figure 1 is a word cloud displaying the frequency and intensity of words from sportswriters’ stories about the Washington Bullets. Figure 2 is a word cloud reflecting the frequency and intensity of words from sportswriters’ articles about the Wizards from 2008-2010. Both of these figures help illuminate some of the prevailing narrative from the selected periods which reinforces the sportswriters’ ideologies. These word clouds were added to draw attention

*Figure 1. Word cloud of frequently used words from 1977-1979 Bullets’ articles.*

*Figure 2. Word cloud of frequently used words from 2008-2010 Wizards’ articles.*
to the themes generated from sportswriters’ articles. They provide a visual illustration of the narrative from both subsets of years. They were generated by copying the data, which was outlined and detailed in Chapter 3, and inputting this data into the online program, Wordle.

![Figure 2. World cloud of frequently used words from 2008-2010 Wizards’ articles.](image)

When utilizing word clouds, words that are used most frequently in a text receive larger visuals than words that occur less often. Some of the successful terminology utilized in the Bullets era: “victory,” “lead,” and “scored” are absent from the 2008-2010
word cloud. The tone of writers was increasingly more critical for the 2008-2010 period and some of the most referenced events and terms were reflected in Figure 2: “lost,” “loss,” and “Arenas.” The 2008-2010 Wizards failed to develop chemistry, largely due to injuries, and this contributed to a single season franchise record 27 different players being named to the roster, worst two year record in franchise history, and unquestionably poor performance throughout the season. As Figure 2 highlights, some of the issues described about that Wizards are reflected in this visual. Although Bullets’ setbacks were viewed as significant, they remained competitive in many games and continued to produce several blowout wins late in the season despite a roster impacted by injuries. Writers covering the Bullets maintained a winner’s sense of failure; setbacks were compared to their status of being in the hunt for the playoffs. At that point in the franchise’s history, there had not been years of losing, lack of postseason appearances, or other meteoric hindrance. The Wizards in 2008-2010 were building on almost 20 years of losing and 35 years since their last appearance in at least the second round of the playoffs. Writers cultivated a learned helplessness approach to losing; it was a behavior that necessitated an immense effort to circumvent.

There was an ideological and vocal culture of winning for the Bullets that the Wizards had not come close to. Losing rhetoric for the Wizards reflected a significantly direr situation than what was alluded to by Bullets’ writers whenever that team struggled. Bullets’ losses were seen as setbacks; however, Wizards’ issues were depicted in extremes, equated to tragedies and meltdowns. These snapshots reveal, for Wizards
enthusiasts, essential components that illuminate their struggles. The game of basketball demands a great deal from an NBA team and success is earned through trial and error in the form of the draft, free agency, and regular season performance. Players have to be committed year round, they need time to mature, and they must find it within themselves to perform when the time comes. Coaches have to be resilient, emphasize their philosophy, and rally their team around setbacks and triumphs. The organization, as a whole, must show its commitment to the team through quality results from free agency and the NBA Draft while also stimulating the growth of its existing roster. The professional sports world is an elite and ultra-competitive arena that may not always be competitively balanced. One cannot aspire to be a competent source of Wizards’ basketball, or Washington, D.C. basketball, without first becoming well-versed and understanding the angst of fans. These snapshots matter in that the franchise has been believed to be several years away from being regarded as an elite team in the Eastern Conference. There is a history of stagnation that has permitted losing discourse to permeate.
Appendix A

Baltimore Sun Articles


Guards lead Bullets into first place. (1977, December 5). *Baltimore Sun*, p. C4


Appendix B

Washington Post Articles


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Biography

Jamel Lavine graduated from C.D. Hylton Senior High School, Woodbridge, Virginia, in 2007. He received his Bachelor of Science from George Mason University in 2011. He received his Master of Science in International Sport Management from George Mason University in 2014.