

LOMBARDI LINEUP:

In defense of umpires

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For more than a century, every baseball player has heard the same warning at least once: don't argue balls and strikes. Not only was it considered pointless, but it was also seen as a direct challenge to the umpire's unquestioned authority. The strike zone was whatever the person behind the plate decided, and players were forced to accept it. That was until this MLB season, with the debut of the new Automated Ball-Strike (ABS) system. Using this new technology, with the tap of a cap players can challenge calls they believe the umpires got wrong. Prior to this season, ball and strike calls were non-negotiable. Even the most blatant missed calls would stand because teams had no way to challenge them like most other plays. As a result, hitters were forced to adjust to even the most questionable strike zones, or risk being ejected from the

game. But with ABS now in place, umpires no longer hold absolute authority over every pitch, and in cases of particularly ego-driven officials, players can now push back. ABS was implemented to eliminate truly egregious missed calls, but has now introduced unintended tensions on the diamond as well. Modern fans, now equipped with sophisticated real-time pitch tracking, have begun to expect perfection behind the plate. To achieve that level of accuracy, however, would require removing the human element of umpiring that has been a staple of the game ever since it was created. The technology behind the ABS system is undeniably enticing, and can help remedy major mistakes, but we should still strive to preserve the human umpire, even if that includes a missed call here and there. Potential issues surrounding ABS became evident in just the first weekend of the season and should serve as a game the

league hopes to avoid in the future. On Sunday, March 29, umpire CB Bucknor was behind the plate for a Reds-Red Sox game that would show the effects of the ABS system. The friction began in the sixth inning, when Eugenio Suarez challenged two consecutive would-be strikeout calls, and Bucknor's frustration became increasingly noticeable. In total, this game had eight total challenges and six overturned calls, which is noticeably more than average. While the system was functioning as designed, the constant stoppages created a visibly tense environment that began to feel like a mockery of the umpire more than anything. Tensions skyrocketed in the eighth inning, when Red Sox shortstop Trevor Story checked his swing on an 0-2 count, but Bucknor took it upon himself to call him out. Normally in close calls like this, it's expected for the home plate umpire to appeal to a field umpire, since his view

is obstructed behind the plate. This sparked immediate outrage that led to Red Sox manager Alex Cora being ejected, in a call that many fans saw as the umpire taking out his frustration for the challenged calls. Bucknor finished with an 88.3% accuracy in this game. In most professions, being nearly 90% correct in a split-second environment sounds successful, but that's not the case in a hyper-analyzed league like the MLB. His result would easily rank in the bottom three percent of games in any given season. But an unintended consequence of the new system has become abundantly clear. MLB umpires are some of the most highly trained officials in any professional sport, but now they're being forced to essentially work under a microscope with their failures being shown to tens of thousands in real time. While some say it humbles umpires and incentivizes them to make better calls, others believe it just humiliates

them for doing an incredibly difficult job. To the MLB's credit, though, the ABS challenge system was designed to create a balance of power. Teams are given two challenges per game, which they can keep only if they are successful. This is so that players only challenge particularly egregious or impactful calls, rather than every pitch. The goal isn't to replace umpires; it's to give teams a chance to correct important mistakes. Still, as everyone adjusts to ABS in today's game, there needs to be some compromise. It's easy to blame umpires for inaccuracies, but if we want to retain the iconic image of an umpire making the call, they cannot be treated as a subject of ridicule. Examples like Bucknor's should hopefully be an extreme case, and not the norm going forward. As a player, manager, or even a fan, ABS is an important tool to ensure the fairness of the game, not an excuse to attack the officials behind it.



SPORTS SPECTRUM:

Negative NBA Narratives

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All sports serve to tell a story about why certain games matter and why rivalries hold so much power. Sports narratives are mostly rooted in things that happened and trends that occur, but at times, the truth can be stretched, and narratives bleed into sensationalized content. There are usually two different types of narratives: ones surrounding players and ones surrounding the game itself. Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown: Who's the Guy on the Celtics? The Tatum and Brown storyline has been around since the two debuted, but recently, it's picked up since Tatum returned on March 6 vs. the Mavericks after tearing his Achilles in Game 4 of the 2025 Eastern Conference Semifinals. The narrative often presents the two of them as competing for success, a common theme among NBA teams since the collapse of the Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving, and James Harden "big three" in Brooklyn: the belief that the team cannot have multiple points of success and that one must outperform the other. Every team needs to have their "guy." For the majority of the Golden State Warriors' success, that guy has been Curry, although he did not win Finals MVP for the first three titles; he was the driver for their success in their championship seasons. For the Lakers in the late 2010s, it was Kobe Bryant. Kevin Garnett and Anthony Edwards fill this function on their respective Minnesota Timberwolves teams. Often, the media tries to place stars in a Batman and Robin-like scenario. The Cavaliers, featuring Donovan Mitchell and Darius Garland; the Lakers, again with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Magic Johnson; and the Bulls, with Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen. However, such narratives can tear apart two stars, as was the case with Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal. Following their threepeat in 2000, 2001 and 2002, media figures began framing the championships as something Kobe "received" rather than "earned," often comparing him to Pippen to imply he was merely a high-end support piece for O'Neal. Having grown up idolizing Michael Jordan, Kobe was reportedly obsessed with a legacy where he wasn't viewed as the sidekick. Although O'Neal maintains that he was in charge

(and during the feud, engaged with the narrative publicly), he urges others not to discount Bryant's contributions to the team. He explicitly told Shaq that if they were to continue winning, he had to be the "lead dog" because he wasn't getting the credit he deserved. Unlike those examples, there isn't a massive age gap or a clear "Batman and Robin" hierarchy; they are peers who grew up in the league at the same time, drafted a year after one another. For the better part of the last nine seasons, they've been successful together. Since Brown's rookie season (2016-17), the Celtics have made it to at least the third round (conference finals/tournament semifinals) of the playoffs every year except one. They have been in the conference finals four times. Tatum and Brown are part of the team's consistent success. **MVP Race Inconsistency** Some make the case that Brown and Cade Cunningham can still win MVP, especially over Shai Gilgeous-Alexander or Victor Wembanyama. As excellent as those two are, that's highly unlikely, given reigning MVP Gilgeous-Alexander hit a game winner in the same game he tied a 63-year-old record. As discussed in a previous article, there are many other issues with the current state of the award. Do note that, as with many other sports, there is no set criteria to determine MVP — it's usually 100 media personnel sitting together and voting from their opinion, which we have no way of knowing for sure. An NBA MVP, in modern times, is decided by one of four factors: their team's record, their personal stats, their on/off net rating/box plus/minus, and a voter's opinion of the player and what they interpret as value in the NBA. Since there is no "set criteria," voters often fall back on the "story" they want to tell. This is why many people were not comfortable with the idea of Nikola Jokic winning MVP three times in a row; the stats were there, but the "narrative" had moved on, so they refused to award him. In addition, many held his lack of a championship (as of the beginning of the 2022-2023 season) against him, because, usually, players who had won MVP three times in a row had won a championship by then, as did Bird, Chamberlain and Russell. Given media reception of both Jokic and Giannis Antetokounmpo, it's become a common

trend for international players to be viewed through the lens of what they have not accomplished. A major reason for this is the NCAA to NBA pipeline. Because the media lacks a 'pre-packaged' collegiate story for these players, they often rely on traditional milestones, like championships, much earlier and more strictly than they would for a domestic star with an established 'hero' arc. This is a prime example of narrative gatekeeping. Without the NCAA to NBA marketing pipeline, international players are forced to pay a 'championship tax' just to stay in the MVP conversation. With the growing number of international players who are taking the stage (you may have seen a graphic about the nationality of all of the MVP's in NBA history), Gilgeous-Alexander has bridged this gap somewhat regarding the coverage of international stars. **The Price of Being on the Lakers** Doncic has been the source

of a lot of criticism since he was traded to the Lakers in February of 2025. From what is perceived as complaining to the refs to his defensive motor, he's been swinging in and out of public favor for the past couple of weeks. Complaining to the refs should be classified as not an issue with the player, but rather a side effect of the NBA's questionable refereeing, which has been a notable problem for years. This is a problem, as players have been fined for making gestures that insinuate the referees make money off certain calls. The main point here is that none of this criticism (at large, anyway) happened at this level while Doncic was playing for Dallas. This is an example of what is dubbed the "Lakers Tax" in full effect. The Lakers tax is a concept that, when playing with such a historic franchise in a large city and market, you are almost bound to have every action and reaction criticized. Think of

them as the Yankees of the NBA in terms of branding. Doncic has also never been known as a defensive stalwart or even a two-way player, so to expect anything else from him at this point in his career is setting expectations too high. Generational as he is, a player's game adapts only if progress is there. Some even mention that James being on a team this dysfunctional is a disservice to him, harming his legacy. James has had an undeniable career. Being a part of NBA pop culture, the Heatles, going back to Cleveland and making history with a 3-1 comeback and even his championship with the Lakers. Those are not things anyone can take from him, as he's been playing the game for a long time, the longest of anyone in NBA history. Overall, the Lakers have actual roster construction issues, and to push that aside for legacy conversations is disingenuous at best and outright harmful at worst.



Jayson Tatum of the Boston Celtics during a game. Tatum recovered from an Achilles injury and returned to the lineup in early March.
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