Basketball fouls can be predicted by personality traits—but not the ones you would expect
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A basketball player can be dishonest or bad-tempered yet is not more likely to commit fouls, a new study has shown.

Researchers including from the University of Exeter Business School ran a study of 242 male youth basketball players from the top German youth basketball league (Nachwuchs und Jugend Basketball Bundesliga) to investigate if personality traits can predict rule-breaking behavior in sport.

They found that players in the top quartile for conscientiousness—who were organized, careful and precise—committed 30% fewer fouls (0.95 fouls per 10 minutes) than those in the bottom quartile (1.24 fouls per 10 minutes).

But the researchers found no links between other character traits and fouls, including qualities such as honesty, emotionality, extraversion and openness to experience.

“The findings are surprising given that honesty is generally linked to rule-breaking behavior so would be assumed to be linked to fouls too,” said Professor Jonas Lang, a Distinguished Research Professor at the University of Exeter Business School and co-author of the study.

Prior to the start of 2017-18 basketball season, players filled out a HEXACO personality survey and the Sports Mental Toughness Questionnaire, which measures confidence, constancy and control.

This was then linked to performance data of each player, provided by the league at the end of the season, which included number of fouls, minutes played and team.

"Fouls in sports can impact the outcome of games, tournaments or even whole seasons, yet there is a lack of research into whether personality traits predict rule-breaking behavior," said Professor Lang.

"Our results might provide important insights for future research: if our results can be transferred to other sports then teams and managers might start basing their decision-making processes more strongly on personality characteristics—especially levels of conscientiousness."

Previous research has shown that there are certain characteristics within a game that can influence the number of fouls committed—in basketball, for example, more fouls are committed in games between teams with a similar league position.

In making their findings the researchers were able to take into account these "situational characteristics."

They also were able to calculate how much a
player's position predicts fouls committed, finding that it explains only 13.2% of variance in fouls per minute, using data from the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL) and UEFA Champions League.

The study, Linking personality traits to objective foul records in (semi-) professional youth basketball, is published in the Journal of Research in Personality.


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