

What explains ‘home court advantage’ in sports? NBA ‘bubble’ provides some clues

The weirdly truncated pro basketball season of 2019-20 afforded a prime opportunity for a [natural experiment](#).

After halting its season in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Basketball Association resumed the last two months of the season in July with the 22 top teams confined to play in a travel-less “bubble” within Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

“I’m a big sports fan, and I always wanted to look at how travel – and potentially jet lag and sleep disturbance – impacts sports performance,” [occupational health scientist Andrew McHill] said.

...

When a team travels across the country into different time zones, the mismatch between the new time zone and the team’s home time zone has a physiological effect in a very specific part of the body: the suprachiasmatic nucleus of the brain’s hypothalamus. In a precise activity like shooting a basketball, even slightly disrupting a player’s central circadian clock could be the difference between a ball that swishes through the net and one that rattles in and out of the rim.

The study found that shooting accuracy in the bubble improved significantly.

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McHill said his findings suggest that NBA teams may be better off boarding a plane for the next city immediately after their previous game ends – as opposed to staying overnight and then flying the next day.

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