The

“Underdog”
Mentality

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On a cool evening on Jan. 10, 2009 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Kurt Warner spoke to reporters after his Arizona Cardinals stunned the Carolina Panthers in the Divisional Round of the 2009 NFL Playoffs. When explaining how his team pulled off the upset, Warner uttered the phrase, “Nobody believes in us, but us.” The win came a week after this same Arizona Cardinals team surprised a likable Atlanta Falcons team in the Wild Card Round to advance to Carolina. The following week, against another heavily favored team in the Philadelphia Eagles, the Cardinals again defied the odds and won the game by the score of 32-25 to advance to biggest game in all of football: The Super Bowl.

**Abstract:** The objective of this paper is to understand the underdog, specifically in the world of sports, what comes with that label, and how it can actually be used as an advantage. I will examine just what effect being the underdog has on a team’s psyche, and how that in turn, can be used to the team’s benefit. The three main ways I will determine this will be to examine the psyche of the fan, as well as the psyche of the athlete and team, and to further explore just how these underdogs can acknowledge the reality of their situation to defeat the favored opponent.
The team was an underdog coming in to the playoffs, contributing to Warner’s belief that “Nobody believed in [them].” They remained an underdog all the way through the Super Bowl, when their impressive streak of catching opponents off guard finally came to an end. Still, an NFC Championship is nothing to be ashamed of. But the question that the 2008-2009 Arizona Cardinals football team raised among the millions of football fans was a valid one: If this team was supposedly an underdog, why were they able to advance all the way to Super Bowl XLIII? And the question the other 31 teams in the National Football League began to ask was also valid: If they can do it, why can’t we?

The concept of the underdog is nothing new. Perhaps the most famous underdog story of all comes in the Biblical account of David vs. Goliath. In the story, Goliath, a gargantuan man standing at nearly nine feet tall is defeated by a common man of humble origins, David, simply because David defied conventional wisdom and attacked Goliath where he was most vulnerable. The tale is meant to be uplifting, to inspire readers into believing that anything is possible, no matter how impossible it may seem.

The Arizona Cardinals surely had a difficult path to the Super Bowl. But their story is not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only underdog story worth discussing. Yet, it is the postgame phrase used by Warner that makes it such an intriguing case. The fact that Warner is aware that “Nobody believes in us” is an indication that he is aware of his team’s perception as the underdog. Moreover, the fact that this particular team defied the odds and actually advanced to the biggest game of all is proof that all underdogs have the potential to defeat “Goliaths,” they just have to understand exactly how it can be done.
In order to fully understand how an underdog can defeat the favorite, it must first be established just what makes a certain team an underdog. To do this, it is important to understand the psyche of the fan, for an underdog is created through the perception of the fans; if the fans think a team should win, they are favorites, not underdogs. In his work titled “Bandwagon and Underdog Effects and the Possibility of Election Predictions,” Herbert Simon explains “If persons are more likely to vote for a candidate when they expect him to win than when they expect him to lose, we have a ‘bandwagon’ effect. If the opposite holds, we have an “underdog” effect” (Simon, 1954, p. 246). Simon is obviously referring to politics when he describes this, but the terminology could easily be translated into the sports world. The “bandwagon” effect is not directly relevant to the topic of the underdog, but it could still be translated to the sports world in that if a fan perceives a team to be more talented than the opponent, the bandwagon effect would be at play, and that team would be the favorite. However, if a fan perceives a team to be inferior to an opponent, then the underdog effect takes place. Upon this understanding, the question then becomes, what factors contribute to a fan’s perception of certain team?

While the media is a major factor in creating the perception of a favorite or underdog, the most tangible way to determine which team is the favorite and which is the underdog would be the betting lines. There are many variables that are factored in to the betting lines including, but certainly not limited to, home-field advantage, team record, weather, and player injuries. For the purpose of this argument, attention will be given not to the specific factors but the lines themselves. The betting lines are used mostly for gambling purposes, and they are set by odds makers. The way they work is that the team that is perceived to be better will “give” points, and the team that is perceived to be inferior will “get” points. In certain cases, when the two
competing teams are seen as equals, the line is set at “pick-em,” meaning that neither team is “getting” nor “giving” points. In this instance, they are both equally perceived as being skilled enough to win the contest. For example, in the 2009 Cardinals and Panthers game, the line read: Panthers -9.5. What this meant was that in the gambling world, the Panthers were perceived as being better than the Cardinals, so much so that if the Cardinals began the game with a 9-0 lead, the Panthers would still win the game outright. In even simpler terms, the odds makers believed that the Panthers could win the game by a margin greater than 9.5 points. In terms of NFL Playoff football, a -9.5 line is extremely rare and is only given if one team is considered to be significantly better than the other team. It is in looking at the lines that fans generate a perception of a team; and when a fan sees that one team is favored to win by as much as 9.5 points, the underdog effect is in play for the opponent.

It has already been established that the idea of the underdog lies in perception. As far as the underdog perception in the mind of the athlete is concerned, the factors that suggest an underdog (i.e., the media, betting lines, etc.) are the same for athletes as they are for fans. Yet, in terms of fans, the length with which they can use this perception only goes as far as their rooting interests and maybe an occasional bet or two. For the athlete, however, this perception can be used to drive performance on the field of play, and it is in the acknowledgement of this perception that the idea of being an underdog can actually work in a team’s favor.

In an article that examines the effects of a crowd on a team’s performance, authors Roy Baumeister and Andrew Steinhilber cite a study by M.R. Leary and B.R. Schlenker that notes “Rejecting, or unsympathetic audiences may tend not to engender self-presentational concerns.
Supportive audiences, in contrast, may desire and support the favorable self-redefinition, so self-presentational concerns may be greatest in front of them” (Baumeister and Steinhibler, 1984, p. 85). What this study is saying is that teams playing in front of a largely supportive crowd actually feel more pressure to perform up to the fans’ high standards rather than if that crowd were simply giving them negative feedback. In other words, the pressure to live up to expectations is far greater than the pressure to defy them. The crowd’s support for its team is actually having a somewhat negative effect because it is maximizing a player’s self-awareness, meaning they become more aware of what is at stake, thus bringing about added pressure.

This can be directly tied to the Cardinals playoff game due to the fact that Arizona was playing the game in front of fans in Charlotte, North Carolina. With the Panthers enjoying home-field advantage, the crowd was more supportive of their team, and gave the Cardinals a more negative reception. As a result, the pressure of having to appeal to the home crowd was a factor that automatically worked against the Panthers, whereas with the Cardinals, the team did not face that added pressure and could instead focus on simply playing the same style of football that had gotten them this far. This example could be extended to the next two rounds as well, as Arizona then traveled to Philadelphia where they were again the away team, thus not subject to the same pressure that the home team faced as a result of the crowd. For this reason, it should not be all that surprising that the Cardinals were able to win the game and advance to the Super Bowl. Going further, in the Super Bowl, when the Cardinals finally did lose, the game was played at a neutral site. This neutrality meant that neither team had a home field advantage, thus, both were subjected to an equal amount of pressure from the stands. When the playing field is evened, it is far more likely that overall talent will be the number one factor in determining a winner, and in Super Bowl XLIII, that certainly was the case when the juggernaut Pittsburgh Steelers defeated the underdog Arizona Cardinals.
While Leary and Schlenker’s study is specifically examining crowd effects on team performance, the conclusion can be extended factors outside of the stadium, as well. Just as the crowd elevates the home player or team’s self awareness, any factor that shows support likely will have the same effect for a favorite. For example, an ESPN analyst predicting that a team will dominate an opponent follows along the same lines of crowd support. While that analyst may not be at the stadium cheering on the team, the high expectations set by that prediction will, at least partially, have the same effect that the supportive crowd had on the players of the favored team. The prediction will cause the favorite to feel more pressure, while taking even more pressure off of the underdog. As a result, the underdog can relax and focus on playing its own game while the favorite has the added pressure of having to live up to the analyst’s predictions. Obviously, an analyst’s predictions are just one more of a seemingly infinite amount of ways that a team can gain the perception of a favorite or underdog. Pressure can be added to the favorite not just by the crowd, but any of these other factors that have previously been discussed (media, betting lines, etc.); and this pressure can, in turn, have the same effects on the favorite and the underdog, respectively.
Hence, when Warner uses his “Nobody believes in us, but us,” line, he may not know it, but what he could really be saying in terms of this study is, “The Panthers’ fans’ support for their team, along with all the so-called ‘experts’ predictions of our defeat placed all of the pressure on those guys and made our job a lot less stressful.” The fact, according to this study, is that having “nobody believe in [them]” can actually be a benefit to the underdog.

It has now been explained that underdogs can use the lack of pressure in their favor, and it could be argued that the disproportionate amount of pressure facing the favorites is the main factor that allows underdogs the ability to defeat them. But the fact remains that no matter how small the amount of pressure facing the underdogs may be, the team cannot simply relax and hope the favorite folds under the pressure of the high expectations. The underdog still has to find ways to outplay the “Goliaths” in order to win. The process of doing so can only begin with the team’s self-perception and acknowledgement that they are, in fact, the underdog.

Malcolm Gladwell recently published an article in the “New Yorker” examining just how these underdogs trump their opponents. In the article, titled “How David Beats Goliath,” he takes in to account a lot of these same factors. He does so through examining several journals that explore the idea of underdogs triumphing over “Goliaths.”

The main article Gladwell uses for his statistics is an article by Ivan Arreguín-Toft titled “How the Weak Win Wars.” According to Gladwell, “Toft recently looked at every war fought in the past two hundred years between strong and weak combatants. The Goliaths, he found, won in
71.5 per cent of the cases” (Gladwell, 2009, p. 1). As can be seen from this statistic, regardless of pressure or any other outside factors, when boiled down simply, favorites win almost three out of four times. However, in many of these instances, the underdogs failed to recognize that they were in fact, underdogs. The key, as Gladwell and Toft conclude, is for the underdog to acknowledge that they are an underdog and attempt to compensate for their weakness. The sad truth is that an underdog cannot simply hope that their talent will win out against a superior opponent. In fact, “Of the two hundred and two lopsided conflicts in Arreguín-Toft’s database, the underdog chose to go toe to toe with Goliath the conventional way a hundred and fifty-two times—and lost a hundred and nineteen times” (Gladwell, 2009, p. 5). However, the fifty other contests reveal a lot more about how real of a chance an underdog has to defeat an opponent if that underdog is willing to acknowledge its weakness.

As Arreguín-Toft (2001) explains, it is important to understand how the weak win wars because it will reduce the likelihood of unwinnable wars, increase the chances for the underdog’s success, and it can help serve as guide for the underdog to achieve victory. As was the case in David vs. Goliath, David acknowledged he was a much weaker opponent and could not simply defeat Goliath in any conventional manner. Thus, because he knew this, he decided his only chance for victory was to go an unconventional route and throw stones. In doing this, David caught Goliath off guard and, ultimately, defeated him. Likewise, in the instances in wars when the underdogs also acknowledged their weaknesses, “[Their] winning percentage went from 28.5 to 63.6” (Gladwell, 2009, p. 1). Basically, when the underdogs are aware of their weaknesses and play with them in mind, they actually win more often than they lose. Again, this example isn’t intended for sports, but the idea of defying conventional thinking can certainly be applied to the sports world. Just as David acknowledged his weakness and took an unconventional path to victory, the underdog in any sporting event can do the same.
The article gives another intriguing example of how thinking unconventionally gives the thinker or thinkers an incredible advantage. Gladwell describes (as cited in Lenat & Brown, 1984) an experiment performed in 1981 by a computer scientist from Stanford University named Doug Lenat. Lenat entered a contest where every team was given an imaginary budget of $1 trillion to allocate toward a naval fleet, and these fleets would compete against each other with the last fleet to have boats that were not sunk being the winner. The teams could choose to spend the money in any way that they desired, and they could spend the money on any combination of small, medium, and large ships. The vast majority of entrants used the conventional way of thinking and simply allocated an equal amount toward all three sizes. Lenat, however, designed a program he called “Eurisko,” and he relied on the program to make his decision for him. The program did not have any conventional way of rationalizing the purchases and instead based the decision off of the most logical train of thought that would ensure victory. It essentially took the common sense approach. “Eurisko” decided to spend the money entirely on small ships, thus having a fleet much larger in quantity than every other entrant in the contest. To Lenat’s surprise, the fleet was so overwhelmingly large that through its sheer quantity, it was able to outlast all of the other fleets, and Lenat won the contest.

This example is relevant because it is the perfect example of how falling in to the trap of conventionalism can lead to one’s downfall. “Eurisko” was a computer program that had no human emotions. Therefore, it could rationalize the purchase of all small ships because it wasn’t trained with the conventional way of thinking, meaning it did not care that this huge amount of small ships being destroyed meant many lives (obviously, the lives were fictional, but they still
represented life nevertheless) would be destroyed along with them, a moral dilemma the human contestants likely faced. Instead, the program was able to simply look at the contest from a point of view that was only concerned with finding the best way possible to win, and it worked.

How does this relate to an underdog in sports? On the field of play, most often, the more talented team will come out victorious. However, just as an underdog can use the alleviation of pressure to their advantage, they can also attempt to defeat the “Goliaths” simply by acknowledging themselves as an underdog, recognizing their weaknesses and compensating by playing in an unconventional manner, just as “Eurisko” went the unconventional route to win its contest. For example, the Butler Bulldogs made a recent run at a National Championship in the 2010 NCAA Tournament. The team was not expected to make it all the way to the championship game, but when all was said and done that was where they found themselves. How did this happen? Rather than hope that they could just outshoot opponents, the Bulldogs understood that they were not the most athletic team in the tournament. Therefore, they compensated for their shortcomings by playing tenacious defense, often pressing to force the other team to make mistakes. This may seem like the way every team should play defense, but surprisingly, very few teams copied Butler’s style of play, choosing instead to go the conventional route and play a half-court, hands-off style of defense. Yet, in the end, it was Butler’s unconventional style of play that went the farthest.
If it is true that the underdog effect can actually have positive effects in the sports world, then sports’ fans can expect to see a lot more cases like that of the Butler Bulldogs and Arizona Cardinals. The heightened pressure that comes with being a favorite will serve as a detriment to the team’s overall performance. Therefore, the position of being an underdog is a favored one because it allows these supposedly inferior opponents the luxury of not having to appeal to fans’ high expectations. Attitudes of a home crowd, analysts’ predictions, and the many other factors that fuel the perception of an underdog will all have an effect on the team’s self-perception. And it is in acknowledging this perception that an underdog can use it to its advantage and take the unconventional route to upset the “Goliaths.”
As far as the Butler Bulldogs are concerned, it should be noted that the NCAA tournament games are held at neutral sites. Therefore, the condition previously discussed of a home crowd adding pressure to teams did not apply in these games. For this reason, the teams did not have to worry about playing for a crowd and could instead focus simply on playing their own style of basketball. In Butler’s case, that meant playing unconventionally. Yet, interestingly, the championship game, the game when the Butler Bulldogs exciting run met its disappointing end in the biggest game of all just like the Arizona Cardinals, was played in Indianapolis, Indiana. The campus of Butler University is also located in Indianapolis, just five miles away from the stadium where the game was held. Suddenly, the idea that “nobody believes in us” was not applicable to Butler, because even though the Bulldogs entered the game as an underdog, the crowd was comprised mostly of Butler fans, adding a heightened sense of pressure to the team that should not have felt any at all.

Works Cited


