The Houston Astros Data Scandal

In the field of sports, data is very important. Teams need to collect as much data as possible regarding their opponents. For example, teams can collect data regarding their opponents last five matches to see how they have played. This information would help them in planning and give them a higher probability of winning. However, there are times when teams can use data unethically to give them an advantage over their opponents. For example, if a team uses data science to predict what their opposing team is likely to do, then that is unethical. One of the teams that have been engaged in unethical data use is Houston Astros.

Just like other baseball teams Houston Astros used data to improve their team's performance. The team's general manager, Jeff Luhnow, particularly utilized advanced data analytics to enhance Houston Astros' performance. However, in the year 2016, an intern working Houston Astros organization presented a PowerPoint to general manager Jeff Luhnow that featured the latest creation by the team's high-tech front office: an Excel-based application programmed with an algorithm that could decode the opposing catchers' signs (Diamond, 2020). In baseball, the pitcher and the catcher have to be in constant communication. The communication has to be discreet so that the opposing team does not decipher what the players are saying and mostly, players use fingers to communicate (Epps Jr., 2016). There is nothing unethical about nonverbal communication among the players as it is part of their winning strategy. It is however unethical to decipher communication signs using electronic means.

According to rule 8 (e) of Data Science Code of Professional Conduct, "A data scientist shall use reasonable diligence when designing, creating and implementing algorithms to avoid harm. The data scientist shall disclose to the client any real, perceived or hidden risks from using the algorithm. After full disclosure, the client is responsible for making the decision to use or not

use the algorithm. If a data scientist reasonably believes an algorithm will cause harm, the data scientist shall take reasonable remedial measures, including disclosure to the client, and including, if necessary, disclosure to the proper authorities. The data scientist shall take reasonable measures to persuade the client to use the algorithm appropriately." In the case of Houston Astros, the people who created the cheating algorithm knew exactly what the algorithm was meant to do. Also, the management was aware of the cheating algorithm but still went ahead to use it, which was unethical. According to Convercent Team (2020), during the investigations into the case, the Houston Astros players told the Major League Baseball (MLB) investigators that had the team management intervened, they would have stopped the unethical practices. The fact that the management did not intervene but supported the practices shows that they endorsed the unethical practices. Although A.J. Hinch, Astros manager, did not approve the sign-stealing scheme, he never took any direct steps to stop the practice from continuing (Convercent Team, 2020). As a manager, he should have taken more stringent measure to curb any unethical practices but never did.

The Astros cheating scandal had a number of consequences. One was that it damaged the team's reputation. After the scandal, Astros' net favorability dropped by twelve points among the adults in the United States after the release of the cheating report by MLB (Silverman, 2020). As a result of the scandal, some teams banned the use of 'Astros' nickname. As Yaeger (2020) notes, leagues in Long Beach, South Fullerton, in Pennsylvania and New York announced that they had banned the Astros name and uniform from competition in the wake of the Houston Astros cheating scandal. Thus, many teams did not want to be associated with the Astros after what they had done. Astros' scandal also tainted baseball as a whole. When a game is associated with cheating, fans may not enjoy watching it. Many fans enjoy honest competition where the better

team wins, but not through underhand methods. It was disheartening for many fans who had celebrated Astros' victories when they realized that many of them were through cheating.

There were consequences for the team's top management. As a result of the scandal, Astros fired the team manager, A.J. Hinch, and general manager, Jeff Luhnow, after they were suspended for one year (Vigdor, 2021). Luhnow and Hinch's suspensions and subsequent firings would have reputational implications for them. As Nitengale (2020) notes, Luhnow was already among the one most unpopular general managers in the baseball sport industry among his peers. Thus, after losing his job, he would have trouble getting a team that would employ him. The Major League Baseball (MLB) fined Astros club $5 million (Vigdor, 2021). This fine would have huge financial implications for the club. Robert D. Manfred, the baseball commissioner was also heavily criticized for not punishing the Astros players and refusing to vacate the Astros' World Series title from 2017 (Vigdor, 2021). These criticisms show that people expected more severe action to be taken against the Astor team for what they did. There were also other people who were punished as a result of the scandal. Among them was Boston Red Sox manager Alex Cora and New York Mets manager Carlos Beltran. Cora was fired because of his involvement in the cheating scheme when he served as Astros' bench coach in 2017 and Beltran resigned because he was an outfielder for the Astros during the 2017 season (Vigdor, 2021). These consequences were severe not only for the team but also for those involved. Even though Astros did not lose their trophy, they would have to start the long rebuilding process without major leaders.

As a result of the Astor scandal MLB planned to make some changes. MLB planned to crackdown on cheating in baseball. MLB was working on various protocols together with the players association to come up with measures that can prevent future cheating incidences. MLB

had proposed that access to clubhouse and dugout while games are taking place would be limited only to players, seven coaches and mandatory trainers & interpreters. Also, the front office members would not be allowed access to clubhouses during games (Pickman, 2020). Since televisions played a key role in facilitating sign stealing, another proposal was to allow only one television in the training room to air the game broadcast, but only on an eight-second delay (Pickman, 2020). The league was also looking for ways of cracking down on the use of engineered substance mixtures that pitchers can use. The measures would bring tremendous changes in the sports and would hopefully boost confidence among all the baseball stakeholders.

Many of the changes would revolve around whether to use or to abandon technology altogether. Although technology is good, it can sometimes reduce the excitement of the games. Also, technology is much likely to improve and players and teams are more likely to device other methods of cheating. This does not however mean that stringent measures should not be imposed. There is a need to implement more measures aimed at reducing cheating in games.

In conclusion, the case of Houston Astros use of technology to cheat reveals how much people can violate data ethics. Data collection can be overlooked as an inconsequential exercise by some people. However, as the case reveals, some data collected can have serious implications on the lives of many people and even affect an entire industry like sports. As such, it is important to always uphold data ethics. Managers must not at any time endorse the use of technology to facilitate cheating. Also, data analysts must be on the forefront in pointing out any fraudulent activities and avoid creating algorithms that aid such activities.

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