Home Cage Advantage: Implicit Bias in MMA Decisions

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This study tests whether implicit bias is present in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) judging. Specifically, after controlling for fighting effectiveness and other non-performance criteria, we examine whether fighters receive favorable decisions in their home countries when facing foreign opponents. We further examine which countries have provided the greatest home-cage advantage.

Perception of the occasional curious decision has prompted the mantra for combatants to “never leave it in the hands of judges.” Judging criteria are clearly outlined and independent organizations have systematically collected fight performance metrics, criteria that have been shown to be predictive in decisions (Gift, 2014). Nevertheless, potential for discriminatory outcomes exists, as implicit biases may favor in-groups even among individuals avowed to impartiality, such as judges.

The literature on discrimination across various professional sports focuses on race and gender (e.g., Jewell, 2017), to the exclusion of other forms of bias. Among those is country-of-origin, notwithstanding that foreign participation in major league sports is vast. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is no exception, with a fighter roster from 30 countries and events staged in 14 different countries during the 2013-2017 sample period utilized in this research.

Method

A logit model with 6,467 scored rounds was estimated based on performance factors and non-performance factors including a home bias variable. This was coded to unity when exactly one of the participating fighters was from the host country. Our fitted model correctly classified 86.6% of round winners. The model estimated the odds of winning a round at 56.9% higher for a fighter competing in his home country against a foreign opponent (exp(0.451)=1.569; p<0.001).

A second model showed thirteen of the fourteen fighter-country match variables were positive, six at traditional levels of significance. That only half of the individual countries are significant may be attributable to the number of rounds scored in a particular country being few, as the estimated coefficients exceeded that of the US in all cases but one (Sweden). The US (exp(0.2903)=1.33; p=0.014) was home to 3,604 of the observations, while South Korea (exp(0.571)=1.79; p=0.538) hosted just 27 scored rounds. The advantage ranged from 33% in the US to 473% in Germany.

Discussion

This research provides considerable evidence of home country bias in the scoring of UFC matches. Implicit bias is a critical and timely subject both in and out of sport management. That we find evidence of this within a small and select group of affirmed impartial judges is further substantiation of the consequence of this research. In the domain of sport management, numerous suggestions for practitioners emerge. Among them, managers should have pause before accepting fights in the opponent’s home country. Within this there is variation in the degree of bias, where being in the out-group is significantly more punitive in certain countries. Because pay and retention in the organization are directly tied to winning, biased decisions can have immediate and adverse impact on fighters and their camps. The converse of these implications also hold true.