

JUMP SHOT NEWS AND NOTES: SEEKING TRUTH, COURTING CONTROVERSY

By Robert Tiltz

5/31/2024 – KAT's Comfort Zone vs Winning – When the chips were down, when substance mattered more than style, when winning was on the line during the Minnesota Timberwolves 2024 playoff series against the Dallas Mavericks, Karl-Anthony Towns faced criticism like never before. Critics, both the fans and the talking heads, had finally come to understand that Towns' long-range-based offensive game did not maximize his offensive efficiency.

The criticism of Towns' offense focused on his apparent preference for long-range shooting over shooting from closer to the basket, which is where his combination of superior size and skills was likely to be most effective. It's not that Towns is a bad long-range shooter. Everybody agrees that Towns is a good standing-start/stationary 3-point shooter, maybe even the greatest long-range big man shooter of all time as he himself has proclaimed. But despite his good stats from long-range, the only statistic that distinguishes Towns from the ever-growing number of competent standing-start/stationary 3-point specialists is his height.

When the criticism crescendoed during the playoffs, Towns responded by increasing his drives to the basket and decreasing his 3-point shooting. The result was a noticeable improvement in the efficiency of Towns' offense. The critics were pleased. The Timberwolves even managed to avoid a sweep with a game four win. Problem solved? No. More changes are required.

Although Towns' shift in emphasis from shooting to driving was a step in the right direction, it still located the start of his offense on the outside. Getting to the basket saps energy and risks mistakes. The opinion here, therefore, is that Towns should cut out the middleman, so to speak, and start his offense in the low post, where his superior size and skills combo is more of an instant winner. Problem solved? No again. For Towns to maximize his offense, an even bigger and more important change still needs to be implemented.

Sorry to say, KAT fans, what needs to go is Towns' elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot. The good results that Towns gets with his elbow-in-strokesnap semi-jump shot from long-range very much depend on the absence of defensive pressure, which is readily available at long-range. The absence of defensive pressure is more than fundamental to the appeal of long-range shooting, it is the primary attraction. That's true for most long-range shooters, but especially true for elbow-in-strokesnap shooters because their out-front, horizontally extended and basket aligned elbow-in shooting position for the start of the release needs room to work well, which to a great extent precludes getting off a good shot from mid-range on in.

If learning how to shoot a legitimate post-up jump shot seems like a tall task for Towns at this advanced stage of his NBA career, it's not. The whole-body jump shots can be learned fast because they are based on easy to learn and easy to execute big-muscle shooting techniques. Plus, the whole-body jump shots' setup fundamentals generally override the resistant muscle memory of preexisting failed jump shots.

6/1/2024 – What about Wembanyama? – If the preceding piece sounded like an argument against the stretch-4 and the stretch-5, you got that right. The opposition, however, is not absolute. All-around shooting skills are always appreciated and useful. The opposition is actually to primary focus on long-range shooting by power forwards and centers. Yes, special circumstances could create an exception to the common sense rule of locating the power forwards and centers closest

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to the basket. For example, perhaps a small forward, such as Bernard King, is the team's best post-up player, which means space needs to be cleared for the post-up small forward to operate close to the basket. But that's the exception. Under most circumstances, building an offense around stretch-4s and stretch-5s is not optimal.

Admittedly, Karl-Anthony Towns is a convenient foil for the argument against the stretch-4 and the stretch-5. But are there better examples of the genus out there? Joel Embiid is certainly not a better example. Philadelphia's process man has stubbornly stuck to the stretch motif, but without reward in the win column. The 76ers have imported a new crew of reinforcements to relieve Embiid of primary offensive responsibility. Can Embiid take a hint? Kristaps Porzingis used to be part of the argument for the stretch-4 and the stretch-5. Now Porzingis is part of the counter argument. When Porzingis moved the hub of his offense closer to the basket to provide offensive balance for the perimeter-oriented 2023-24 Boston Celtics, the team went on to both lead the NBA in wins and then win the championship. Could it be that the tide has turned against the stretch-4 and the stretch-5? Could be if winning has anything to do with it.

Could be if defense has anything to do with it as well. The emphasis on stretch-4s and stretch-5s has shrunk both positions because the smaller versions were better shooters, based on the larger pool of talent to select from. Another reason was that coaches wanted smaller 4s and 5s to chase shooters on the perimeter. But the shrinking 4s and 5s dispersed on the perimeter opened the floodgates for the non-shooting layup specialists of the world. Unwisely, this blog says. In terms of percentages, would you rather place your bets for a big of any description shooting a long-range standing-start/stationary 3-pointer or for any player shooting a frequently unopposed layup? Keep in mind that the long-range standing-start/stationary shooter is easily thwarted by any defender, no matter their size, applying pressure. That's a fact. You can be sure that's a fact because, as stated in this blog's preceding post, the reason that most long-range shooters are out there in the first place is because they cannot get a good shot off closer to the basket.

To be fair, however, a giant new presence looms on the horizon that could alter the discussion in a big way. The reference is to Victor Wembanyama. To begin with, Wembanyama is not burdened with the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot. No, the lithe giant shoots a whole-body elbow-out jump shot, apparently developed by himself for himself, thank you very much. Thus equipped, Wembanyama has a jump shot adaptable to all circumstances: long-range, mid-range, post-up, off-the-dribble strongside and weakside, straight up or falling away. That's not to say that mixing in a little whole-body reachback jump shot down the line in pursuit of jump shot diversity for enhanced fallaway purposes wouldn't hurt. But as of right now, Wembanyama has got all he needs in the jump shot department to dominate the NBA for decades. That's great, but there is a caveat. There is a definite danger that the elbow-in-strokesnap obsessed NBA will attempt to convert Wembanyama over to their how-not-to-shoot jump shot technique.

Secondly, the word lithe does not do justice to Wembanyama's athleticism. To this observer, it is not an exaggeration to state that the comp for Wembanyama's athleticism is Allen Iverson, albeit a stretched-out Iverson. High praise because Iverson was one of basketball's all-time best athletes, but warranted. And to top it off, Wembanyama is a heads-up player, meaning he sees the court, and is also an excellent ballhandler and passer.

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So what happens if Wembanyama develops a KAT-like fixation with long-range offense? First of all, Wembanyama anchoring at long-range seems unlikely because he seems to relish the action closer to the basket. But hypothetically speaking, what if Wembanyama did go long-range crazy? Well, the dude is so great, he could probably get away with it, at least to a greater extent than Towns has. Would championships be obtainable? Probably yes. But the reason would not be Wembanyama tilting the scales with long-range shooting. The key factor would more likely be Wembanyama's anticipated unprecedented defensive prowess.

The real question then is whether Wembanyama's projected winning, domination and championships are likely more certain and more numerous if he builds his offense close to the basket instead of at long-range or even at mid-range. Not to diminish the spectacle of a seven foot plus basketball player amazing with his all-court skills and abilities, but the belief here is that the likely most certain road to winning, domination and championships for Wembanyama runs through the low post.

Wembanyama's whole-body elbow-out jump shot instantly arms him with a potentially dominant weapon in the low post. But wouldn't it be wonderful, that is for Wembanyama not for the opposition, if the young Frenchman were to add the sky hook to his post-up arsenal. Is it imminent? Are offers to teach Wembanyama how to shoot the sky hook piling up? Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, the master of the sky hook, tried several times to teach it to notable young centers. But because nobody close to Abdul-Jabbar's sky hook skill level ever emerged from his tutorials, it seems fair to say that the sky hook master failed as a shooting coach. That's not a knock on Abdul-Jabbar. Baseball's greatest hitters seldom proved to be great hitting coaches. And outside of Abdul-Jabbar, it appears that few have even tried to teach how to shoot the sky hook.

The suspicion here is that past sky hook instruction failures are mostly attributable to poor understanding of how the dormant super weapon actually worked. Well, that's changed. A *Power Shooting* article unlocks the sky hook's secrets. However, as befits the discovery of dormant super weapon technology, the sky hook's performance formula is currently top secret. Once Wembanyama and/or some other worthy NBA centers put it to the test, *Power Shooting* will follow its precedent and release the performance formula to the public.

One last word on the sky hook is in order. Although the sky hook is one of the most dominant post-up weapons if not the most dominant, that standing depends on its use by towering centers. That's because the sky hook gains its advantage through positioning. For all other players, the whole-body post-up jump shots are the best available ticket to post-up domination. That's because the whole-body post-up jump shots gain their advantage through athleticism.