

## **HOW TO PLAY POINT GUARD: SHOOT FIRST, PASS PREFERRED**

*By Robert Tiltz*

The shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic is intended to produce more and better passing opportunities for the point guard. The idea behind the shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic is to use the threat of a reliable strongside penetration pull-up jump shot off a strongside drive to disrupt the defense in order to free up teammates and thereby raise the point guard's passing game to its highest level.

The shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic should start off with a strongside drive, which has dominant-hand controlled instant and repeatable stop and start capability. The stop is facilitated by a side-to-back dribble, from protection mode to pull-up or torque mode. The start is facilitated by a back-to-side dribble, from torque mode to acceleration. The purpose of the strongside drive is to push back or blow by the point guard's defender in order to make room to shoot a strongside penetration pull-up jump shot, not to get to the basket. Shoot-first-pass-preferred point guards use the one-two combination of a strongside drive and a strongside penetration pull-up jump shot to operate in and dictate from the middle of the defense. After the point guard beats the defender with the strongside drive, the threat of a reliable strongside penetration pull-up jump shot is likely to disrupt the entire defense. The key disruption occurs when the inside defenders leave their primary defensive assignments to confront the point guard's threat of a reliable mid-range or short-range strongside penetration pull-up jump shot.



Strongside drive acceleration: L to R, Jason Kidd, Steve Nash, Jrue Holiday, D'Angelo Russell

The moment the disruption the defense occurs, the shoot-first-pass-preferred point guard will be perfectly positioned to make the play with premium passes to unguarded teammates either on the inside or at mid-range. Even if the disruption of the defense does not occur and the premium passing opportunities do not materialize, the shoot-first-pass-preferred point guard will still have a range of viable options, including the strongside penetration pull-up jump shot itself, the drive-and-dish, the driving layup and the readily available pass to open teammates at long-range.

The problem with the shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic is that most NBA point guards, past and present, either do not or cannot shoot the strongside penetration pull-up jump shot, which provides the body-wedge protection of the basketball that is necessary for operating in the middle of the defense. Most point guards do not shoot jump shots that can stand up to and indeed benefit from the rigorous physical demands of strongside play. To do so optimally, point guards must master either the whole-body jump shot theory's elbow-out jump shot, see Gus Williams, Allen Iverson, Stephon Marbury and Ja Morant, or the whole-body theory's reachup jump shot, see Walt Frazier, Andre Miller, Tony Parker and Jalen Brunson.

The strongside whole-body elbow-out jump shot provides body-wedge protection of the basketball during the gather for the jump and during the jump of the jump shot. For point guards, such protection is crucial to operating in the middle of the defense, which is where point guards should do much of their business. The elbow-out structure locates the hands, the arms and the basketball back close to the body, which adds more protection and approximates a natural jumping posture. During the whole-body elbow-out jump shot’s release, the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder helps to power both the release and the rotation of the square-in-the-air jump that many strongside pull-up jump shots require and all could use. The whole-body elbow-out jump shot’s on-the-rise release is early, fast and very much vertical, which is why it reliably beats defenders to the punch. The whole-body elbow-out jump shot’s release generates a medium-arc trajectory, which is sufficient to clear even the tall inside defenders.



WhB Elbow-out point guards: L to R, Gus Williams, Allen Iverson, Stephon Marbury, Ja Morant

The whole-body reachup jump shot is another good fit for point guards. The full vertical extension of the reachup jump shot’s release is ideal for point-guard play in the middle of the defense. If the momentum buildup from a preceding penetration drive is great, then the reachup jump shot’s extension heads out as well as up. Reachup point guards encounter a problem when the strongside penetration pull-up requires more than a minimal square in the air rotation. That’s because the reachup jump shot’s vertical rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release largely negates the possibility of forward rotation by the shooting shoulder during the release. And no forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release means that the reachup jump shot lacks the primary power source for rotating a square-in-the-air jump, which tends to discourage more than soft lateral angle strongside penetration pull-ups. Plus, no forward rotation of the shooting shoulder removes a primary whole-body power source for the release, although whole-body supplementary power production techniques can compensate adequately.



WhB Reachup point guards: L to R, Walt Frazier, Andre Miller, Tony Parker, Jalen Brunson

There it is. The preceding explains why the best way to play point guard is to use a strongside penetration pull-up jump shot to operate in and dictate from the middle of the defense. The preceding also explains why the whole-body elbow-out jump shot is the best jump shot for use in the middle of the defense and why the whole-body reachup jump shot also excels in the middle of the defense. That’s the opinion here. Just the same, modern basketball history is stocked full of good to great point guards who neither based their play in the middle of the defense nor shot the whole-body jump shots that would enable them to do so. So what is the explanation for those different and yes sometimes very effective versions of point guard play?

The thinking here is that differences in point guard play stem not only from players’ various physical attributes and abilities but also from the different types of jump shots that point guards shoot. The fact that point guards shoot different types of jump shots probably arises from widespread dissatisfaction with the prevailing elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot orthodoxy, which mandates a stiff, awkward and unathletic shooting stance and release. In pursuit of a jump shot that works, many point guards have modified and sometimes completely abandoned the elbow-in-strokesnap orthodoxy. Many have at least partially broken free from the worst of it. In other words, innovative point guards have invented new jump shots that can better handle the physical demands of their position than the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot.

To be sure, there are point guard tactics that exist independent of the jump shot. But most are facing a diminished presence and diminished importance because of diminished effectiveness. One such tactic was to direct the offense from the perimeter. It was a winner in the past. Now it’s a relic of the past. It was done in by the shot clock. Gone are the days of perpetually pointing and shouting instructions. Now it’s either make the play or get out of the way.

Drive-and-dish is another way of playing the point. Drive-and-dish was a winner in the past. And there is still a place for the drive-and-dish in the modern point guard’s game. But modern basketball has outgrown the drive-and-dish as a primary tactic. Modern inside defenders are so big and mobile and savvy that the drive-and-dish has become basketball’s equivalent of driving into a brick wall. Too often the drive-and-dish results in turnovers, blocked shots and offensive fouls. Also, a mere missed layup off the drive sets up the other team in transition because the drive-and-dish point guard is out of position to defend against the fast break.



Eric Bledsoe

Point guards that shoot the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot, thankfully few and growing fewer, are victims of a failed technique. For example, Eric Bledsoe and Ricky Rubio are elbow-in-strokesnap jumpshooters who have the athleticism, size and ballhandling skills to attack the middle of the defense with the jump shot but cannot because of the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot’s poor protection, among other problems. Chief among the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot’s



Ricky Rubio

protection problems is its out-front and horizontally extended elbow-in shooting position, which exposes the basketball and prevents vertical extension of the release. By and large, the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot’s poor protection limits point guards to the drive-and-dish and to loosely



defended perimeter shots. For Bledsoe, it's the drive-and-dish. For Rubio, it's the perimeter shots. For both, it's careers marked by underachievement and what might have been.

But criticism of the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot is like beating a straw man. Its low usage by NBA players, confirms they consider the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot more liability than asset. Indeed, the best thing about the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot is the negative inspiration it provides for player-invented alternative types of jump shots. The whole-body jump shots are by far the best of the player-invented jump shots. But qualitatively in between the whole-body jump shots and the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot are a dozen or so player-invented jump shots. Five of the player-invented jump shots will be analyzed here in the context of point guard play. None are ideal for point guard play, but they work to varying degrees and in different ways. All five are popular, more so than the whole-body jump shots, and all five are improvements over the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot, less so than the whole-body jump shots.



Fred VanVleet

The elbow-in-push jump shot and the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot set up with very similar shooting stances. But once the release starts, differences kick in. The biggest differences are that the elbow-in-push release brings athleticism and power, especially when it merges in one-continuous-motion with the preceding arm action that raises the



Cade Cunningham

basketball to the shooting position for the start of the release. It is also important that the elbow-in-push release adds upward impetus that helps to power the jump of the jump shot. While it is obvious that a good jump contributes to getting off a good shot, it is not so obvious that the jump and its prep also harness the horizontal momentum of any preceding moves or run-ups by redirecting it upward, which is crucial to getting off a good shot. On the downside, the elbow-in shooting position for the start of the release is anti-athletic. The elbow-in-push release starts low and finishes low, by comparison to the whole-body jump shots. A higher start and finish for the release would provide more upward power/momentum for the jump through lengthened upward arm action. In addition, the out-front, horizontally extended elbow-in shooting position excludes the shooting shoulder from the release by way of blocking its rollback, which limits square-in-the-air capability and in turn the strongside pull-ups that depend on it. Nevertheless, Fred VanVleet and Cade Cunningham have built excellent point guard games around the elbow-in-push jump shot, which facilitates everything fairly well. Everything, that is, but the ability to attack the middle of the defense with the jump shot.

The winggrip jump shot was probably invented by players who sought to avoid the stiff and awkward external rotation of the shooting hand to align it with the basket while locating either behind or underneath the basketball when setting up the shooting position for the start of the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot's release. Good idea. An angled-out shooting hand, the wing part of the winggrip, brings flexibility and comfort simply by eliminating the external rotation of the shooting hand. So the winggrip is a tradeoff that brings flexibility and comfort instead of alignment and stiffness. And it's a gift that keeps giving. The flexibility of the winggrip makes



Kyle Lowry

it easier to set up the shooting position and makes it easier to set up the shooting position forehead-high or higher, which in turn makes it easier to get off a good shot. The improved flexibility also brings medium physicality that benefits the athleticism and power departments. But there is a price to pay for the easy way. Because the winggrip's



Tyrese Haliburton

angled-out shooting hand locates even farther out front than the totally aligned, out-front and horizontally extended elbow-in-strokesnap shooting position, the disconnect between the winggrip release and the shooting shoulder is great. Even so, thanks to the flexibility of its shooting position and its resulting medium physicality, the winggrip jump shot can squeeze out a little shooting-shoulder-reliant square-in-the-air capability. That's nice, but it's far from the full-bore physicality that both point guards and their jump shot need to handle the athletic rigors of attacking the middle of the defense with the strongside pull-up jump shot on a dynamic and a relentless basis. Just the same, winggrip point guards, such as Kyle Lowry and Tyrese Haliburton, manage to get the job done quite well, despite their jump shot limitations.



Jamal Murray

The cradle-grip jump shot was designed for power. The advent of the 3-point era and the resulting premium on power therefore made the cradle-grip jump shot very popular in terms of usage. The cradle-grip jump shot achieves its power production capability through its reachback that activates the shooting shoulder by engaging it with the release mechanism. But the cradle-grip jump shot is low-performing when it comes to athleticism. The problem is that the cradle-grip has trouble holding onto the basketball because it is non-



Darius Garland

oppositional, meaning both the shooting hand and the off-hand locate basically behind the basketball. Once the release starts, the cradle-grip's ball security worsens because the off-hand separates from the basketball almost immediately. As a result, cradle-grip jumpshooters seldom even attempt to shoot strongside pull-up jump shots because their rigorous athleticism requires a secure two-hand grip on the basketball. Thus cradle-grip point guards, such as Jamal Murray and Darius Garland, are left with second-rate point guard tools, including weakside stepbacks with their backward lean that balances the cradle-grip, 3-point shots and of course the drive-and-dish. The weakside stepback and the 3-point shot are good for individual scoring, but neither advances playmaking. The drive-and-dish is helpful, but it cannot solve the point guard puzzle by itself.

The semi-sideways jump shot is good at the shoot-first part of the shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic. But it is not good at the pass-preferred part. Whether in the hands of a point guard or any player, the semi-sideways jump shot is geared for weakside pull-ups, stepbacks and fallaways or going straight ahead. Built into the weakside semi-sideways jump shot is easy. It is easy to set up its shooting grip off the weakside dribble, it is easy to set up its shooting position for the start of the release and it is easy to shoot. All that easy is of course conducive to shooting the



Goran Dragic

basketball and shooting it well. There is nothing wrong with that. But this discussion is about playing point guard. So the question is whether the weakside semi-sideways jump shot's method of scoring benefits point guard play. The answer is not enough. Yes, point guards that pose a scoring threat automatically loosen the defense for their teammates. But weakside scoring threats tend to defer to or back off from the defense in pursuit of iso-scoring



De'Aaron Fox

opportunities, which minimizes disruption of the defense. The deference to the defense occurs because the weakside semi-sideways jump shot has a protection problem stemming from exposure of the basketball as it is being raised to the shooting position. Too bad for semi-sideways point guards, like the otherwise excellent Goran Dragic and the super talented De'Aaron Fox, but the obvious and ready solution to their protection problem, which is the body-wedge protected strongside pull-up jump shot that provides the means to attack and disrupt the defense, is unavailable to them. That's because the square-in-the-air jump to set up a semi-sideways shooting position off a strongside move or run-up would need to rotate approximately 120 degrees in mid-air largely against counteracting strongside momentum with commensurate duration, which is all but physically impossible. By comparison, the square-in-the-air rotation of whole-body jump shots off strongside moves or run-ups usually ranges from 20 to 30 degrees, though extreme strongside lateral pull-ups can require about 45 degrees give or take.



Trae Young

The push-off shot is an athleticized version of what the whole-body jump shot theory previously called the squat shot. The squat shot of the past was stiff and stationary, see Jerry Lucas and Magic Johnson. The more modern push-off shot is streamlined and mobile, see Trae Young and Tyrese Maxey. The push-off shot evolved into existence because the



Tyrese Maxey

advent of the value-added 3-point shot created a demand for volume long-range shooting that the squat shot could not meet. Still, two major squat shot problems carry over to the push-off shot. Both are no-jump affairs, getting in the air through the effort that goes into shooting, not a jump. And the release of both starts low and finishes low. But the push-off jump shot is athletic by virtue of its streamlined shooting stance that channels the momentum from preceding moves or run-ups into the release. There are two keys to the streamlining of the push-off jump shot. The first is the forward lean of its shooting stance. The second is the shift of its shooting position for the start of the release toward the middle of the body, though still on the dominant side. That shift locates the shooting position within the scope of the body, as opposed to the squat shot's out-to-the-side location. But without much of a jump and with a low-start/low-finish release, the push-off shot needs fairly significant separation from the defender to succeed as an attack shot, which makes operating in the middle of the defense difficult. But the mobility of the push-off



shot gives Young and Maxey the ability to create shots, which combines with their superior athleticism, ballhandling and passing to elevate them to point guard star status.



Deron Williams

Point guards that shoot the whole-body reachback jump shot are positional misfits with regard to jump shot technique. The problem is caused by the setup reachback to the reachback shooting position. The reachback creates backward momentum that works perfectly with the reachback jump shot's mid-range strongside lateral pull-up specialty. But the reachback's backward momentum clashes with the forward momentum of the strongside penetration drives



Chris Paul

and pull-ups that should be the point guard's bread and butter. Without strongside penetration pull-up capability, reachback point guards are basically ball-dominant two-guards with a good handle and passing ability. That means whole-body reachback point guards, such as Deron Williams, usually build their playmaking around an at-odds mix of mid-range strongside lateral pull-ups and the drive-and-dish. The first is too far from the basket to consistently make play and the second is too close. Still, remedies are available. Chris Paul concludes penetration drives with his signature strongside curl to accommodate the lateral demands of his whole-body reachback jump shot. It is not optimal, but it works exceptionally well for Paul.

The ideal solution for whole-body reachback point guards falls under the heading of jump shot diversity. If whole-body reachback point guards were to add either the whole-body elbow-out or the whole-body reachup jump shots to their arsenal, they would then be equipped to instantly pull up off strongside penetration moves. By no means, however, should whole-body reachback point guards abandon their whole-body reachback jump shot. Despite its strongside penetration pull-up limitations, the whole-body reachback jump shot is perfect whenever the best option is the lateral pull-up. The whole-body reachback jump shot is also the #1 crunchtime weapon when defenses pack the middle to cut off the path to the basket.

This discussion of point guard play pegged to the jump shot could go on. The whole-body elevated-elbow-in jump shot facilitates an all-around point guard game. The unique whole-body jump shot mix of Kyrie Irving covers all contingencies in point guard play. Stephen Curry's one-of-a-kind long-range attack capability by way of his one-of-a-kind long-range whole-body jump shot expands disruptive point guard play beyond its usual boundaries. There's still a bunch of player-invented jump shots that engender their own types of point guard play, limited though they may be. But the connections already cited are sufficient to substantiate the argument that point guard play very much derives from the point guard's jump shot.

There is, however, another grouping that does things differently. And successfully, which makes their inclusion in the discussion appropriate. The reference is to those big men, though not classic point guards, who command their team's offense from the backcourt with a point guard game that is not built around the jump shot. Their skillsets are not identical. But they've all got a good handle and a willingness and an ability to pass the basketball. One way or another, either conventional or by bully-ball, they get into the middle of the defense and make plays. Most of

them cannot guard the opposing point guard, but neither can they be guarded by the opposing point guard. Here's a few and how they do it. Magic Johnson thrived on fast break basketball. LeBron James is a locomotive strong and fast slasher and playmaker. James Harden mixes top-notch 3-point and slashing capabilities, but underutilizes his whole-body reachup pull-up as a defense disrupter. Luka Doncic is strong and quick, not fast, though quick translates to versatile, repeatable stop-and-go while fast translates to one-dimensional, one-and-done slashing.



Big men playing point guard: Magic Johnson, LeBron James, James Harden, Luka Doncic

Will the shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic ever take over point guard play? In its favor, its best jump shot components, the whole-body elbow-out and whole-body reachup jump shots, do not need to be invented, they already exist. While the basketball establishment disapproves of the whole-body elbow-out, the whole-body reachup is fairly common and kicking ass when point guards use it right. Against it, there is a directional conflict between attacking the defense with the jump shot and the current mass migration to 3-point land. What shoot-first-pass-preferred needs most are role models, meaning more than a few dynamic, relentless and disruptive whole-body strongside jumpshooting point guards to put it on display. Shoot-first-pass-preferred also needs for the teammates of point guards to have the mid-range and inside jump shot skills to cash in on the disruption-created scoring opportunities. At present, those teammates do not exist in sufficient numbers. If shoot-first-pass-preferred prevails, it would fundamentally transform basketball. Stationary/standing-start long-range shooting would be out. Athletic mid-range and inside jumpshooting would be in. And the transformation would be led by the point guards, basketball's on-court leaders. How appropriate.

There is one more obstacle to implementing shoot-first-pass-preferred point guard play. The obstacle is the appeal and allure of the easy to shoot and easy to score weakside pull-up jump shot, which largely precludes all other offensive options. Pursuing easy weakside jump shot iso-scoring opportunities might be just fine for the other positions, but it is not OK for point guards, although there are exceptions. The shoot-first-pass-preferred tactic, on the other hand, generates teamwork by way of a strongside penetration pull-up jump shot spearheading the strongside game with its complementary shooting, driving and, most importantly for point guards, passing options. It is therefore beholden upon the point guard to consciously and conscientiously build around the strongside pull-up jump shot for the sake of teamwork.