

## **THE STRONGSIDE GAME: THE WAY TO PLAY**

*By Robert Tilitz*

The strongside game is defined by *Power Shooting* as all the offensive capabilities that can be obtained when the player dribbles to his or her dominant side with the dominant hand. The strongside game is built around the strongside pull-up jump shot. As a result, my whole-body jump shot theory's strongside forward-oriented elbow-out jump shot and strongside laterally-oriented reachback jump shot are crucial to the strongside game. That's because the whole-body jump shots not only stand up to the physical rigors of strongside pull-up play better than all other types of jump shot, but they also actually benefit from and even enhance the strongside dynamic. That's good to know. But what is it that makes the strongside game the way to play?

The answer is that the tools of the strongside game enable each individual player to maximize his or her athleticism and power. The most important of those tools are the attack-capable whole-body strongside pull-up jump shots. The strongside game also advances teamwork by providing built-in body-wedge protection of the basketball to both its jump shots and its ballhandling, which is essential for attacking and disrupting the middle of the defense to create opportunities to pass to open teammates.

The strongside game starts off with ballhandling. The strongside game is built on the surest ballhandling skills, which are those that control the basketball with the dominant hand and the dominant arm by way of the strongside dribble. Given the naturally superior coordination and strength of the dominant hand and the dominant arm, there can be no doubt that the strongside game maximizes individual performance in the ballhandling department.

By comparison, the weakside game puts the control of the basketball in the off-hand and the nondominant arm by way of the weakside dribble. By definition, the off-hand and the nondominant arm are second best at ballhandling.



Kawhi Leonard

The strongside game protects the basketball by wedging the player's body between the basketball and the defender to form a protective shield. Body-wedge protection of the strongside dribble illustrates the point. But body-wedge protection of the dribble is not unique to the strongside game. Body-wedge protection of the jump shot, on the other hand, is unique to the strongside game. The body-wedge protection of the basketball that began during the strongside dribble continues through most of the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot as the basketball is raised to the shooting position for the start of the release. The continued body-wedge protection shields the

basketball after it is grabbed off the strongside dribble and then during most of the square-in-the-air jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot. When the rotation of the square-in-the-air jump is close to completed toward the top of the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot, the body-wedge protection of the basketball is used up. By then, however, the body-wedge protection of the basketball during the strongside pull-up jump shot has already achieved its purpose.

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By comparison, the weakside game provides body-wedge protection of the weakside dribble but poor protection for weakside jump shots, both pull-ups and stepbacks. The weakside dribble's body-wedge protection is forfeited after the dribble is grabbed to set up the weakside jump shot. Once the basketball has been grabbed off the weakside dribble, it is shifted to the dominant side of the jumpshooter's body so that it can be raised straight up to the shooting position for the start of the weakside jump shot's release. From the moment that it is shifted to the dominant side of the body off the dribble until it is raised to the shooting position, the basketball is exposed and poorly protected because the dominant side of the weakside jumpshooter's body is the side that is closest to the defender.

The weakside jump shot's exposure-of-the-basketball protection problem is at its worst during the jump of the jump shot. The weakside jump shot's exposure of the basketball during the shot preparation process explains why the stepback move is so popular with weakside jumpshooters.



Devin Booker



Sheryl Swoopes shooting an elbow-out jump shot

The strongside game itself generates extra-added athleticism and power. The whole-body strongside pull-up jump shots are the gateway to the strongside game's athleticism and power. Both whole-body jump shots, the elbow-out and the reachback, use the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release to channel the athleticism and the power of the jump of the jump shot into the release of the jump shot, merging the two. The forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release also partly powers both the release and the rotation of the square-



Tracy McGrady shooting a reachback jump shot

in-the-air jump that many strongside pull-up jump shots require and all could use. The coordinated merge of athleticism and power achieved by the whole-body jump shot techniques makes the strongside pull-up jump shots hard to guard and easy to shoot.

The strongside pull-up jump shot must be able to stand up to the physical demands of the strongside game. The strongside moves to get free from the defender build up horizontal momentum, sometimes running momentum, that must be harnessed or else the strongside pull-up jumpshooter will be out of control. To harness the strongside move or strongside run-up momentum, it must be redirected into the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot. That redirection must include a midair rotation toward the basket by the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot, which *Power Shooting* calls squaring in the air.

The squaring of the strongside pull-up jump shot actually starts with braking and pivoting on the ground, although most of it takes place in the air during the rotating jump. The rotation of the square-in-the-air jump, that is, the squaring in the air, is largely powered by the forward rotation

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of the shooting shoulder during the release, which also partly powers the release of the whole-body jump shots. The strongside pull-up jump shot's square in the air adds athleticism, but not difficulty. The strongside pull-up jump shot's fluid combination of braking and pivoting on the ground and squaring in the air with its rotating jump transforms squaring up from a constraint to a catalyst.

The braking and pivoting on the ground that starts the strongside pull-up jump shot's squaring turn toward the basket connects the strongside move or run-up with the jump of the jump shot. The braking and pivoting on the ground starts at the same time the basketball is grabbed off the strongside dribble. That's when the inside leg should apply the main brake for the strongside pull-up jump shot with the first step of Power Shooting's two-step stop. The inside leg also ends up doing most of the pivoting. But the inside leg's pivot is turned by the outside leg's step into the jump shot, the second step of the two-step stop. The step into the strongside pull-up jump shot completes the two-step stop. At the same time as the step into the strongside pull-up jump shot is taking place, the initial bent-back half-hand grip should form on top of the basketball. The secured basketball should simultaneously be drawn fairly close to the body about waist-high or a little lower anywhere on the dominant side.

The airborne phase of squaring the strongside pull-up jump shot is next. It follows and gets early momentum from the just described pre-jump braking and the pivoting on the ground during the two-step stop that actually starts the turn/rotation toward the basket. The airborne rotation of the strongside pull-up jump shot's square-in-the-air jump is mostly powered by the whole-body jump shots' release techniques, mainly the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder but also the full extension of the shooting arm.

The merge of the rotating square-in-the-air jump and the strongside jump shot's release techniques transforms squaring up from rigid and groundbased to flexible and airborne. The strongside pull-up jump shot's square-in-the-air jump also expands the shooting window via gun-turret adjustability provided by the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder. Another big benefit gained from squaring in the air is the continuation of the body-wedge protection of the basketball from the strongside dribble to throughout most of the jump of the strongside pull-up jump shot.

The bottom line is that shooting-shoulder-powered squaring in the air is crucial to the strongside pull-up jump shot and, by extension, the entire strongside game. Unlike squaring up on the ground, which is predicated on slowing down to line it up to get it right, squaring in the air works after an action stop – in fact, works best after an action stop. With the ability to square in the air after an action stop, whole-body jumpshooters can initiate the strongside moves and run-ups that precede strongside pull-up jump shots intent on beating the defender, not on slowing down to square up on the ground. The strongside moves and run-ups that precede the strongside pull-up jump shot also produce momentum that helps to power the jump of the jump shot.

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Karl Malone shooting an elbow-out straight-up post-up jump shot

Although this analysis of the strongside game has thus far focused on the mid-range strongside pull-up jump shots, strongside post-up jump shots are also integral to the strongside game. There are parallels between strongside mid-range pull-up and strongside post-up jump shots. Both work best when using the whole-body jump shot techniques. That means both rely on the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder that partly powers the release of the whole-body jump shots and largely powers the rotation of the square-in-the-air jump that they both require or could use. And despite operating in a smaller area close to the basket, the strongside post-up jumpshots are no less dynamic than the strongside mid-range jump shots. Both are also dominant offensive weapons.



Charles Barkley shooting a reachback fallaway post-up jump shot

By comparison, except for mini-squares-in-the-air off nearly straight-ahead moves, weakside jump shots, both pull-ups and stepbacks, do not feature a rotating square-in-the-air jump. In most cases, if weakside jump shots were to square in the air, it would drain both their athleticism, by reversing the momentum of the weakside move, and their power, by rotating the release mechanism, not the release itself, back away from the basket. Instead, weakside jumpshooters usually stick with their semi-sideways posture at the completion of the weakside move, and then modify it during the jump of the jump shot. The modification of the semi-sideways shooting stance during the jump of the weakside jump shot consists of a backward twist of the upper body to open and to square the shoulders. The backward twist of the upper body also rolls back and activates the shooting shoulder, which results in an inadvertent but significant power boost when the rolled back shooting shoulder rotates forward during the release.

Now there is no doubt that the weakside jump shot is a viable and a popular jump shot. The weakside jump shot is popular because it is easy to set up its shooting grip off the weakside dribble and because it is therefore easy and fast to shoot. And the semi-sideways weakside jump shot is especially popular because it gains inadvertent but significant shooting-shoulder power brought on by a rollback of the shooting shoulder during the setup of the semi-sideways shooting stance. However, all weakside jump shots have a protection problem caused by exposure of the basketball as it is raised to the shooting position for the start of the release that frequently forces off-balance jumps away from defenders or stepbacks, both of which can make the weakside jump shot harder to hit. Regardless, when it comes to athleticism, power, accuracy, protection and gun-turret adjustability, the attack-capable whole-body strongside jump shots are far superior to if not more popular than all versions of the weakside jump shot.



Lou Williams shooting a weakside semi-sideways jump shot

There remains the question of how the various parts of the strongside game can combine in order to maximize their offensive potential. For mid-range players, the answer is strongside stop-and-

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start shooting and driving. The tactical mix of shooting and driving poses a double-barreled threat that creates an endless dilemma for defenders. The threat of a reliable strongside pull-up jump shot forces on-ball defenders to guard tighter, which opens up the strongside drive. The threat of a strongside drive pushes on-ball defenders back, which opens up the strongside pull-up jump shot. To make matters worse for the defenders, their dilemma is actually much deeper because the strongside stop-and-start attack mode is instantly and endlessly repeatable. In other words, if the initial strongside move is checked, then the transition to the next strongside move can start immediately. And the same goes for all subsequent strongside moves.

Aggressive players and coaches are sure to love strongside stop-and-start attack mode because it's about sticking to the fundamentals and dogging the defense to death with relentless stops and starts. That said, despite having the ability to repeatedly attack the defense during strongside stop-and-start attack mode, it should not be necessary for the player to repeat the stops and starts that many times in order to get where he or she wants to get and do what he or she wants to do. At most, only a couple or a few stops and start should do the job. Perhaps an especially tenacious defender or a series of successful switches by the defense might force more than a couple or a few stops and starts. But those are about the only circumstances that can do so.

In addition to enhancing the player's individual scoring ability, the strongside stop-and-start attack mode also benefits teamwork. That's because the strongside stop-and-start attack mode generally disrupts the opposing team's entire defense. The disruption occurs when a strongside drive that pushed the on-ball defender back forces one or more of the interior frontcourt defenders to abandon their primary defensive assignments close to the basket in order to confront the threat of a reliable strongside pull-up jump shot at medium or shallow mid-range. The resulting disruption of the defense creates premium passing opportunities to undefended teammates on the inside and at mid-range.

The ability to disrupt the defense derived from the strongside stop-and-start attack mode that can add a valuable team-oriented dimension to the skillset of any offensive player is an absolute essential for point guards. By extension, that means the strongside whole-body elbow-out jump shot should be the jump shot of choice for point guards because its square-in-the-air athleticism provides body-wedge protection of the basketball from the gather through the jump of the jump shot. Body-wedge protection of the basketball enables the point guard to operate in and indeed dictate from the middle of the defense.

By comparison, the weakside game is mostly one-dimensional. The one dimension consists of the previously described very popular but only somewhat effective weakside jump shot. Still, many put the weakside jump shot on a pedestal. The favorable opinions of the weakside jump shot are at least in part predicated on belief in the importance of strongside-weakside jump shot balance. Yet neither jump shot creates much space for the other except for maybe a one-step head start on pull-ups. And if its initial move is checked, the difficulty of restarting strongside-weakside jump shot balance defines it as basically no more than a one-off. Weakside driving layups and weakside passes can add variety. However, because weakside driving layups and weakside passes are controlled by the nondominant off-hand, neither is totally primed for the attack. But to be clear, there is a place for the weakside game as a secondary offensive option, provided that whole-body techniques are used on the weakside jump shots.

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A vital part of the strongside game not mentioned to this point involves setting up the shooting grip for strongside pull-up jump shots off the strongside dribble. There is a separate article on that subject in the book and on the website.

To summarize, the shooting, driving and passing options of the strongside game add up to attacking power basketball. Strongside players can attack the defense with explosive strongside pull-up jump shots, rugged strongside drives and forceful strongside passes, all while maintaining maximum protection of the basketball. The strongside game is built around the whole-body jump shots, which are highly athletic, extremely powerful, well protected, gun-turret adjustable and built for the attack. By comparison, the weakside semi-sideways jump shot's poor protection frequently necessitates an off-balance jump away from defenders or a step back, both of which hurt athleticism, power and accuracy. Certainly, whenever possible it is better to attack than it is to step back. Moreover, strongside-shoot-drive balance is not only the most potent individualized offensive tactic but it is also a tool for teamwork. By pushing on-ball defenders back with a drive that also forces the inside defenders to step outside to confront the threat of a reliable strongside pull-up jump shot, the strongside-shoot-drive tactic can disrupt the defense and create premium passing opportunities.

Manufacturer's warning: The strongside game that has been championed here as the way to play is seldom if ever seen elsewhere in the basketball world as an affirmed offensive tactic, much less elevated to a level of primary importance. The strongside pull-up jump shot, which is the centerpiece of the strongside game, is probably the main stumbling block. Since the mechanics of the strongside pull-up jump shot are not well understood and are therefore difficult to teach, the entire strongside game has been largely ignored by most coaches. Although some players have developed a strongside pull-up jump shot and a strongside game on their own, their numbers are small when compared with the number of players who have gravitated toward the weakside game. So something needs to be done. Enter *Power Shooting*, which is all about the very teachable whole-body strongside pull-up jump shots and the strongside game.