

THE REACHBACK-STROKESNAP JUMP SHOT: NOT FIT FOR A KING

By Robert Tilitz

The reachback-strokesnap jump shot is a hybrid of the whole-body reachback jump shot's shooting position and the elbow-in-strokesnap jump shot's release. The reachback shooting position is strongside compatible. But the shooting-shoulderless strokesnap release is very much strongside incompatible. This article is about LeBron James's reachback-strokesnap jump shot and its impact on his offensive game.

No fallaway jump, no backward bend of the upper body, no Kobe kick and no body-leverage sequence indicate exclusion of the shooting shoulder from the release of James's reachback-strokesnap jump shot. That is despite James's reachback, which automatically rolls the shooting shoulder back. But James nullifies the shooting shoulder's resulting potential whole-body role in the release, replacing it instead with the strokesnap release.

More specifically, the reachback to rollback sequence automatically engages the shooting shoulder with the release mechanism. Thus engaged, the shooting shoulder is activated as a source of whole-body athleticism and whole-body power by way of its forward rotation during the release. James's elbow-out shooting position reinforces the rollback, engagement and activation of the shooting shoulder. The payoff would be an attack-capable strongside jump shot with body-wedge protection of the basketball. But James opts instead for a shooting-shoulderless strokesnap release. Why does James reject high performance? Whatever the reason, James has shown little inclination to change. James appears quite content shooting mainly standing-start 3-pointers and weakside jump shots.



The reachback and the elbow-out parts LeBron James's shooting stance both roll his shooting shoulder back. Yet James usually excludes the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder from the release, which denies his jump shot strongside and attack capabilities.

James's exceptional physical abilities do not exempt his reachback-strokesnap jump shot from the athleticism and the power deficiencies that result from the exclusion of the shooting shoulder from the strokesnap release. One reason for the athleticism deficiency is that the whole-body merge of the jump of the jump shot with the release of the jump shot depends on the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release to channel the raw athleticism and power of the jump into the release. Another reason for the athleticism deficiency is that the ability to square in the air, which many strongside pull-up jump shots require and all could use, depends on the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder during the release to power the rotation of the

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square-in-the-air jump. The power deficiency that results from the exclusion of the shooting shoulder from the strokesnap release is more manageable. The main reason is that standing-start 3-point shots and weakside jump shots tend to morph toward including other partial whole-body techniques that can compensate for the absence of shooting shoulder power.

When James does shoot with a pure strokesnap release, that's when his shooting hits rock bottom. Fortunately for James, it appears that he shoots with a pure strokesnap release only on his free throws. So James's free throw shooting has been and remains poor.

On the tactical side, James's exclusion of the shooting shoulder from the release effectively limits his shot selection to one half, specifically the weakside half, of the jumpshooting game. To make matters worse, it's the wrong half because the weakside jump shot's poor protection of the basketball as it is raised to the shooting position for the start of the release largely disqualifies it as an attack jump shot.

James does, of course, have the athletic ability to shoot strongside pull-up jump shots. It's the strokesnap release that is the impediment. There are in fact instances of James going all out athletically and tapping into the most dynamic elements of the classic strongside lateral whole-body reachback jump shot of Jerry West, Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant lineage. But those instances are rare. For some reason, James resists embracing the whole-body reachback jump shot's specialty shooting-shoulder-driven strongside lateral fallaway athleticism. Instead, James shoots far too many easier to set up but more difficult to make off-balance weakside fallaway and stepback jump shots.



L to R: The first three show LeBron James shooting his preferred weakside fallaway jump shot that sometimes starts with a stepback. The last shows James shooting one of his much too rare reachback specialty strongside lateral pull-up jump shots.

James's worst jump shot problem, however, is using any type of reachback jump shot as his primary jump shot in the first place, regardless of whether its mechanics are correct or incorrect. The problem is that the reachback jump shot's strongside lateral specialty is a poor fit for James's to-the-basket game. That's because the backward momentum of the reachback clashes with the forward momentum of the to-the-basket game. That clash makes any reachback jump shot a bad choice as a to-the-basket pull-up. On a physical level or a mental level or both, James

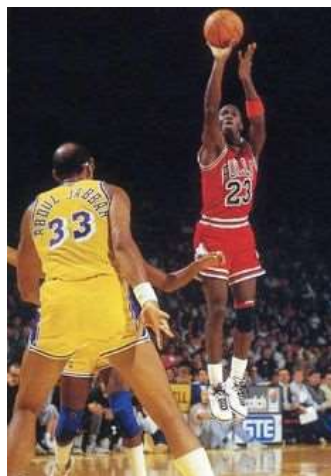
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knows this. The tell is that James seldom even attempts to shoot to-the-basket pull-ups with his reachback-strokesnap jump shot.

To put it mildly, the impact of James's reachback-strokesnap jump shot on his offensive game has been restrictive. But by playing smart and relying on his prodigious physical gifts, James has still achieved basketball greatness. For James, playing smart in part means seldom shooting strongside lateral pull-up jump shots, which he does not shoot consistently well because of his exclusion of the shooting shoulder from the release. So without an attacking mid-range jumpshooting game, James instead focuses on what he does do well. Above all, James parlays his awesome size, strength and speed into a highly effective bullying driving game. To which James adds his willing and excellent passing skills to form the basis of a point-guard-type floor game. James has also improved his 3-point shot over the years. There's a good reason for that improvement. From long-range, it appears that James now employs whole-body shooting techniques, such as full extension of the shooting arm including a stretched-out forearm stroke and even forward rotation of the shooting shoulder, to power a leveraged straightstroke-pull release. From long-range, it also appears that James has grown comfortable with brushing hand action, another whole-body staple, to better control the basketball.

But enough of the critique of James's reachback-strokesnap jump shot and its destructive impact on his entire offensive game. For this article, the focus will now shift to possible replacement jump shots and possible resulting improvements in James's overall game.

Despite being a premier whole-body reachback jumpshooter, Michael Jordan faced the same to-the-basket pull-up challenge that stymies James. But Jordan solved the problem with the reachup jump shot, which starts its release at near full extension. Jordan's straight-up reachup to the shooting position eliminated the backward momentum created by a reachback. Jordan's reachup jump shot worked well from short-range but not so well from mid-range on out because its pared-down release consists mainly of just hand action. Also, please note that Jordan kept two hands on the basketball for control as he raised it and until he started the near-fully-extended hand action release of the reachup jump shot. That two-hand grip contrasts with the one-hand grip of the much-hyped teardrop long-range push-layup that both raises and shoots the basketball with only one hand, which significantly increases the degree of difficulty and significantly decreases accuracy.



Michael Jordan: The forward lean, the vertically extended shooting position, the absence of a Kobe kick and the location on the court all suggest that the above is one of Jordan's to-the-basket reachup pull-up jump shots, not his usual reachback.

Just imagine if James could shoot a reliable strongside to-the-basket/penetration pull up jump shot from the middle of the defense. When paired with his devastating strongside drives to the basket, a reliable strongside penetration pull-up jump shot would be James's ticket to strongside stop-and-start attack capability. And because strongside stop-and-start attack capability is

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instantly and endlessly repeatable, James could dog the defense to death with it. For James, strongside stop-and-start attack capability would add up to unstoppable. Each stop and each start would present James with an opportunity to make something good happen. Strongside stop-and-start attack capability or attack mode can also be thought of as strongside-shoot-drive balance.

Besides expanding and diversifying James's scoring ability, the mere threat of a reliable strongside penetration pull-up jump shot off a strongside drive would enhance his passing game by disrupting the defense. The disruption would occur when the strongside drive pushed back the on-ball defender forcing one or more interior defenders to abandon their primary assignments close to the basket in order to confront the threat of a reliable strongside pull-up jump shot at mid-range or short-range. The disruption would create premium inside passing opportunities for James to open teammates on the inside and at mid-range for high-percentage shots, which is a definite improvement over his present emphasis on inside-out passes that set up lower-percentage long-range 3-point shots. In other words, a reliable strongside penetration pull-up jump shot and the resultant strongside stop-and-start attack capability would add an inside dimension to James's point guard and point forward play that has previously been missing. With that inside dimension, James would gain more control of the offense, which seems like a surefire winning proposition. James's drive-and-dish game would also benefit.

To equip James with a strongside penetration pull-up, the whole-body elbow-out jump shot is by far the best choice. The less well-protected whole-body reachup jump shot could also get the job done. In its favor, the whole-body reachup jump shot elevates the release point to the max. But the whole-body elbow-out jump shot can elevate its release point to the max when necessary. There are two other reasons why the whole-body elbow-out jump shot is the best choice for James, one of which is personal. First of all, the whole-body elbow-out jump shot provides the body-wedge protection of the basketball from the gather through the jump of the jump shot that is essential to operating in and dictating from the middle of the defense. The key to pre-release body-wedge protection of the basketball during the gather and the jump of the whole-body elbow-out jump shot is its shooting-shoulder-sourced square-in-the-air athleticism. That's because the forward rotation of the shooting shoulder for power during the whole-body elbow-out jump shot's shooting-shoulder-centric release also doubles as the primary power source for the rotation of the square-in-the-air jump. The personal reason is that because James is already a natural elbow-out shooter by way of his elbow-out reachback-strokesnap jump shot's shooting stance, it would probably be relatively easy for him to transition to and quickly master the whole-body elbow-out jump shot.