

# **Analysis of the Evolution of LeBron James' Game**

**By Carl Almazan**

Recently, LeBron James has broken Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's NBA all-time scoring record of 38,387 against the Oklahoma City Thunder. As of right now (February 22nd, 2023), LeBron has a total of 38,411 points and seeing how good he is after 20 years of being in the NBA, he is definitely adding a lot more points to that total. With the Lakers' season on the line, the final push for the playoffs will definitely have LeBron play the hardest he will ever play for the last 23 games in a regular season for his entire career. For so long, his teams were so good he was able to coast for the last set of games in a regular season, but this year the Lakers have gone through a lot challenges and a lot drama as they sit in 13th place in the Western Conference.

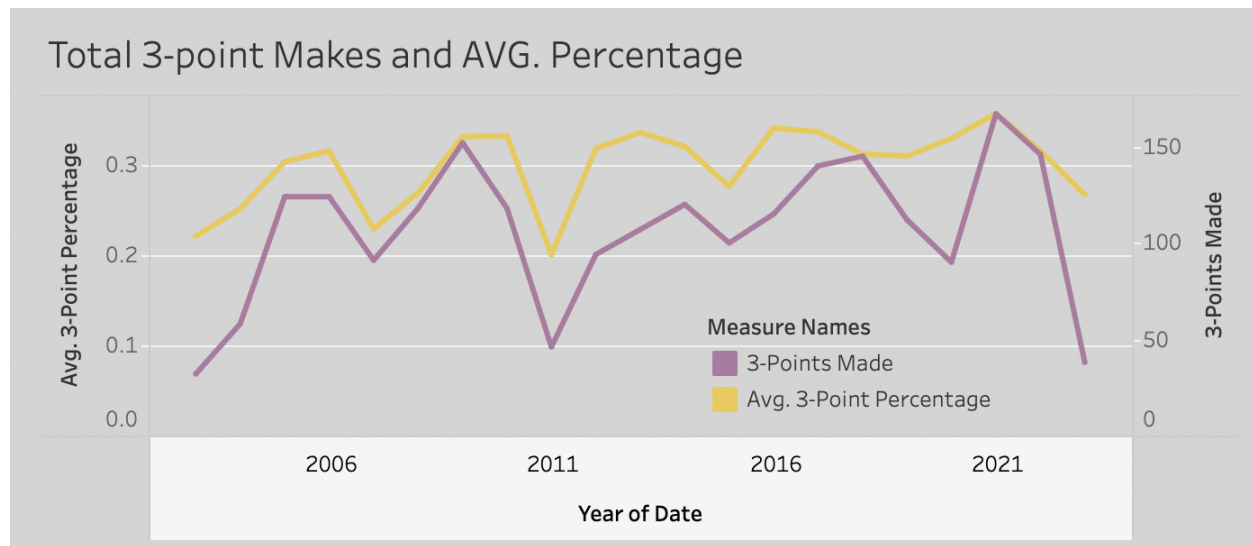
However, this is not an analysis on how the Lakers can make a final push (I'll think about creating an analysis like this one day), but an analysis of the evolution of LeBron's game over the past 20 years he has been in the NBA (Just by looking at regular season statistics). As a 38 year-old, LeBron James is still one of the best players, if not, the best player in the NBA. He has definitely slowed down compared to his peak, especially those days back in Miami and Cleveland, but he is still dominating on the court and having high averages in his totals such as points, assists, rebounds, and etc. As the NBA's style of play has evolved, LeBron has evolved with it and it's interesting to see what has changed in his game, but also what consistently stayed the same.

*(I would also like to thank Basketball Reference for LeBron's statistics and their link will be in reference page)*

## **3-Point Shooting**

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Before James was drafted, it was known that shooting, primarily from distance, was one of his weaknesses coming in the league and it was questioned whether he would improve in that area of his play. He was gifted as an athlete and it was already noticed that his vision and his inside finishing was at an elite level. However, did his 3-point shooting improve from year one to year 20?



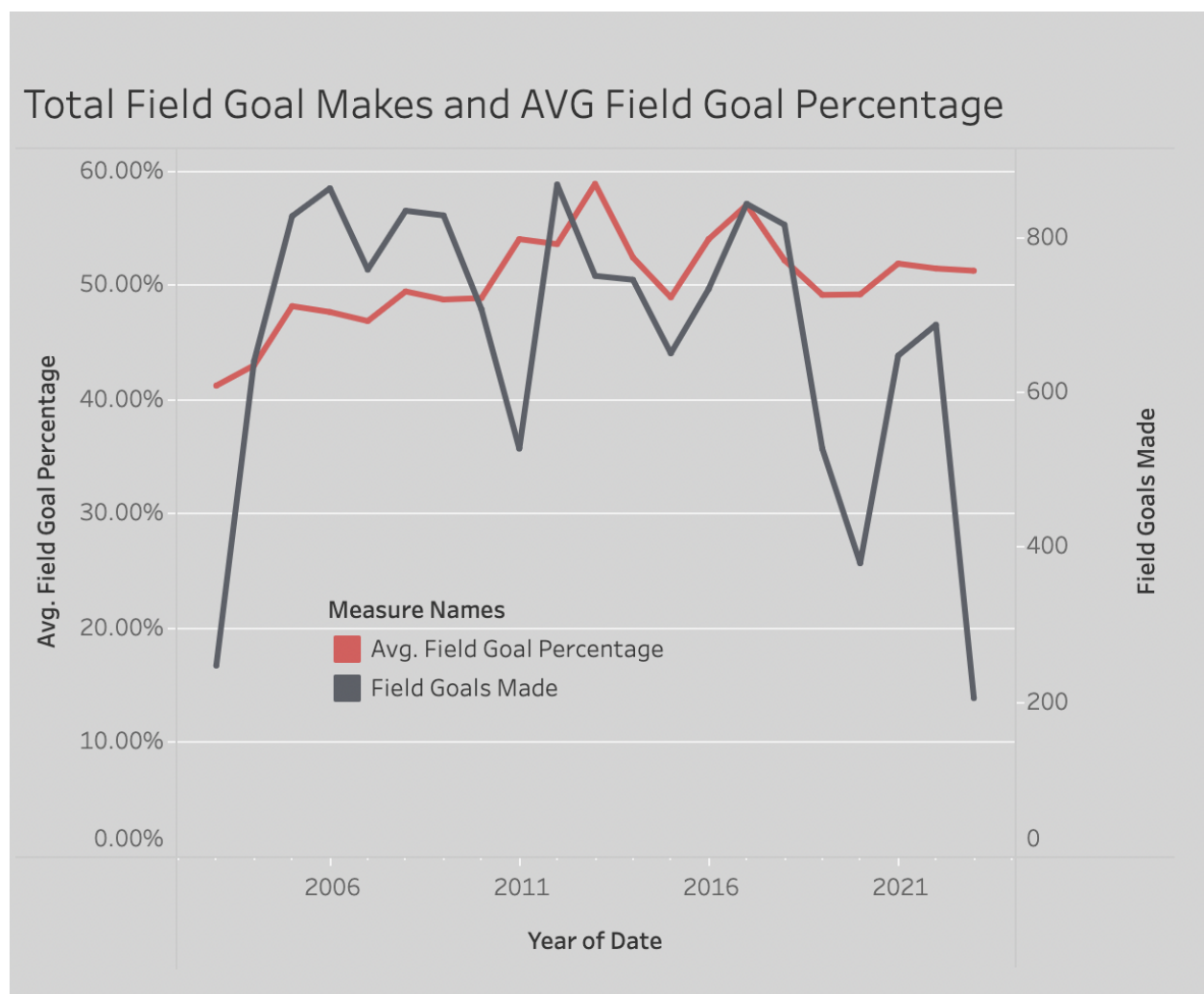
In the first few seasons of his career, it was shown that he had a steady improvement of his average three-point percentage and the amount of threes he has made has sky rocketed from around the 60-70 range up to at least 100 made threes around 2005-2006. The low three-point percentage and the low three point makes were probably due to him transitioning from the highschool three-point line to the NBA three-point line. He's continued to make that improvement until 2011 where he took a big dip in three point percentage and three point makes. He joined the Miami Heat around this time and the low shooting percentage and makes was probably due to him sharing the ball with Dwyane Wade and he was more of a facilitator in Miami, rather than basically doing everything back in Cleveland.

LeBron's shooting was starting to improve again and around 2019-2022, he hit his three-point shooting peak, making more than 150 threes as well as having his highest

three-point percentage average of 36%.. It's impressive how his shooting is still improving as a veteran, but also is evolving as the NBA is evolving, turning into a more shooting friendly league.

### Field Goal Makes and Field Goal Percentage

Lebron was always known to be an efficient player shooting wise, especially with the finishing skills around the rim and the ability to jump over defenders due to his 6 foot 9 frame and his freakish athleticism.

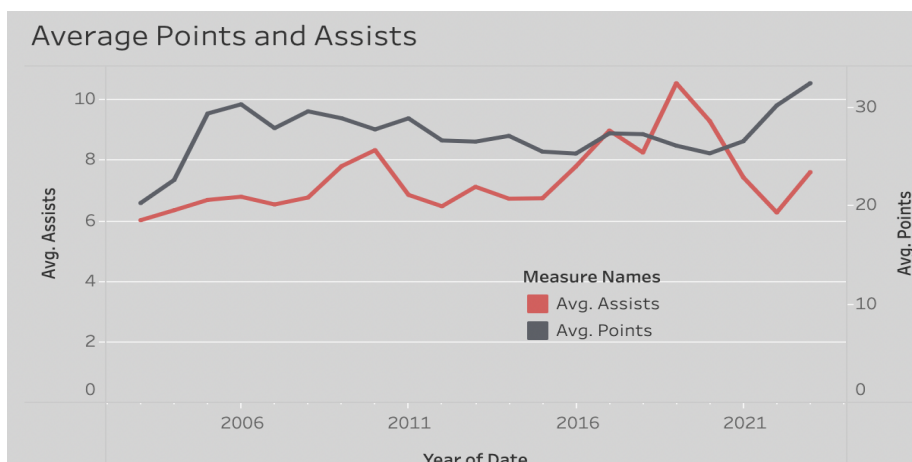


From the start of the his career in Cleveland, he was surprisingly shooting right below 50% in the field. However, the amount of field goal makes was around the peak of

his career (around 800 field goals in 2008). After joining the Miami Heat in 2010, his average shooting percentage was shooting up above 50% and even close to 60%. He even reached the highest amount of field goals he has made in a year in 2012, just like he did in 2008. However, it's evident that this is around his prime as an overall basketball player, since he was shooting at a high efficiency, while still making a high amount of field goals at the same time. It definitely helps that he has superstars and all-stars on his team (such as Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh), unlike his earlier years in Cleveland, but he was still considered the best player on those teams. As he went back to Cleveland to join up with Kyrie Irving and Kevin Love, his efficiency did have a little dip around 2015, but as time went on, his shooting percentage was yet again above 50%, making around 700-900 field goals in the process. When he joined the Lakers around 2018, there was a dip in field goals made, but it was due to the fact that he missed more games due to injuries in the groin and his ankle.

## Points and Assists

As good as LeBron was at being an efficient player shooting wise, he was the master of being 'the quarterback' of the team, which was his strongest skill as a basketball player. His vision was his greatest strength ever since he was a high schooler. He was creating opportunities for his teammates, but also getting his own points in the process. Over the years, LeBron's role of the team was always to put his team in the best position to win, but sometimes he will be more of a facilitator than a scorer and in other years he was the opposite.

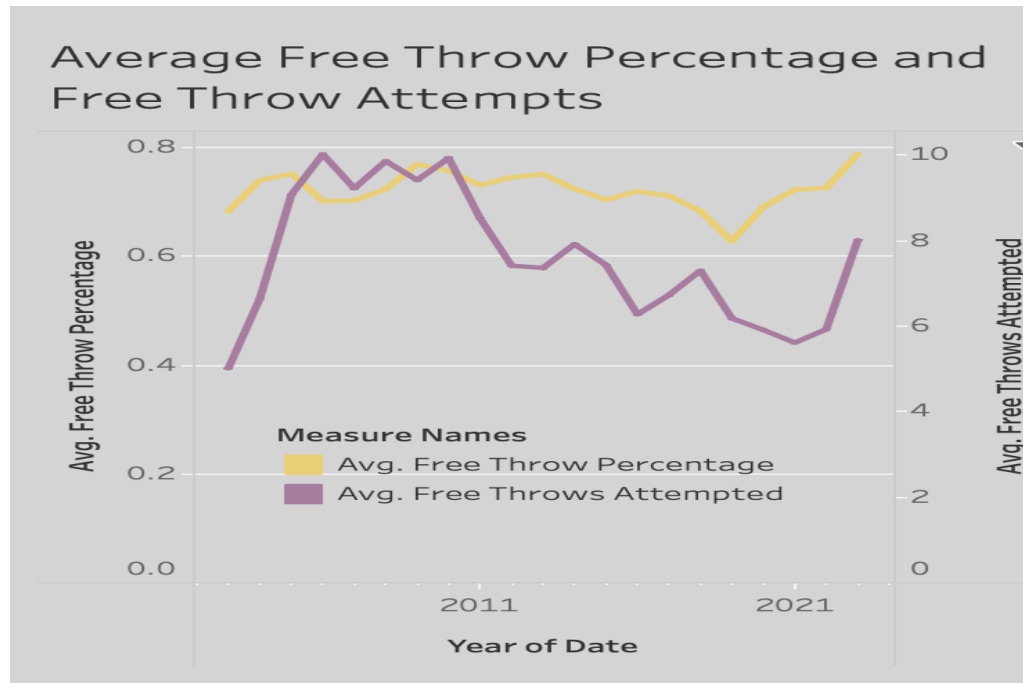


Throughout his career, he was always averaging above 6 assists a game while averaging above 20 points a game. However in his early years, his goal was to score as many points as he can to win the game. He was averaging a good amount of assists, but he was averaging around 28-30 points per game. In his MVP year in 2010, it is shown that LeBron was averaging around 8 assists while scoring 28 points a game. When he joined Miami in 2010, it looked like his stats were taking a minor dip. Even when he won MVP for 2012 and 2013, it wasn't exactly like the numbers he has gotten in his 2009 and 2010 season in Cleveland, but his numbers were still elite, averaging around 27 points and 7 assists a game. When he went back to Cleveland after his stint in Miami, the average number of assists increased around 9 assists a game, while averaging 27 points per game. Even when he wasn't exactly in his prime, he was still averaging very elite numbers. Just by looking at these stats, anyone can argue that he was still improving as a player overall, because he was still an elite scorer while averaging more assists than he usual gets. After joining the Lakers in 2018, he was definitely more of a facilitator than a scorer. As his scoring numbers dipped in 2020 (Down to 25-26 points per game), the average amount of assists has increased to more than 10 assists per game. His knowledge of the game is at its highest and having a prime Anthony Davis is a plus, which does add another few assists to what he normally averages. In his last two years in LA, he had a spike in scoring, averaging around 30 points as an "old man". However, the average amount of assists dwindled down to 6 a game. Unfortunately, he was dealing with injuries and his co-partner, Anthony Davis, was dealing with major injuries himself. Also the construction of the roster wasn't great due to the Russell Westbrook trade, which traded a lot of their role players that contributed to their 2020 championship. It's unfortunate that it failed from a winning perspective, but scoring wise, this is one of the best we have seen from LeBron when it comes to numbers.

### **Free Throw Percentage and Attempts Per Game**

As mentioned earlier, LeBron's shooting from distance was always known as one of his weaker parts of his game and it wasn't just his three-point shooting, it was his free

throw shooting as well. For his caliber, he wasn't a great free throw shooter and it can be argued that it is his **weakest** part of his game. However, has he improved that part of his game as his career went on?



From the very start of his career, LeBron James was always hovering around 75%, but it never got around at least 80%. His free throw percentage even starts dipping close to 60% around the time he joined the Los Angeles Lakers, but got back up to around 79%. However, it just never broke above 80%, which shows that his free throw shooting hasn't really improved. However, the amount of attempts was at its peak around 2009-2011, but it's just an indicative to how often he was getting to rim using his own athleticism and strength to get by defenders, forcing them to foul. In his later years of his career, the amount of attempts start to go down as he starts to lose his athleticism and it went as low as an average of 5 free throws a game. There's only been signs that his free throw could've made that jump from 75% to 80%, but it just wasn't his strongest area in his game.

## **How has LeBron's Game Evolved?**

It's not a surprise that LeBron James is very consistent when it comes to his style of play and how he played the game. He was always a very elite all-around basketball player on the offensive side of the ball and it can be argued that he is the **best** all-around basketball player of all-time. However, throughout his career, there were different peaks where he was just an absolute scoring machine, but there were also peaks where he was more involved as a facilitator. The one part of his game that has really improved was his 3-point shooting. He never became great from distance, but over the years he has become pretty good at shooting from downtown and the amount of makes he had really increased since he got in the league. As his athleticism starts to dip, it makes sense to why he has to rely more on threes. Also, the evolution of the volume of 3-pointers in the NBA definitely influenced LeBron to become better at that aspect of his game. Also, the NBA's pace has gotten faster and more points are being racked up, especially in the 2020's, so LeBron's scoring numbers increased just of the pace itself. Personally, as a fan, I really wish that he made that improvement in his free throw shooting. A LeBron James with an average free throw percentage of 85% in a season would definitely reach Michael Jordan scoring-like numbers and he could've beaten Kareem's record even faster, which is honestly very insane to think about. Even though free throw shooting wasn't the greatest, he was still able to average 27 points for 20 years in the NBA, which is already very elite and impressive itself. The fact that he was still able to reach elite numbers, especially reaching the peak of the average amount of assists he gets per game as a 36 year-old in 2020 insane. Even with all of these improvements and random peaks, his game didn't evolve too much, other than his three-point shooting. LeBron James was always the same since he was 18, an all-around monster on the basketball court.