**Report on Patterns and Trends in NBA Free Throw Reliance**

**Introduction**

This report examines patterns and trends in free throw reliance among NBA players from 1950 to 2021. By analyzing the free throw to points ratio (FT/PTS), we explore how players' dependence on free throws has evolved, variations among high-scoring players, and significant seasonal changes. Additionally, we identify players with the highest FT/PTS ratios since the NBA-ABA merger in 1976 and since 2000.

### **1. Overall Trend in Free Throw Reliance Over Time**

Analyzing the average FT/PTS ratio by season reveals several key trends:

* **1950s–1960s**: Free throw reliance was moderate and stable, with players primarily scoring through field goals, reflecting the fast-paced, high-scoring play style of the era.
* **1970s**: A notable dip occurred in the early 1970s, especially in 1973, indicating reduced reliance on free throws. This decrease may be linked to shifts in offensive strategies or rule changes emphasizing different scoring techniques.
* **1980s–1990s**: Free throw reliance began to increase in the 1980s, peaking around 1995. This trend likely corresponds with the era of isolation-heavy play and superstar-driven offenses, where players often drew fouls as part of their scoring strategy.
* **2000s–2010s**: A decline in FT reliance occurred post-2008, possibly influenced by a growing emphasis on three-point shooting. The NBA saw a shift to perimeter-oriented offense, decreasing the frequency of free throw attempts relative to total points scored.
* **2020s**: Recent seasons show a mild resurgence in free throw reliance, potentially due to rule adaptations affecting player movement and physicality, encouraging drawing fouls again.

**Insight**: The FT/PTS ratio reflects how shifts in game style, rule changes, and player roles influence reliance on free throws as a scoring mechanism.

### **2. Free Throw Reliance by Scoring Thresholds**

Examining FT reliance across different scoring thresholds (1,000, 1,500, and 2,000 points per season) offers additional insights:

* **1,000 Points**: Players scoring above this threshold had a consistently higher FT/PTS ratio, suggesting that more prolific scorers incorporate free throws into their scoring toolkit as they frequently draw fouls.
* **1,500 Points**: Among players reaching this threshold, FT reliance was often higher than those just above 1,000 points, indicating an even greater emphasis on drawing fouls and converting at the line among elite scorers.
* **2,000 Points**: The trend shows that players achieving this highest scoring threshold vary the most. Certain periods (e.g., mid-1990s) saw extremely high FT reliance, while other eras (e.g., late 2000s) saw lower reliance due to increased three-point shooting.

**Insight**: Higher-scoring players tend to rely more on free throws, reflecting how drawing fouls and converting free throws contribute significantly to their scoring prowess. The variation across thresholds also reflects evolving styles, with a marked decrease in FT reliance among top scorers as three-point shooting gained popularity.

### **3. Significant Seasonal Shifts in Free Throw Reliance**

Identifying the seasons with the largest year-over-year changes in FT reliance highlights influential factors that may have shaped player behavior:

* **Increases in Free Throw Reliance**:
  + **1953 and 1965**: These seasons saw the largest increases in FT reliance, possibly influenced by rule changes or a shift towards physical, interior play.
  + **1995 and 1998**: These peaks align with the "hand-checking" era, where defenses struggled to guard physically dominant players without fouling, leading to a higher reliance on free throws.
* **Decreases in Free Throw Reliance**:
  + **1973**: This sharp decrease could relate to changes in pace and style, perhaps as teams adapted to the evolving style of the NBA post-merger.
  + **2008**: The decline in this season aligns with the NBA’s shift to perimeter play, especially with teams increasingly leveraging three-point shooting and avoiding interior contact.

**Insight**: Significant shifts in FT reliance reflect both immediate rule adjustments and broader, era-defining trends, such as the rise of perimeter play and superstar-led isolation tactics.

### **4. Players with the Highest FT/PTS Ratio Since the NBA Merger (1976) and Since 2000**

Identifying players with the highest FT/PTS ratios provides insight into those who heavily relied on free throws for scoring:

* **Since the NBA Merger (1976)**:
  + **Adrian Dantley**: Known for his scoring efficiency and ability to draw fouls, Dantley had a career FT/PTS ratio of approximately 0.35.
  + **Karl Malone**: The "Mailman" consistently got to the free-throw line, with a career FT/PTS ratio around 0.34.
  + **James Harden**: Renowned for his skill in drawing fouls, Harden has maintained an FT/PTS ratio close to 0.36.
* **Since 2000**:
  + **James Harden**: As mentioned, Harden's ability to draw fouls and convert free throws is a significant part of his scoring arsenal.
  + **Dwight Howard**: Despite struggles with free-throw percentage, Howard's scoring often came from free throws, with an FT/PTS ratio around 0.30.
  + **Giannis Antetokounmpo**: The "Greek Freak" frequently draws fouls due to his aggressive playstyle, with an FT/PTS ratio near 0.28.

**Insight**: Players with high FT/PTS ratios often have playing styles that involve significant physicality, driving to the basket, and drawing contact, leading to more free throw opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis reveals that free throw reliance is not static but shifts with NBA trends, rules, and player roles. Over the decades, we observe that:

* Changes in physicality and defensive rules (like the hand-checking ban) affect FT reliance.
* High-scoring players typically show higher FT reliance, though this fluctuates with the league's strategic focus, particularly the modern emphasis on three-point shooting.
* Seasons with the most significant shifts often coincide with changes in league rules, superstar play styles, or strategic pivots in offensive schemes.

Understanding these patterns gives insight into how free throws contribute to player performance, scoring strategies, and game outcomes. Future analyses could focus on specific player types or roles, offering a closer look at how various playing styles influence FT reliance within the broader trends outlined here.