

The Two Sides of Nick Anderson

Contextualizing Anderson's performance after the 1995 NBA Finals

Josh LaFronz

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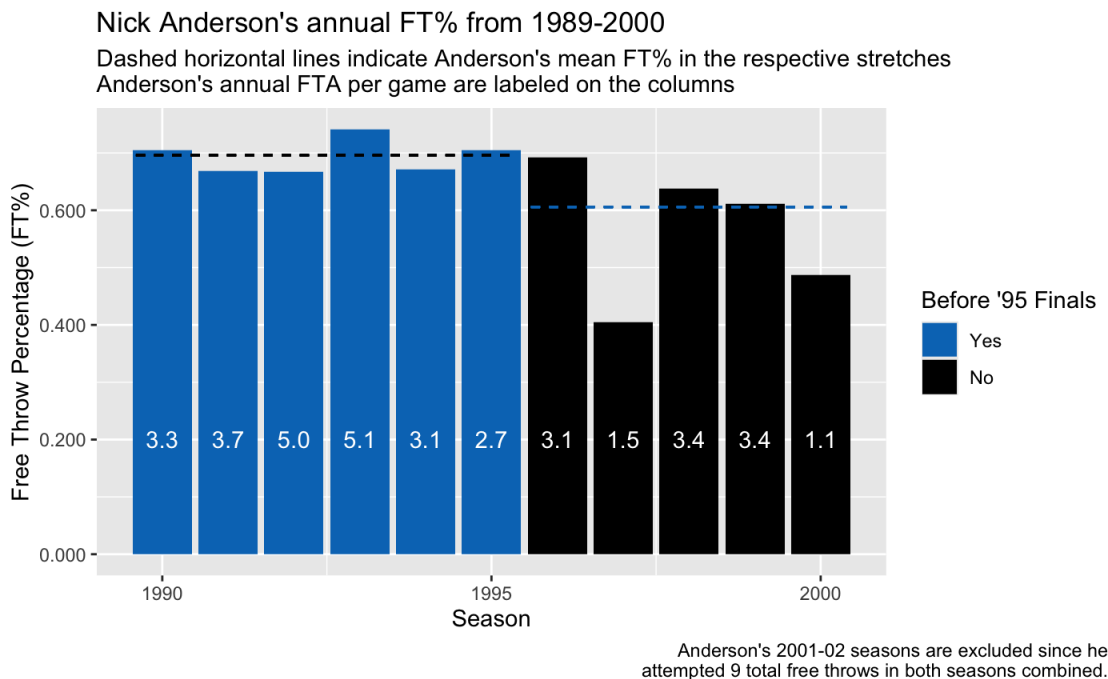
Introduction

In the mid-90s, the Orlando Magic had a period of brilliance that came to an extremely abrupt end when Shaquille O'Neal left for greener pastures in Los Angeles. The period lasted three years and ended in a sweep against Chicago in 1996. A year prior, the Magic experienced another brutal sweep at the hands of the sixth-seed Rockets. As chronicled in the ESPN "30 for 30" *This Magic Moment*, sports reporter Jackie McMullan notes that this Finals series revealed the "immaturity" of the Magic. Game one in particular was gut-wrenching; the team squandered a lead, managed to rally in the fourth quarter, but couldn't finish the job after Nick Anderson's late extended trip to the free throw line. Anderson, the franchise's first player in its history, became the ultimate scapegoat after he missed all four of his free throws. If he had made one, the Magic would have extended their lead to four points. Basketball games are never lost because of a single moment or sequence, but those moments have a way of sticking in the minds of anyone familiar with the game in question. After all, the game went into overtime; the Magic had five more minutes to correct those misses, but they couldn't do it. In the aforementioned documentary, Anderson admits that he was "not the same guy" after those four consecutive misses: "I lost that dog in me."

Former Magic general manager John Gabriel mentioned that he added a stipulation within Anderson's contract requiring him to average three free throw attempts per game. He wanted to be sure the Magic were retaining the services of the same Anderson who had been a marvelous player. This all appeared very dramatic when I watched the documentary and I decided to investigate how serious this decline was, especially since the man himself said he wasn't the same, although I suspected Anderson was being overly critical of himself. Was Anderson truly no longer the same player after those missed free throws? Unfortunately, the numbers suggest he may very well no longer have been.

Figures

After the '95 Finals, the first area to check would be Anderson's free throw percentage. Before Game 1, Anderson was a career 69.8% free throw shooter including the postseason. From then on, he shot 60.6% from the line, including the postseason.



That's nearly a ten percent drop, and using bootstrapping, I found that there's a statistically significant difference between those two figures. The gap is so wide; that can't come as a huge surprise. Anderson's free throw percentage dipped, but there are two seasons where it cratered to unspeakable levels. Anderson shot 40.4% from the line in 1997 and 48.7% in 2000 as a Sacramento King, both seasons at one attempt per game. He shot above 60% in the other seasons in which he played significant time ('96, '98, '99) on more than three attempts per game. Those two sub-50 seasons came out of nowhere. If Anderson was truly experiencing some kind of mental block, those seasons are where it truly showed itself.

Free throw attempts are another gauge of Anderson's aggressiveness. A raw total or average is going to be skewed by factors like play style or role, so I decided to use Anderson's free throw attempt rate (the ratio of free throws attempts to field goals attempted) for comparison before and after Game 1. I didn't include Anderson's 2001 or 2002 seasons since he played only 36 games and a few hundred minutes in both seasons combined. Anderson's free throw rate (FTr) before Game 1 was .283 and .207 after. That's another stark difference. Anderson obviously got older, but the 2000 season was his age-32 season and he was mostly free of injury woes. Again, bootstrapping produced a statistically significant result in evaluating the difference between the two periods.

To be as fair as possible, I also looked at Anderson's usage rate (USG%) during his regular season career from 1989-2000; I wanted to note if there was a dip of any kind in the seasons following the '95 Finals. His average USG% before Game 1 was 22.1% and 20.6% after that point. That's not a very significant difference; in fact, Anderson's career high USG% came in the 1998 season. That '98 season was Anderson's best campaign after Game 1. He averaged about 19 points, 6 boards, 3 assists and more than one steal per game; he also had solid shooting splits (45.5 FG%, 36 3P%, 63.8 FT%). This was one of Anderson's best seasons; he had career highs in Player Efficiency Rating (PER) and Box Score Plus-Minus (BPM), a career low in turnover percentage (TOV%), and his second-highest Win Shares per 48 minutes (WS/48).

That '98 season included a game that would bring a smile across the face of anyone

invested in the Orlando Magic. It revealed that Anderson had some of that dog left inside him. The scary Los Angeles Lakers came to town, including the man who left Orlando about two years prior: Shaquille O’Neal. The Magic were merely trying to stay above .500 and the Lakers had a 36-15 record. Anderson had 30 points, made 11 of 14 free throws, and [drilled the game-winning three to beat the Lakers](#) in front of a raucous Orlando crowd. Ahmad Rashad declared that Anderson got his swagger back, and Ahmad was right.

The second half of the 1998 season was a renaissance for Anderson:

He’s Back!	GP	PTS/g	FGA/g	FTA/g	FTr	FG%	3P%	FT%	TS%	Games w/ 25+ PTS
Before Feb. 11	32	8.2	7.8	1.2	.149	.437	.412	.405	.492	0
After	26	24.2	19.4	6.2	.321	.463	.336	.691	.546	14

Table 1: Nick Anderson’s second-half surge in the 1997-98 season

Who said he wasn’t the same guy? Anderson’s scoring and aggressiveness took off in the latter half of the ’98 season. Penny Hardaway’s season-ending injury forced Anderson to step up. His free throw rate, if maintained for a full season, would have been Anderson’s highest since his rookie year. His free throw percentage during this stretch was right in line with his career percentage before Game 1 in ’95. His true shooting percentage was well above league-average and more than half of his games ended with him scoring 25+ points.

The renaissance did not last. Anderson’s following season saw him post career-lows in FG%, eFG% and TS% while still shooting his usual amount of shots. This was the second season in his last three where Anderson finished the season shooting below 40% from the field. He had never fallen below 45% before. Anderson shot below 40 FG% next season (with Sacramento) too.

Bootstrapping analysis indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in FG% before and after Game 1 of the 1995 Finals. However, that does not tell the whole story. Anderson started shooting more threes in the latter half of the 1990s, so FG% is not fully appropriate because it doesn’t recognize Anderson’s made threes. Bootstrapping also showed that there was a significant difference in three point attempt rate; he shot more threes on average after Game 1. Combine those two results and it is not surprising that the difference in effective field goal percentage (eFG%) was not statistically significant. eFG% accounts for a player’s made threes and assigns more weight. To summarize, it’s statistically evident that Anderson’s shot selection, free throw rate, free throw percentage, and field goal percentage between the two stretches are different, but his adjust field goal percentage did not have significant results.

Another shooting statistic, true shooting percentage (TS%), accounts for a player’s free throw efficiency. Bootstrapping revealed a statistically significant difference, although it is very barely significant. From an overall efficiency standpoint, Anderson was roughly the same player across both periods, but the way in which he attacked offensively was different. A player resorting to jump shots more often and attempting to draw fouls less often will stick out far more than efficiency. Those differences in approach will be easily picked up from watching, while one would have to dig to find that Anderson’s overall efficiency wasn’t far apart.

Statistical Results

For all tests, I performed 1000 bootstrapping iterations at a 95% significance level. Let S be a statistic, and let S_{Before} and S_{After} represent those statistics before and after Game 1 respectively. For a given statistic, let θ represent the ratio of S_{Before} to S_{After} , so $\theta = \frac{S_{Before}}{S_{After}}$. The test is as follows:

$$H_o : \theta = 1$$

$$H_a : \theta \neq 1$$

If the bootstrapping intervals do not contain 1, this indicates that we can reject H_o with 95% confidence. This is a two-sided test, so if the entirety of the interval is:

$$\text{Greater than 1} \implies H_a : \theta > 1 \implies S_{Before} > S_{After}$$

$$\text{Less than 1} \implies H_a : \theta < 1 \implies S_{Before} < S_{After}$$

Stat	Formula	How?	LB	UB	Verdict
FT_r	$\frac{FTA}{FGA}$	Median of Individual Games	1.333	2.25	Very Significant
FT_r	$\frac{FTA}{FGA}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.203	1.56	Very Significant
$FT\%$	$\frac{FT}{FTA}$	Median of Individual Games	1.111	1.5	Significant
$FT\%$	$\frac{FT}{FTA}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.078	1.233	Significant
$FG\%$	$\frac{FG}{FGA}$	Median of Individual Games	1.067	1.184	Significant
$FG\%$	$\frac{FG}{FGA}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.074	1.184	Significant
$3PAr$	$\frac{3PA}{FGA}$	Median of Individual Games	0.265	0.367	Very Significant
$3PAr$	$\frac{3PA}{FGA}$	Average (All Games Summed)	0.398	0.485	Very Significant
$eFG\%$	$\frac{FG+(0.5*3P)}{FGA}$	Median of Individual Games	0.956	1.083	Barely Not Significant
$eFG\%$	$\frac{FG+(0.5*3P)}{FGA}$	Average (All Games Summed)	0.97	1.072	Barely Not Significant
$TS\%$	$\frac{PTS}{2*(FGA+(0.44*FTA))}$	Median of Individual Games	1.007	1.111	Barely Significant
$TS\%$	$\frac{PTS}{2*(FGA+(0.44*FTA))}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.001	1.098	Barely Significant
$FGA/36$	$36 * \frac{FGA}{MIN}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.069	1.167	Significant
$PTS/36$	$36 * \frac{PTS}{MIN}$	Average (All Games Summed)	1.132	1.289	Significant
$USG\%$	Very Long	Seasonal Average	0.862	1.346	Not Significant

Table 2: Statistical Results

Conclusion

After Game 1 of the 1995 Finals, Nick Anderson was not quite the same player. His free throw rate and efficiency fell of, he became more of a jump shooter, and he had a couple of nightmare seasons in terms of overall efficiency. Anderson's second half of the 1998 season was a brief return to brilliance, but unfortunately, his hot shooting did

not translate beyond that point. Anderson's 2000 season with the Kings exposed how different of a player he had become. At age 32, Anderson started his left game ever in the NBA.

It's unfortunate that many only know of Nick Anderson because of that sequence against the Rockets. Anderson was a reliable and loyal OG of the Orlando Magic along with being a gifted scorer and offensive threat. Anderson has had so many marvelous games throughout his career: a 50-piece in 1993, the aforementioned game against the Shaq-led Lakers, a 40-pointer in 1999 (on great efficiency), etc. He scored 25+ points 99 times and 30+ points 38 times. The game against Los Angeles in 1998 was heartwarming in particular. The "30 for 30" made it seem like Anderson's career slowly withered away after the free throws without any positive of note. That stretch was a reminder to the league, and maybe to Anderson himself, that he could still get buckets.

References

- [1] *This Magic Moment*. Directed by Gentry Kirby and Erin Leyden, *30 for 30*, season 3, episode 6, ESPN Films, 14 Apr. 2016.
- [2] Statistics are taken from Basketball Reference.
- [3] Data manipulation, visualization, and compiling was done using Excel and R.