

O'Neal vs. The Hack-a-Shaq

Contextualizing Shaquille O'Neal's Free Throw Shooting Woes

Josh LaFronz

July 13, 2025

Introduction

Shaquille O'Neal is the most dominant force of nature in the modern NBA. Across his 19-year career, he scored more than 28,000 points, bullied countless helpless defenders, and won three straight Finals MVPs in the most recent three-peat in NBA history. Shaq was so dominant, teams were forced to enact new strategies specifically for him. O'Neal was unguardable once he got anywhere near the paint, so naturally teams took that chance away from him. As Richard Jefferson said, "[Teams] would have 2-3 guys just for fouls." Shaq is virtually impossible to defend, but he is not a proficient free throw shooter, so the choice between a hook shot or a dunk versus making him earn it at the line is not a choice at all.

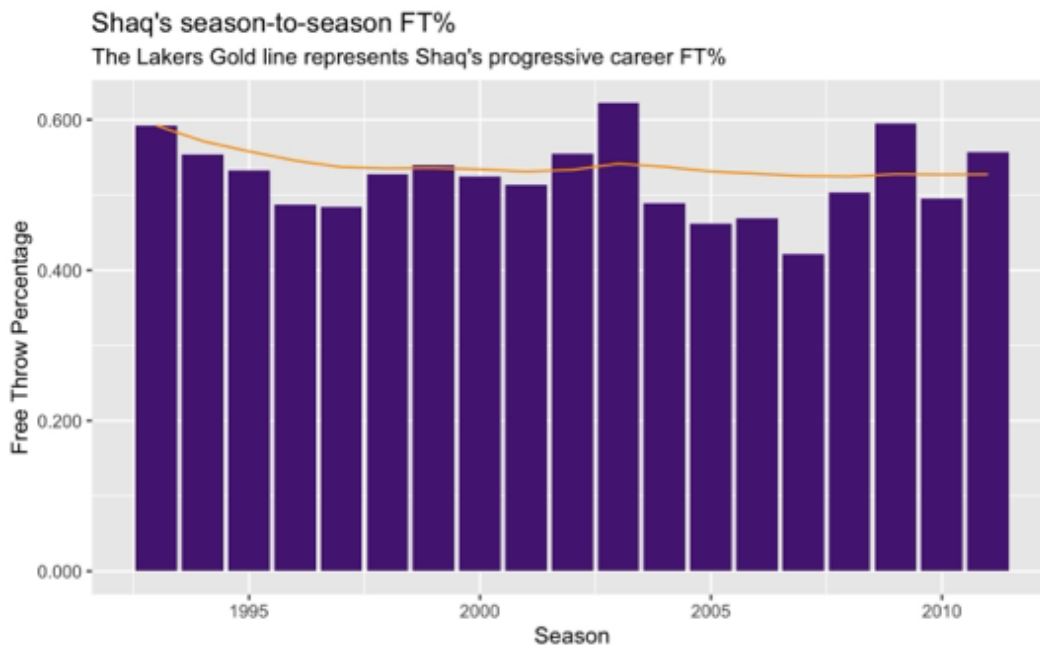


Figure 1

O'Neal was a poor free throw shooter for his entire career; it was Shaq's only glaring weakness as a player. He had just a single season where he shot above 60% from the line (2003). It speaks to O'Neal's dominance that he scored as many points as he did without being a proficient perimeter scorer or passable free throw shooter. The only

other player who most matches that profile and scored at Shaq's level is the player he's compared to the most: Wilt Chamberlain. O'Neal's career free throw percentage reached the 53-54% mark in 1998 and bounced around that for the rest of his career. Naturally, he was never even close to being an average free throw shooter for any season in his career. $FT+$ is a statistic that compares O'Neal's free throw percentage to the league average percentage and multiplies that ratio by 100. If a player's percentage is equal to the league average, he will have a 100 $FT+$, meaning he is perfectly average. Below 100 is below average, above 100 is above average. Here is a graph of Shaq's seasonal $FT+$:

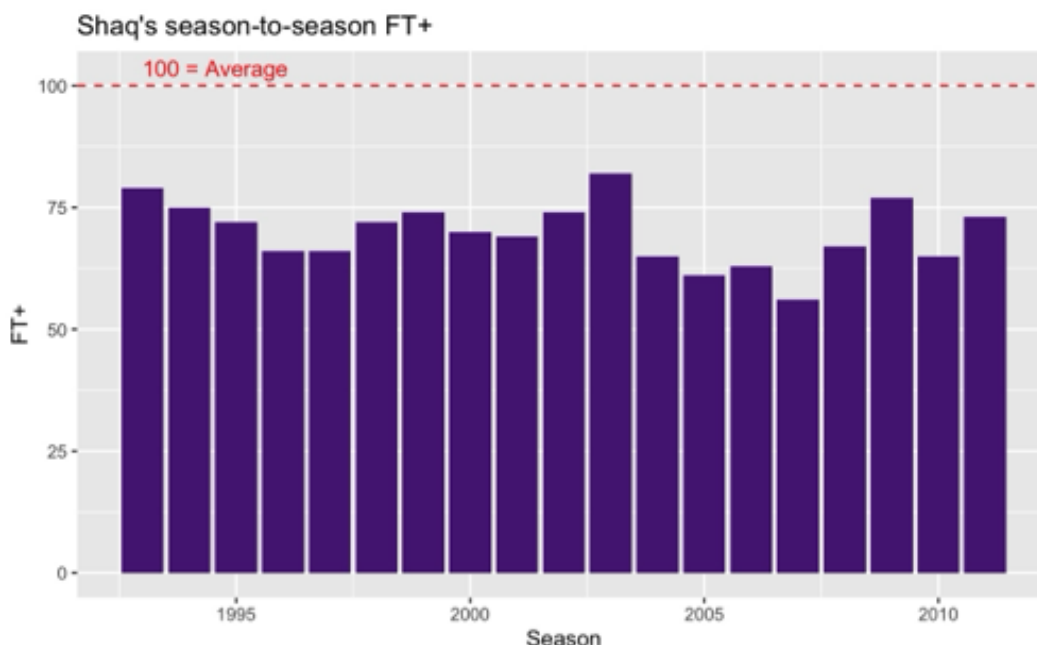


Figure 2

With these numbers in mind, it becomes incredibly easy to understand why teams adopted the strategy of fouling Shaq in mass rather than attempting to defend him straight up. Shaq is either the most dominant or second most dominant force in NBA history, but definitely not from the free throw line. The strategy became so commonplace that it received its own title.

Shaq Math

O'Neal hates the Hack-a-Shaq strategy; partly because the name stuck after he retired. The strategy is annoying, it slows the game down, but it became a viable strategy because it arguably works. To defend this, I'm going to cite a YouTube video about the Hack-a-Shaq strategy by Marc Jiang, username "MDJ." He uses this rough mathematical explanation to depict the method's effectiveness using the 2015 Clippers as an example. The Clippers had a 112.4 offensive rating that season. Offensive rating ($Ortg$) is equal to points per 100 possessions, which means that the 2015 Clippers scored 1.12 points per possession. That season, Clippers big man DeAndre Jordan was an abysmal 48.2% free throw shooter. Not accounting for offensive rebounds from missed free throws or lane violations, this equates to 0.964 points per possession (0.482



Figure 3: MDJ's Hack-a-Shaq Math

points per free throw \times 2). That dropoff from 1.12 to 0.964 is the defense for why the tactic works. It's tough to say if this decrease is worth the constant interruptions and lack of rhythm, but it is to many teams facing a poor free throw shooter. That being said, O'Neal led the league in free throw attempts per game in eight different seasons. I applied MDJ's logic to those eight seasons in the following visualization:

Season	Team	Team ORtg	Team PPP	Shaq FT%	Shaq PPP	Diff
1995	ORL	115.1	1.151	.533	1.066	-0.085
1998	LAL	111.9	1.119	.527	1.054	-0.065
1999	LAL	107.6	1.076	.540	1.080	0.004
2000	LAL	107.3	1.073	.524	1.048	-0.025
2001	LAL	108.4	1.084	.513	1.026	-0.058
2002	LAL	109.4	1.094	.555	1.110	0.016
2003	LAL	107.2	1.072	.622	1.244	0.172
2004	LAL	105.5	1.055	.490	0.980	-0.075

Figure 4: Shaq's Points per Possession compared to his team's Offensive Rating

There was a drop off in five out of Shaq's eight league leading seasons, but they are not as steep as Jordan's 2015 drop off (-0.156). Shaq is not as poor of a free throw shooter as Jordan. Excluding two seasons from 2018-20 in which Jordan was unusually accurate from the line, he has been an awful free throw shooter. His career mark is below 50%. Using this rough mathematical logic, if Shaq was just a 60-65% free throw shooter, that would be roughly 1.2-1.3 points per possession, meaning an estimated offensive rating of 120-130 on possessions where Shaq is sent to the line. That level of efficiency would make it not as viable to hack Shaq, but he could never maintain a free throw percentage at or above 60%.

Superman is in The Building

Playoffs

O'Neal made up one half of maybe the greatest duo in NBA history, the other half being Kobe Bryant. Bryant was cut from the same cloth as Michael Jordan: They were both obsessed with the work and evolution process. Shaq was not of the same

mind and his lack of complete dedication irritated Kobe and caused friction between the two [4]. I imagine that day-to-day motivation can be difficult when one is bigger and stronger than every basketball player on the planet like Shaq was (and likely still is). This difference in dedication was a constant sore spot; Kobe was adamant that Shaq would be even greater than he was if he simply worked harder. Shaq's physical condition became an issue in the later part of his Lakers tenure; he was nagged by lower body injuries which could have been partially attributed to conditioning. He has admitted that he did not work out in the summer because he would still play like Shaq regardless of whether he put in the time [5]. Free throw shooting was another casualty of Shaq's work ethic; it never improved throughout his career, as the previous graph showed 2. One of O'Neal's immediate retorts to comments about his free throw shooting is a declaration that he makes them when it matters. He has said this on *Inside The NBA* and in interviews. Considering that Shaq is a 4-time champion and a 3-time Finals MVP, I thought he must be correct. He has adamantly stated "[Hack-a-Shaq] didn't work with me" on *Inside The NBA*, and I didn't question it. I was curious what Shaq's clutch free throw numbers were and how much better they were compared to his regular time numbers.

The playoffs are certainly a time when free throws matter more, so how does Shaq fare from the line during the postseason?

Season	Season FT%	Playoffs FT%
1994	.554	.471
1995	.533	.571
1996	.487	.393
1997	.484	.610
1998	.527	.503
1999	.540	.466
2000	.524	.456
2001	.513	.525
2002	.555	.649
2003	.622	.621
2004	.490	.429
2005	.461	.472
2006	.469	.374
2007	.422	.333
2008	.503	.500
2010	.496	.660
Career	.527	.504

Figure 5: Shaq's regular season and playoff FT% grouped by individual season

2011 is excluded because Shaq only attempted two free throws and played very little due to injury. Out of Shaq's sixteen playoff runs, ten of those runs included free throw accuracy lower than his regular season percentage. In total, his career postseason FT% falls short of his regular season FT%. Using bootstrapping, there is a statistically significant difference, albeit barely significant, between Shaq's free throw shooting in the regular season and the playoffs. He has eight postseasons where he shot below 50%

and three postseasons where he shot below 40%. He won rings in two of those eight postseasons, so I suppose he isn't complaining too much. Not all playoff game situations are "clutch" moments, so how did Shaq perform from the line when it was imperative to bury a free throw?

Clutch Study

Using the Beautiful Soup and Pandas packages in Python, I designed a for loop that scraped each of Shaq's games looking for free throws by the Big Aristotle in clutch situations. Clutch situations are those in which there are five minutes or less in the fourth quarter (or overtime) and the margin is five points or less as defined by the NBA. Play-by-play data are only available as far back as the 1996-97 season, so I collected Shaq's clutch free throw metrics from the regular season and playoffs from 1996-2011. The results were not quite what I expected:

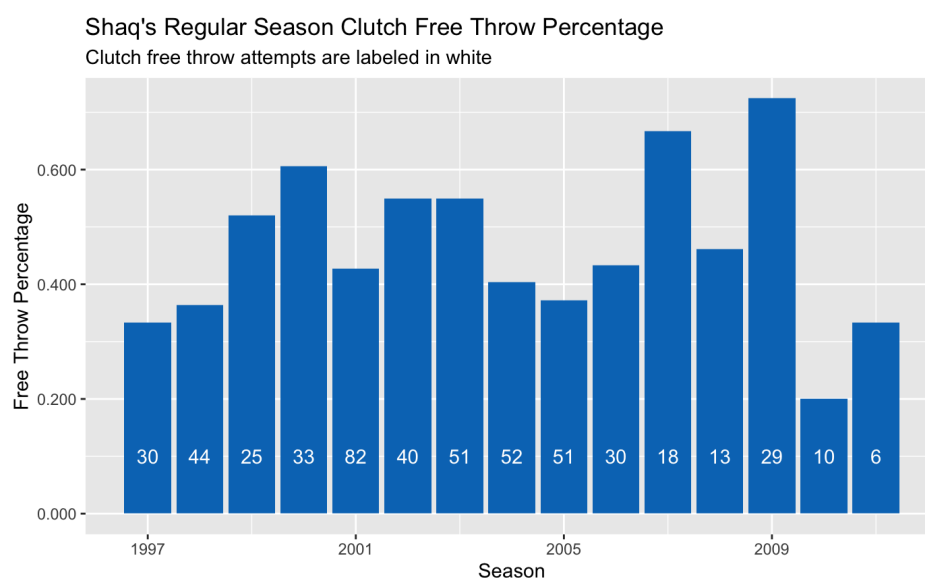


Figure 6

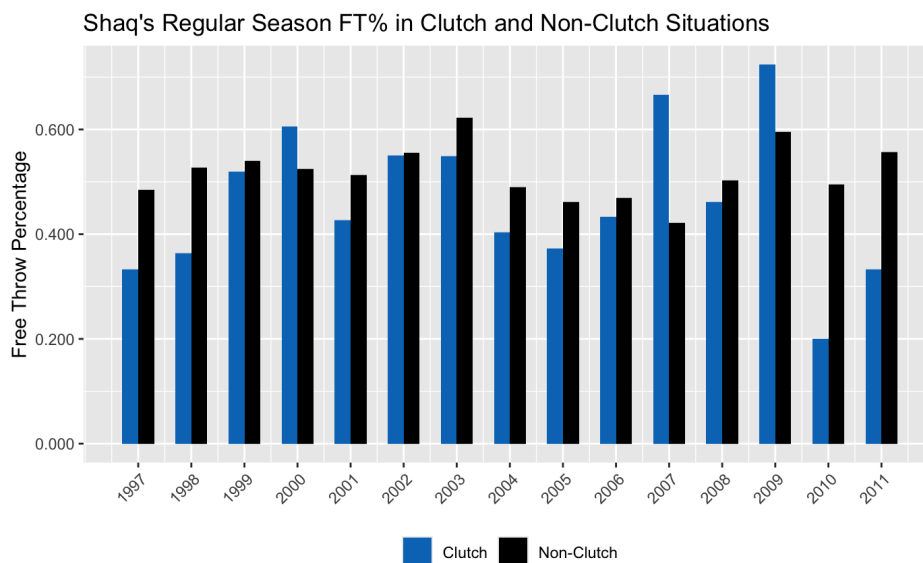


Figure 7

Compare this graph to O'Neal percentages in regular times [1](#), and it doesn't quite align with Shaq's proclamation that he makes free throws when they count. In the regular season, Shaq's career regular time FT% is .530 and clutch time FT% is .467. That's a very substantial difference, and its significance is backed up by bootstrapping [1](#). In fact, in twelve out of fifteen seasons where play-by-play data is available, O'Neal's regular-time FT% is greater than his clutch time FT%. This does not read as making them when they count. What about the same question, but with the postseason?

Shaq's postseason clutch free throw shooting tells a different story. In his playoff career, he posted a .504 FT% in regular time and a .510 FT% in clutch time. This is a slight increase compared to a large dropoff in the regular season. Bootstrapping found no significant difference between clutch and regular time. He actually had a few postseasons in which he shot unusually proficiently (for his standards) during clutch time.

In the 2002 playoffs, Shaq shot 16-22 (72.7%) from the line in clutch situations. I would argue the two most clutch free throws came in Game 4 of the Conference Finals against the Kings. We all remember Robert Horry's heroic game winner, but Shaq had a huge moment of his own beforehand. Down three with 27 seconds left, the Kings put O'Neal on the line, and he drained both free throws to cut the lead to one. The Lakers intentionally fouled to put Vlade Divac on the line, he missed the first of two, and the rest is history. O'Neal was instrumental in the Lakers' huge comeback. Not only did he score 27 points, grab 18 boards and block 3 shots, he also went 6-of-6 from the free throw line in the fourth quarter. That is the definition of making them when it matters. Similarly, in Game 7 of the same series, Shaq made two clutch free throws in overtime to give the Lakers the lead for good.

Shaq had a couple of other strong playoff runs. In clutch moments, he shot 11-17 (64.7%) in 2003 and 10-15 (66.7%) in 2005. However, other playoff runs were pretty ugly; he shot 9-24 (37.5%) in 2000, 6-20 (30%) in 2006, and 1-7 (14.3%) in 2001. However, all three of those playoff runs ended in rings, unlike Shaq's 2003 and 2005 playoff runs.

Statistical Results

The testing for this piece was very brief. For the three tests, 1000 bootstrapping iterations were performed at the significance level $\alpha = .05$. The parameter of interest was the ratio between two statistics; call the ratio θ . If 1 is contained within the bounds of the bootstrapping confidence interval, then there is no statistical difference. Note: In subscripts, "Reg" refers to the regular season and "PO" refers to the playoffs.

Test	LB	UB	Verdict
$\frac{FT\%_{Reg}}{FT\%_{PO}}$	1.001616	1.095116	Barely Significant
$\frac{\text{Clutch } FT\%_{Reg}}{\text{Non-Clutch } FT\%_{Reg}}$	1.040683	1.253081	Significant
$\frac{\text{Clutch } FT\%_{PO}}{\text{Non-Clutch } FT\%_{PO}}$	0.8973769	1.2520245	Not Significant

Table 1: Bootstrapping Test Results

Conclusion

Shaquille O'Neal's free throw shooting was always a big story while he played. His difficulties did not stop him from becoming one of the most dominant and accomplished players to ever walk the Earth. He certainly had moments where he delivered from the line when the stakes were high, but in total, his clutch free throw shooting was not any better than his usual free throw shooting. He had games like Game 4 against the Kings in 2002 where he was brilliant from the line down the stretch. He also had games like Game 5 against the Nets in 2006 where he shot 1-6 from the line in clutch time. Moments of both brilliance and dearth in the clutch led to a convergence towards Shaq's usual free throw accuracy.

References

- [1] "First Hack-a-Shaq In 5 sec In to the 08-09 season!!!" *YouTube*, uploaded by UndergroundFame, 29 Oct 2008, [link](#).
- [2] "Richard Jefferson On Why Prime Shaq Is The Most Dominant Player In NBA History." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Young Man and The Three, 4 Apr 2023, [link](#).
- [3] Jiang, Marc. "The Imperfect Mathematics behind Why Hack-A-Shaq Works." *YouTube*, uploaded by MDJ, 1 Sep 2017, [link](#).
- [4] "'I'd Have 12 Rings!' - Kobe Bryant Reveals What Would Happen If Shaq Had Kobe's Work Ethic." *YouTube*, uploaded by Valuetainment, 22 Aug 2019, [link](#).
- [5] De Guzman, Andrei. "Shaquille O'Neal admits he never worked out in the summer: 'For what and who am I working out for?'" *Basketball Network*, 2 May 2024, [link](#).
- [6] "Hack-a-Shaq." *Wikipedia*, 24 May 2025, [link](#).