

# The Delayed Development of Keon Johnson

Josh LaFronz

January 11, 2025



Figure 1: Johnson playing for the Suns in the 2023 preseason

The 2025 NBA season has been, in a word, interesting for Nets guard Keon Johnson. With the Nets fully engaged in a tank accompanied by a fire sale, Johnson has assumed more responsibility as the season continues.

This past Friday (1/10/2025), Keon Johnson set a pair of career highs: field goal attempts (21) and three-point attempts (12) in a single game. Such volume should translate to a big scoring day, but Johnson ended up with 22 points. He made 8-21 FG and 4-12 3PT plus 2-2 FT, which leads to a 50.2 TS%. The 2024-25 league average TS% is about 57%, so that simply isn't good enough.

This game against the Nuggets is an example of the biggest problem throughout Johnson's career so far: scoring efficiently. Johnson declared for the NBA draft after one year at Tennessee where he shot 27% from downtown, but his record-breaking vertical<sup>[2]</sup> enticed the Knicks and eventually the Clippers enough to take him in the first round. In the NBA, those efficiency concerns are lingering. In his age-19 season, he hardly played for the Clippers but received a huge boom in minutes following a win-now trade to Portland. He shot 35% from three, nice, but he shot 35.7% from the field, not so nice. His three-point shooting was about league-average (99 3P+), but his inability to shoot two-point shots leads to a to a sub-50 TS%, and a TS+ of 81, meaning his true shooting was 19% worse than league average.

In 2022-23, it was more of the same. Johnson's three-point shooting was close to league-average (34.6%, 96 3P+), but his overall shooting was poor (37.6 FG%, 83 TS+). This year, his three-point percentage has fallen to 30.4%, so it's been a similar story with lower lows behind the arc. Along with his overall three-point percentage teetering on the border of average, Johnson shoots 29.3% from the corner three. This wonderful website *positiveresidual.com* has a shot chart of Keon Johnson's 2024-25 season colored by true shooting. Johnson hits corner threes at 44 TS%, far below the league average of 58%, and he shoots corner threes at an above-average rate. A lethal combination.

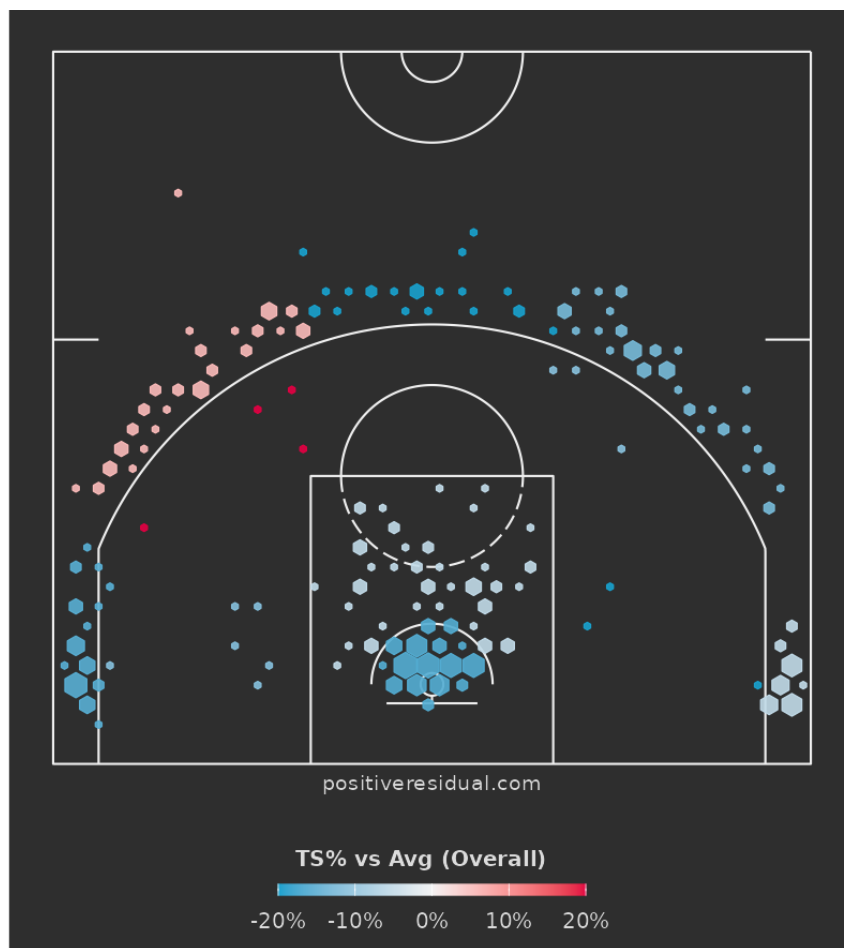


Figure 2: Keon Johnson's 2024-25 shot chart

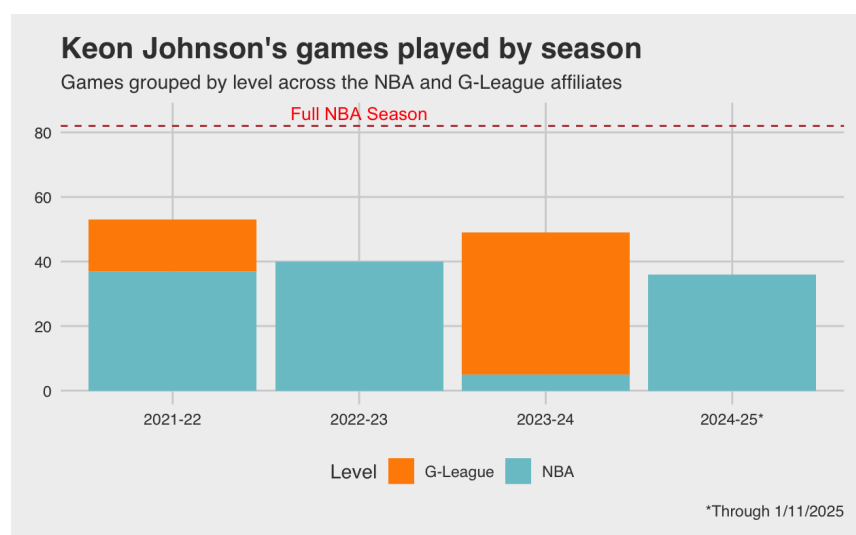
For more context on Keon's poor scoring efficiency, his 2024-25 field goal percentage on shots around the rim is 49.2%. He ranks fifth-worst in the league this year among qualified players. Once again using *positiveresidual.com*, his 52 TS% at the rim is well below the league average of 69%. In his career, he shoots 53.1% on shots around the rim, and it does not make sense. How does someone who has this nuclear athleticism struggle to score around the rim?

The biggest area that stood out to me was Johnson's inability to draw fouls. He shoots 2.4 free throw attempts per 100 possessions, putting Johnson on par with Chris Paul, Kyle Anderson, and Cody Martin. The 22-year-old freak athlete with a 48-inch vertical has the same free throw attempt pace as a man halfway to being an octogenarian, a man dubbed "Slo mo," and Cody Martin. He has an FTr+ of 50 this year, meaning that his free-throw attempt rate is half that of the NBA average. He is not a bad free throw

shooter by any stretch; he is a career 77% shooter from the stripe. The issue is that Johnson fails to draw many fouls.

Through his first four seasons, Keon Johnson has been inefficient all around. He struggles with finishing around the rim, drawing fouls and being an average three-point shooter. That shot chart[4] did reveal that Johnson is a much above average three-point shooter from the right wing, but it is a lonely red patch across a heat map dominated by blue.

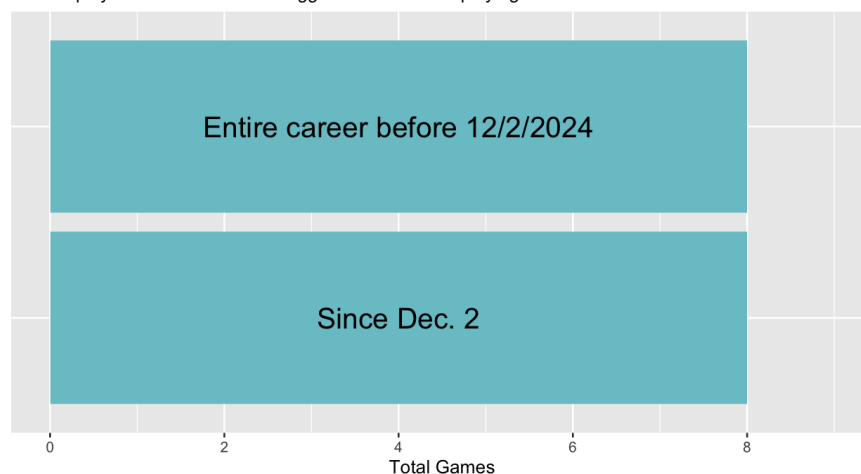
On one hand, Keon Johnson's first four seasons have been anything but pretty. On the other hand, he has played a total of 118 out of a possible 284 games across four seasons. Johnson left Tennessee at 19 years of age clearly needing some development on that jump shot. He was not entirely reliant on his athleticism; he demonstrated creative shotmaking and acrobatic finishing around the rim. It hasn't translated to a league full of better athletes than he was facing in college, but the lack of consistent run is doing Keon no favors.

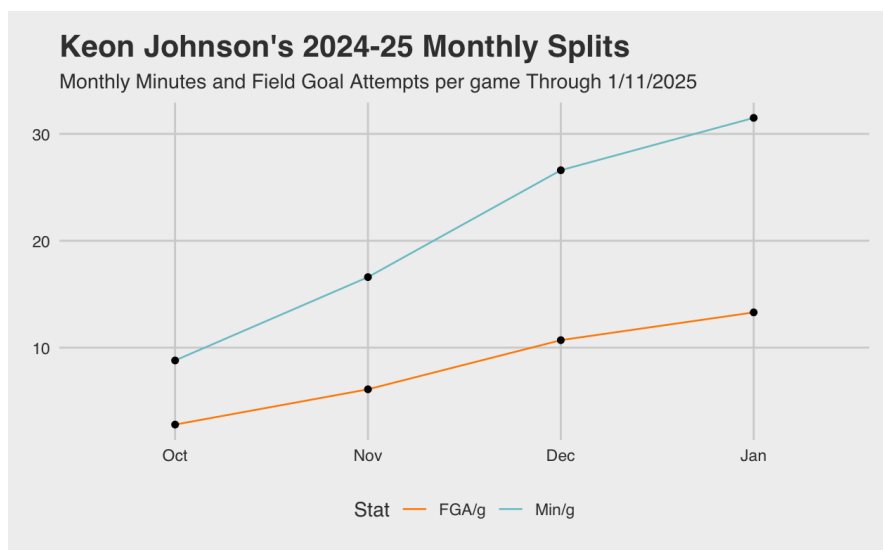


However, with the Nets engaged in a full-blown tank, his minutes have increased, and he is taking more and more shot attempts as the months pass.

### Keon Johnson's career 30-minute games

Games played in which Johnson logged 30 minutes of playing time on the court





Johnson is on track to shatter his personal bests for games and minutes played, and that is perfect for his situation. He needs reps.

If there is any reason for optimism, I would nominate Johnson's play in the G-League last season. In 44 games with the Long Island Nets, he averaged 17.9 points on 46.7/37.1/78.3 shooting splits, good enough for a very solid 58.5 TS%. His free throw rate (.191) could still be higher, but that is nitpicking a very encouraging season of development for the then 21-year-old Johnson.

## References

- [1] Photograph of Keon Johnson. "Brooklyn Nets Sign Keon Johnson To Two-Way Contract" Official Release on NBA.com, 1 Nov. 2023, NBA.com, [link](#).
- [2] "Combine: Keon Johnson max vertical record 48 inches in 2021" NBA.com, [link](#).
- [3] Statistics taken from Basketball-Reference and Positive Residuals
- [4] Shot chart from <https://www.positiveresidual.com/shiny/true-shooting-charts/>