

# Patrick Williams & The Five-Year Plan

Detailing the slow start from the recently extended Bulls forward

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## Introduction

At twenty-three years old, Patrick Williams is having his worst year as an NBA pro. In the first year of a five-year contract, Williams is killing the Bulls and the remaining optimism of Bulls' fans.

## From Seminoles to the Bulls

Since being drafted in 2020, Williams has played solid enough, but not quite to the level of the fourth overall pick. The situation he played in wasn't necessarily built for P-Will to succeed. After his first year, he was consistently pigeonholed as the fourth option behind DeMar, Vuc, and LaVine. It did not help that he missed nearly his entire age-20 season with a wrist injury. Despite those obstacles, he had a tendency to tease Bulls fans with certain performances. In that injury-plagued sophomore year, Williams had one of those classic game 82 explosions<sup>1</sup> where he scored 35 points against Minnesota. Two weeks later, he had 20 and 10 against Milwaukee in Game 4, and then 23 points with four threes in Game 5.

Williams has only scored twenty points SIX times since April 27, 2022. He has played 156 games since then and as of January 17, 2025, only six of them have been 20-point games. He was not touted as a scorer coming out of the draft, but more is desired since Williams has not been a defensive game changer in his career either. Let's look at 2022-23 when Williams played all 82 games. He had a 1.5 STL%, equal to DeRozan's, a 2.9 BLK%, a tenth higher than Caruso<sup>2</sup>, and a 0.4 Defensive Box Score Plus-Minus, lower than Ayo Dosunmu. Sure, P-Will placed top-30 in defensive win shares, but Nikola Vucevic placed SECOND. I cannot trust a statistic that places Vuc near the top of any defensive metric. I simply cannot.

At the very least, Williams has been a good floor spacer. Through his first four years, Williams shot 41% from deep on 2.8 attempts per game. His volume is not high, although it has been above average in the last two years (105 3PAr+). What is so odd about P-Dub is that his non-three-point shooting is grossly inefficient. His two-point scoring is below average (93 2P+), he doesn't draw fouls (80 FTr+) and despite his three-point shooting, that leads to a roughly average TS% (99 TS+). Williams is also

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<sup>1</sup>In the last game of the NBA season, teams often rest their usual players, whether it be to get ready for the playoffs or to fully embrace the tank, so players who wouldn't typically play are blessed with 35+ minutes to do their thing.

<sup>2</sup>Caruso also had a 3.0 STL%.

not a playmaker on offense; in his last healthy season (22-23), Williams was bottom-15 in AST%, placing him between maestros like Rudy Gobert and Walker Kessler.

## Year Five

That's a bunch of numbers, so to recap, Williams isn't a game wrecker on the defensive end, and he is one dimensional on offense, but at least he can make an open three. Is that enough to explain a five-year contract at \$90M? Not really, Chicago is clearly banking on a breakout. Through 31 games, the opposite has happened: Williams's shooting has completely cratered.

	Effective FG%		3-Point Attempts			3-Point Shooting	
Time Period	eFG%	eFG+	3PAr	3PAr+	3PA/g	3P%	3P+
First 4 seasons	54.2%	100	.355	91	2.78	41.0%	113
2024-25	48.1%	89	.543	129	4.65	36.8%	102

Table 1: The story of Williams's three-point shooting

Williams's shooting has experienced a very grim dual phenomenon. His three-point volume has increased, but his accuracy has decreased. More than half of Williams's field goal attempts are from beyond the arc. His three-point attempt rate is now 29% higher than league average, by far a career high, but his percentage has fallen to well below 40%. He is still above average, albeit slightly, but that dip has caused his effective field-goal percentage (eFG%)<sup>3</sup> to fall below average.

I was curious why his distance shooting is suffering. The Bulls did not bring back DeMar DeRozan, but LaVine and Vuc remain Bulls, Coby White has emerged into a stud, and the point guard combination of Josh Giddey and Lonzo Ball are also responsible for initiating the offense. I found a wrinkle within P-Will's shooting profile: his corner threes. Williams is an exceptional corner three-point marksman. The corner is his strongest three-point area. However, the same volume has not been there this year.

Time Period	corner 3PA% <sup>4</sup>	corner 3P%	non-corner 3P%
First 4 seasons	37.5%	44.6%	38.9%
2024-25	21.5%	41.9%	35.4%

Table 2: Corner Three!

Williams's most useful offensive trait has taken a noticeable step back this year, and his opportunities are not the same as they were a year prior. The previous section discussed how his offensive output is heavily reliant on his shooting from downtown since his other forms of scoring are lacking. Surely, those other areas have not taken a step back too?

<sup>3</sup>eFG% is a version of FG% that awards more credit for made threes, so since Williams's three-point shooting is closer to average, his eFG% is a more grizzly figure.

Time Period	2-Point Shooting			Free Throw Attempts		True Shooting	
	FG% from 0-3 feet	2P%	2P+	FTr	FTr+	TS%	TS+
First 4 seasons	.642	51.8%	93	.202	80	57.0%	99
2024-25	.525	39.7%	73	.162	67	51.2%	89

Table 3: The other aspects of Williams's scoring

I stand corrected. There is a lot of ugliness on that table. The only reason that the free throw section has not received a highlight is due to the lack of a true binary nature. Unlike a higher shooting percentage, drawing fouls does not necessarily mean better scoring, but it can certainly make a player's life easier and improve percentages if he draws more fouls<sup>5</sup>.

The two-point scoring is truly beyond explanation. Through January 17, Williams has the FIFTH-worst 2P% among qualified NBA players and a bottom-10 FG% at the rim. This cannot be tolerated from a 6'8" front-court player with the athleticism Williams possesses.

Putting that info together, here is a level-by-level breakdown of Williams's scoring efficiency:

Area	And?
0-3 Feet	Fifth-worst FG% in the association
3-10 Feet	Bottom-20 FG% in the NBA
Midrange	Consists of only 12.5% of Williams's attempts
Two-Point Shooting	Bottom-10 2P% in the NBA
Three-Point Land	Career-low 3P% on career-high volume
Free-Throw Shooting	Good shooting on career-low volume

Table 4: A summary of Williams's efficiency at every level of the court

An all-around disaster. Williams is good at two things on offense: Making threes and free throws, and he does not shoot enough free throws for that latter skill to be very impactful.

Alright, so the Bulls inked this 23-year-old forward to a five-year deal, and he responds by having an awful first half of the season. Absolutely brutal. However, there are two sides in basketball and Williams is genetically predisposed to being gifted on that other half. P-Will has a seven-foot wingspan, so surely he can still make an impact on defense.

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<sup>5</sup>Example: In 2016, James Harden had a .518 FTr and Andre Drummond had a .553 FTr. That higher rate of drawing fouls was not advantageous to Drummond, since he was a dismal free throw shooter. In contrast, this was precisely what Harden wanted to do. Harden ended with a 59.8 TS%, while Drummond posted a putrid 49.9 TS%.

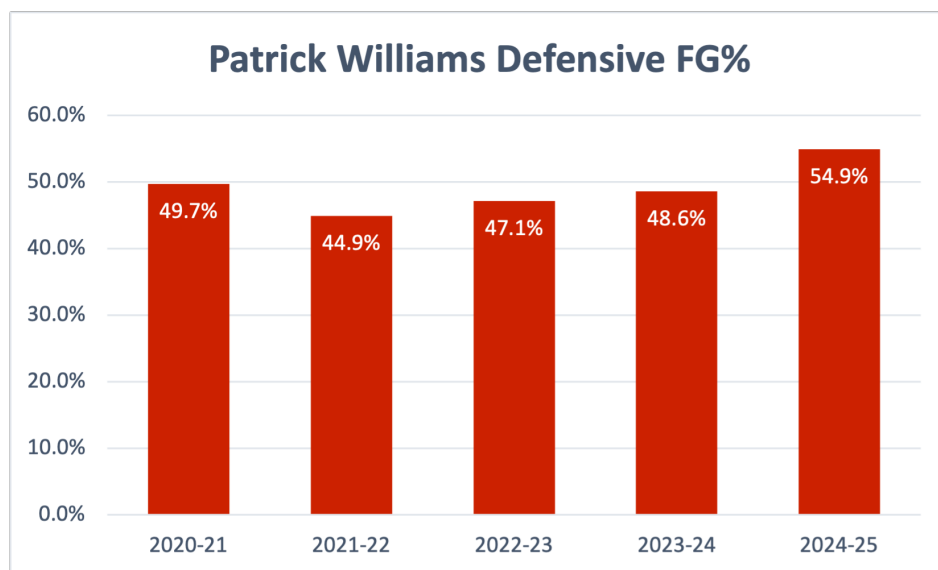


Figure 1: ...

Of course. It is like I stated in the opening paragraph: this is the worst year of Patrick Williams's career. On both ends, he has been unable to make a positive impact. Williams has the FIFTH-WORST defensive field goal pct among players who have played in twenty games. Unreal. I don't love Win Shares or Box Score Plus-Minus, but they can be useful in certain contexts, such as comparing the play of a singular player across different seasons.

Time Period	Win Shares per 48	Off. BPM	Def. BPM	BPM	VORP
First 4 Seasons	.065	-2.1	0.2	-1.9	0.2
2024-25	.014	-2.7	-0.5	-3.2	-0.3

Table 5: Williams by the advanced stats

Again, win shares and BPM are flawed statistics. They value stat-stuffing and can overrate certain players. Once again, Nikola Vucevic was second in the NBA in 2022-23 in DBPM. Vuc and defense have never been uttered together in a positive fashion; always lukewarm, at best. However, this is not used to compare multiple players, this is to compare multiple seasons of one player. Williams is bottoming out in all five of the above categories.

Here is a quick summary of what those statistics mean:

- Win Shares - an estimate of wins that a player contributes
- Offensive Box Plus Minus - an estimate of the points per 100 possessions a player provides with his offense above league-average
- Defensive Box Plus Minus - an estimate of the points per 100 possessions a player provides with his defense above league-average
- Box Plus Minus - an overall estimate of the points per 100 possessions a player provides above league-average

- Value Above Replacement Player - an estimate of points per 100 poss that a player contributes; replacement level is (-2.0). This statistic is not cited as often as WAR in baseball, but both have flaws.

Win Shares is the only statistic that is not on a rate basis. Win Shares are accumulated, hence, the need for Win Shares per 48 minutes. That being said, Williams currently has 0.3 WS this year. In 2021-22, Williams had 0.9 WS. In 2022, Williams missed all but 17 games that season, and he has played fourteen more games and twice as many minutes in 2024-25 than he did in 2022-23, and yet, he has three times as many win shares in 2021-22. Make it make sense.

Season	Games	Minutes	WS	WS/48
2021-22	17	422	0.9	.099
2024-25	31	836	0.3	.014

The Bulls made a huge investment in Williams, so they cannot get rid of him anytime soon. I suppose they could attempt to trade him, but that long contract combined with his nightmarish start to 2024-25 tanks his trade value. It is highly unlikely that someone would be willing to take him on without expecting a huge return.

That being said, the Bulls still roster LaVine and Vucevic, which I interpret as they still care about winning. If that is truly the case, then the Bulls should consider replacing Williams in the starting lineup.

The Bulls have a dearth of frontcourt depth options: Buzelis is young, Phillips plays with energy, Sanogo cannot play the 4, and E.J. Liddell would be the most intriguing option, but he rarely plays too. The most realistic option the Bulls could turn to is Jalen Smith. There are arguments for and against replacing Williams with the man who was drafted six spots after him:

- Pros:
  - Smith's TS% (60%) is much higher than Williams's (51.2%). A huge component of this is the fact that Smith shoots above 60% on two-point field goals and on shots 0-3 feet from the rim.
  - Smith's size would alleviate the Bulls's difficulties rebounding the ball and blocking shots: The Bulls rank 24th and 18th in blocks and rebounds per 100 possessions, respectively. Also, Vuc does not block shots; his vertical is about five inches. His feet seldom leave the ground.
  - Smith has a higher usage and lower turnover percentage than Williams:

Player	USG%	TOV%
Smith	20.7%	8.2%
Williams	16.3%	13.4%

This suggests that Smith receiving more minutes would come with less turnovers.

- Individual offensive rating is a shaky stat, but Smith has a 121 ORtg, while Williams is sitting at 100. A large difference
- Cons:

- Smith is having a worse three-point shooting season than Williams. He shot 42.4% last year with Indiana, but he's below 35% this year. Also, while Williams is shooting above 40% from the corner, Smith is around 30% on comparable volume.
- To add to the floor spacing aspect, Williams is shooting better on open and wide-open threes this season, per NBA.com.
- I can not guarantee that Smith's defense will be an improvement from Williams's. He rebounds and blocks shots, but that does not mean he is a good defender. Smith's DFG% is only a little lower than that of Williams's, and P-Will is the better athlete who is more equipped to guard players on the perimeter.
- Smith and Vuc have never once shared the floor together this year. That fit might be clunky, especially since Smith essentially does not play the 4 anymore.

All that being said, I can not wholeheartedly recommend that the Bulls start Jalen Smith instead of Patrick Williams, but they should give him more minutes. The Bulls simply have to hope in the emergence of Buzelis, Liddell, Phillips, Terry, anyone honestly, or for Williams to improve. That latter expectation appears more and more fleeting as the days pass.

## References

- [1] "Patrick Williams," *NBADraft.net*, [link](#).
- [2] Statistics taken from Basketball-Reference and NBA.com, data manipulation and visualization done in Excel.