The Playoff Pitfalls of James Harden

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Introduction

Another year, another disappointing playoff appearance for the Los Angeles Clippers. Kawhi was healthy, the lightning rod known as Paul George was no longer in town, and yet the Clippers fell to the battle-tested Nuggets in seven games. Game 7 was a massacre and that's coming from a Phoenix Suns supporter. The Clippers failed to escape their playoff narrative yet again, as well as a player who is all too familiar with allegations of disappearing: James Harden.

When Harden retires, he will be a first-ballot hall-of-famer and be remembered as one of the most prolific scorers, lethal isolation players, and dangerous offensive weapons in the history of the association. He is arguably the fourth-best shooting guard of all time[1]. Yet, there has been a stench that has lingered around his legacy. It's one that has followed players like Clayton Kershaw, Paul George, and others: Vanishing in critical playoff games. In his 16-year career, The Beard has reached the NBA Finals once as a member of the baby Thunder and the conference finals twice; he has not reached the conference finals since 2018, where the infamous Game 7 against Golden State took place, featuring 27 straight missed Houston threes. That certainly feels underwhelming for a player of Harden's caliber.

Narratives can be very powerful, regardless of how true they are. Harden has been battling playoff choker allegations since the 2015 or 2017 seasons. We, as sports fans and as humans, are more drawn to extremes, and those extremes can come to define our viewpoint. Is James Harden truly a playoff shrinker or just a victim of an indelible scarlet letter? I'm going to address both sides of this question.

The Defense's Argument

Before any argument, there is a piece of misinformation that has been floating around the hub of the intelligentsia: Twitter. There is a claim that James Harden has 55 career playoff games with fewer than four field goals. This isn't true, but I am going to give these dedicated researchers the benefit of the doubt and assume they meant less than *or equal to* 4 field goals made. Yes, Harden has 55 career playoff games with less than five field goals , but this is misleading. He is being judged as if he was a star for his entire career, but he was not "the guy" until his Houston acquisition. 28 of those 55 games took place while he was in Oklahoma City. In addition, that number includes his 2021 semifinals series against Milwaukee, where he was playing on a hamstring equivalent to

[1] MJ, Kobe, Flash ahead of him

a prime rib. He played in Game 1 for 43 seconds, but that's included in the 55 games with less than 5 field goals made. He played on one leg for Games 5-7 and only fell below the 5 FGM threshold once. If we are going to have a serious discussion about Harden's playoff performance, we must not include this series or his OKC days before casting judgment. We must only look at the version of Harden, who was a star with two functional hamstrings. Yes, that still leaves 25 games with less than 5 field goals made, but he still averaged 8 assists and 8 free throw attempts in those games. Those performances encompass less than 20% of Harden's playoff games from 2013 to now (excluding the 2021 ECSF).

Harden has had many heroic playoff games. He had two 40-point herculean efforts against the Celtics in the 2023 semi-finals. He scored 45 points in a Game 1 win in Boston with his star teammate Joel Embiid absent. This included a gorgeous step-back go-ahead three in the face of Al Horford. Three games later, he did it again. He hit another go-ahead three to give the Sixers the win. Philadelphia was losing before each of these huge threes, and he still hit nothing but net.

Harden has eleven 40-point playoff games. Three of them came against the prime Warriors, and one of them was a loss. That's another point of reality about Harden's playoff struggles; he played in the shadow of a better team. The Warriors eliminated the Rockets four times from 2015 to 2019, and only two of those series were supposed to be competitive. The 2015 Rockets were all guts and heart; they lost Games 1 and 2 in Oracle by a combined five points. Harden shot 24-41 in those two games and averaged 33 points per game. Game 2 was a one-point loss, but Harden was a +12 when on the court. The 2016 Rockets limped into the playoffs as an eight-seed against the winningest regular season team ever, but Harden stole a game with a 35-point effort in Game 3, including a game-winner. The 2018 Rockets should have won; that Game 7 will haunt Houston until the end of time, but that was a team collapse, not a Harden collapse.

James Harden has 49 playoff games with 30 or more points, which is twelfth all time in NBA history. That's an awful lot for a choker to have. Thirteen of those performances came in closeout games, where Harden apparently shrinks.

Harden is heavily scrutinized for his poor performances in closeout games, and it's overblown. I already mentioned Game 4 against the Warriors in 2015; Harden has several strong performances in closeout/win-or-go-home games.

Series	FG	FGA	3P	3PA	FT	FTA	REB	AST	STL	TOV	PTS
2013 1st Round G5	10	16	7	9	4	5	8	3	1	3	31
2015 WCSF G5	9	20	1	8	7	8	11	10	0	5	26
2021 1st Round G5	10	17	4	7	10	11	10	10	2	1	34
2025 1st Round G6	10	20	3	8	5	5	6	8	2	4	28

Table 1: Some of Harden's greatest playoff hits

There are also examples where he played great and his team just fell short.

Series	FG	FGA	3P	3PA	FT	FTA	REB	AST	STL	TOV	PTS
2014 1st Round G6	9	15	4	6	12	12	4	6	4	4	34
2016 1st Round G5	12	23	3	7	8	9	6	6	2	7	35
2018 WCF G7	12	29	2	13	6	8	6	6	4	5	32
2020 1st Round G6	11	22	3	11	7	8	8	7	0	5	32

Table 2: Not enough room in Harden's backpack

That Game 5 against the Warriors in 2016 is unreal. Harden scored 18 points in the first quarter, and yet the Rockets were down 17 at the end of the first frame. Harden made six field goals, while the rest of his team shot 0-15 in the first quarter. What is he supposed to do?

One of those games with less than five field goals occurred in Game 7 of the first round of the Bubble playoffs. Rockets vs. Thunder. Oklahoma City's undrafted rookie Lu Dort had a heroic game. After shooting 7-38 from three in the first six games, Dort scored 30 points and drilled six threes. With the Thunder down two, the ball found an open Dort with another opportunity to launch and possibly win the game. After struggling throughout the game, James Harden stepped up when it counted the most. He blocked Dort's three, and perfectly timed his dodge when Dort tried to throw the ball out of bounds off of Harden. Rockets' ball, half a second remaining, game over, series over.

Statistical Analysis

Furthermore, we can apply statistical methods to determine if there is a significant difference in games with less than 5 FG among regular season and playoff games. Since he's played many more regular season games, our parameter of interest will be the rate of games with less than 5 FG: (number of games with less than 5 FG)/(total number of regular season/playoff games)

Let X, Y represent the number of playoff and regular season games with less than 5 field goals made, respectively. Let m and n represent the total number of games in the playoffs and regular season, respectively. Using bootstrapping with 4000 replicants, I'm generating a 95% confidence interval to estimate $\theta = (X/m)/(Y/n)$.

Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	LB	UB	Verdict
Games with $FG < 5$	.198	.144	0.863	1.964	Not Significant

Table 3: Results using R

The interval includes 1, so we fail to reject H_o: Harden has an equal rate of games with less than five field goals made in the playoffs compared to the regular season.

Let's conduct this same test, but let X, Y represent the respective number of games where Harden had either 30 points:

Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	LB	UB	Verdict
Games w/ $PTS \geq 30$	.381	.359	0.821	1.337	Not Significant

Table 4: Results using R

Again, 1 is included within the interval, suggesting that there is not a significant difference.

In fact, you can perform that same test in multiple areas. There are two different kinds of tests being performed here. The first is a bootstrap interval estimating the true difference in rates/percentages among Harden's regular season and playoff résumé.

$X =$ Times a statistical phenomenon occurs OR
a shooting statistic during the playoffs.

$Y =$ " " during the regular season.

In more math terms:

Given statistic S and numerical threshold or another statistic T

$m = 126$ total playoff games

$n = 825$ total regular season games

$$X = \sum_{i=1}^{m} \Psi(S_i > T_i)$$

$$Y = \sum_{j=1}^{n} \Psi(S_j > T_j)$$

$$\theta = \frac{X/m}{Y/n}$$

$$H_o : \theta = 1$$

$$H_a : \begin{cases} \theta > 1 \text{ , if it's a statistical phenomenon} \\ \theta < 1 \text{ , if it's a shooting statistic} \end{cases}$$

$B = 4000$ iterations

$$\hat{\theta}^{(i)} = \frac{X^*/m}{Y^*/n} \text{ for } i = 1, 2, ..., B$$

Reject H_o if $1 \notin [\hat{\theta}_{(B\alpha/2)}, \hat{\theta}_{(B(1-\alpha)/2)}]$ at the $\alpha = .05$ significance level,
where $\hat{\theta}_{(i)}$ is the ith order statistic of the bootstrap interval.

In other words, the alternative is greater than 1 if the statistic being tested is the number of times Harden satisfied a specific statistical constraint. The alternative is less than 1 if the statistic being tested is a shooting stat across the two time periods.

	Rates/Percentages		Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	LB	UB	Verdict
$eFG\%$	.502	.527	0.8994	1.0087	Not Significant
$3P\%$	.341	.363	0.8558	1.0297	Not Significant
$FG < 5$	.198	.144	0.8905	1.9528	Not Significant
$TOV > FG$	.151	.122	0.7349	1.8417	Not Significant
$TOV > AST$	.119	.092	0.6773	2.1018	Not Significant

Table 5: Rate Bootstrap Interval Results

Interpretation Guide

1. **Harden's playoff** $eFG\%$
2. **Harden's regular season** $eFG\%$
3. **The Lower Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** eFG_{post}/eFG_{reg}
4. **The Upper Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** eFG_{post}/eFG_{reg}
5. $1 \in$ **CI** $\rightarrow$ **fail to reject** H_o

	Rates/Percentages		Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	LB	UB	Verdict
$eFG\%$	$.502^{\mathbf{1}}$	$.527^{\mathbf{2}}$	$0.8994^{\mathbf{3}}$	$1.0087^{\mathbf{4}}$	Not Significant$^{\mathbf{5}}$
$FG < 5$	$.198^{\mathbf{6}}$	$.144^{\mathbf{7}}$	$0.8905^{\mathbf{8}}$	$1.9528^{\mathbf{9}}$	Not Significant$^{\mathbf{10}}$

Table 6: Example Table

6. **The rate of Harden's playoff games in which he makes less than 5 field goals**
7. **The rate of Harden's regular season games in which he makes less than 5 field goals**
8. **The Lower Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** $\left(\sum_{i=1}^{126} \Psi(FG_{post}^{(i)} < 5)\right) / \left(\sum_{j=1}^{825} \Psi(FG_{reg}^{(j)} < 5)\right)$
9. **The Upper Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** $\left(\sum_{i=1}^{126} \Psi(FG_{post}^{(i)} < 5)\right) / \left(\sum_{j=1}^{825} \Psi(FG_{reg}^{(j)} < 5)\right)$
10. $1 \in$ **CI** $\rightarrow$ **fail to reject** H_o

The second test is a combination of a Mann-Whitney U-Test and a bootstrap interval estimating the difference of means.

$X =$ Counting stat during the playoffs

$Y =$ Counting stat during the regular season

Mann-Whitney:

$H_o : P(X > Y) = 0.5$

$H_a : P(X > Y) < 0.5$

Reject H_o if p-value $< \alpha = .05$

Bootstrap Interval of Difference of Means:

$\theta = \overline{X} - \overline{Y}$

$H_o : \theta = 0$

$H_a : \theta < 0$

$\hat{\theta}^{(i)} = \overline{X^*} - \overline{Y^*}$ for $i = 1, 2, ..., B$

Reject H_o if $1 \notin [\hat{\theta}_{(B\alpha/2)}, \hat{\theta}_{(B(1-\alpha)/2)}]$ at the $\alpha = .05$ significance level.

	Averages		Mann-Whitney	Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	p-value	LB	UB	Significant
PTS	25.87	26.91	0.2342	-2.798	0.7729	0/2
FG missed	10.71	10.15	0.0411	-0.1630	1.250	1/2
FTA	8.25	9.07	0.0665	-1.598	-0.0276	1/2
TOV	4.01	4.25	0.0832	-0.6565	0.1701	0/2

Table 7: Mann-Whitney, Bootstrap Test Results in Harden's favor

Interpretation Guide

1. **Harden's playoff average points per game**
2. **Harden's regular season average points per game**
3. **The p-value for the U-test testing** $H_o : P(PTS_{post} > PTS_{reg}) = 0.5$
4. **The Lower Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** $\overline{PTS}_{post} - \overline{PTS}_{reg}$
5. **The Upper Bound of the bootstrap confidence interval estimating the ratio between** $\overline{PTS}_{post} - \overline{PTS}_{reg}$
6. **The number of significant test results out of two tests; U-Test is significant if** $p-$**value** $< .05$ **and the second test is significant if** $0 \notin$ **CI**

	Averages		Mann-Whitney	Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	p-value	LB	UB	Significant
PTS	$25.87^{\mathbf{1}}$	$26.91^{\mathbf{2}}$	$0.2342^{\mathbf{3}}$	$-2.798^{\mathbf{4}}$	$0.7729^{\mathbf{5}}$	$0/2^{\mathbf{6}}$

Table 8: Example Table 2

Harden is routinely criticized for poor shooting playoff games, and the media also pokes at the stat that Harden has 26 playoff games with more turnovers than field goals made. The reality is that Harden is prone to having a game where he's careless with the ball and his difficult shot selection isn't working out. It doesn't get worse once the postseason arrives. Harden had a game against Charlotte in 2020 where he recorded ten turnovers along with a 30-point, 14-assist, 10-rebound stat-line, to which Hornets commentator Eric Collins hilariously highlighted the moment. It's just the lows that Harden can produce at times. He's a terrific playmaker along with being a torture chamber to defend, but he can have some very rough games. The playoffs are a bigger stage, so those rough games stick out, but they are not happening at a higher rate than the regular season.

What's Behind the Narrative

Now that I have laid out the argument in defense of Harden, I am going to switch perspectives and argue that the choker narrative is warranted. On the other side of the spectrum of playoff notoriety is the Legend of Game 6 Klay Thompson. I previously wrote a paper on him in which I argued that the narrative isn't necessarily about the entire body of work, it's about the defining moments. Klay's Game 6 against OKC and his pair of beauties against Houston define that nickname. That's where the name was born and where it stuck. His struggles after his pair of debilitating injuries don't change the impact that prime Klay Thompson had. I'm going to apply that logic to Harden's case, and focus more on low points that defined Harden's choker label. What creates a choking narrative is a combination of performance and timing. Having a stinker at the worst moment can cause that label to linger, and it would take a game of equal magnitude in the other direction to change the minds of the people.

The issue is that Harden doesn't have a lot of signature playoff games. Yes, he had those game winners against Boston, he had that game winner against Golden State in 2016, the block and dodge against Lu Dort. I guess one could argue for his 45-point effort against the Warriors in the 2015 conference finals, but the Rockets were already down 3-0 at that point.

I mentioned Harden's eleven 40-point playoff games, but only one of them took place in a closeout game, and it's the aforementioned game against the Warriors. In fact, none of those 40-pieces took place in Games 5-7. That's one of the issues with Harden's playoff legacy, and it's a facet that I briefly mentioned earlier: Timing. Harden's best playoff games take place between Games 1-4, and the more stressful games are where he simply is not the same guy:

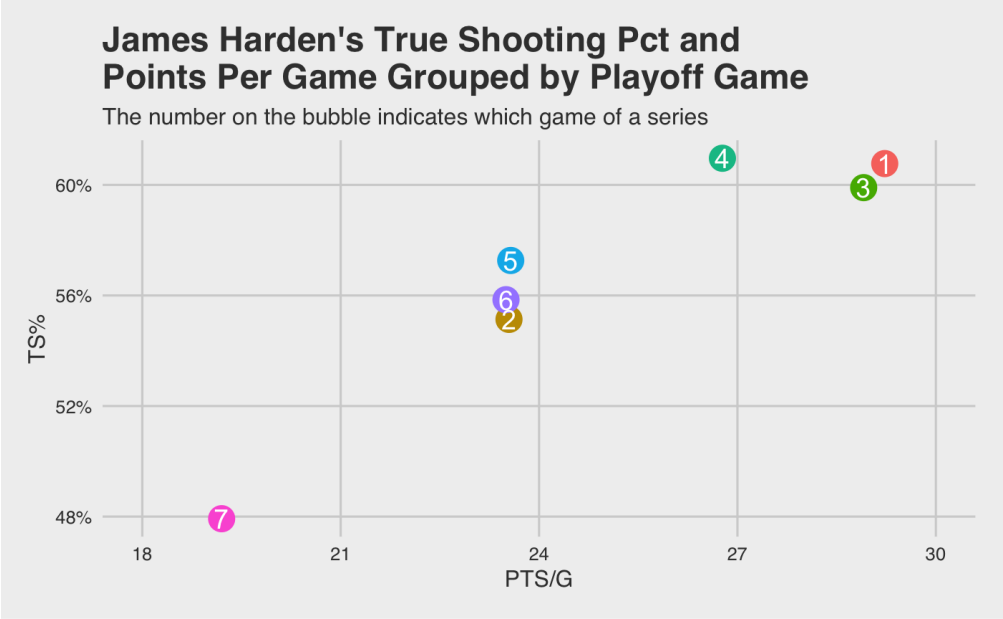

Figure 1

Returning to Harden's 45-point game against the Warriors in Game 4, that game was very commendable. Harden posted his playoff career-high in a win-or-go-home situation. I mentioned how well he played in Games 1 and 2. However, the recurring problem is that Harden just can't keep that bad taste out of your mouth. Games 3

and 5 were absolutely awful. In Game 3, down two games to none, in front of a very anxious Houston crowd, Harden shot 3-16 and the Rockets lost by 35. The Rockets' faithful watched Stephen Curry, the guy who won MVP over Harden, score 40 points on just 19 shots. It was a massacre. After the Game 4 win, Harden and co. traveled to Oracle for Game 5, where he arguably played worse. He shot 2-11 and committed TWELVE turnovers in a 14-point loss. That's the most of all time in a playoff game. Sure, he made ten free throws in Games 3 and 5, but it doesn't matter when you shoot below 20% and lose by double digits. The reason Harden's Game 4 performance isn't talked about much is because it's sandwiched between two all-time terrible games.

Harden simply has too many of these types of performances in pivotal playoff games. 2015 WCF Game 3 was a great chance to make the series competitive, and Harden put forth that effort. Game 5 against the Warriors was too lat because there was no chance the Rockets could have come back down 3-0. In that game, Harden posted a 1.0 Game Score. Game Score is a statistic designed to confine the box score contributions of a player to a single number. This statistic is not kind to defenders and other players who have off-ball roles, but for an on-ball machine like Harden, this stat works fine.

$$\begin{aligned} GmSc = \; & PTS + (0.4 * FG) - (0.7 * FGA) - (0.4 * (FTA - FT)) + (0.7 * ORB) + \\ & (0.3 * DRB) + STL + (0.7 * AST) + (0.7 * BLK) - (0.4 * PF) - TOV \end{aligned}$$

For reference, Harden's Game 4 Game Score was 41, which Basketball Reference calls an "outstanding performance." The Game 5 posting of 1.0 is Harden's second-lowest in his playoff career in the established range. Wait, second-lowest? What could have possibly been worse than a 2-11, 12-TO disaster?

MIN	FG	FGA	3P	3PA	FT	FTA	REB	AST	TOV	PF	PTS
36	2	11	2	9	4	6	3	7	6	6	10

Table 9: Harden's box score in Game 6 of the 2017 Western Conference Finals

This game is the point where the narrative became impossible to ignore and it was very difficult to defend Harden. The Rockets were coming off of a gut-wrenching loss in Game 5, where the ageless Manu Ginobili blocked Harden's game-tying three-point attempt. That is tough to recover from, but the Rockets still had two huge things going for them. One, Game 6 was at home, where the Rockets were 30-11 during the regular season. Two, the man who finished third in MVP voting, Kawhi Leonard, didn't even play. Tony Parker was out since Game 2 after he tore his quad. Despite all of that, the Rockets were embarrassed in Game 6, as they lost by 39 points, and their superstar did that. The game was over by halftime. Along with the abysmal performance, Harden's body language was also terrible. As many people noted, he looked checked out. Some of his turnovers were so ugly. It was unbelievable that someone of James Harden's caliber could have a game this bad in this situation.

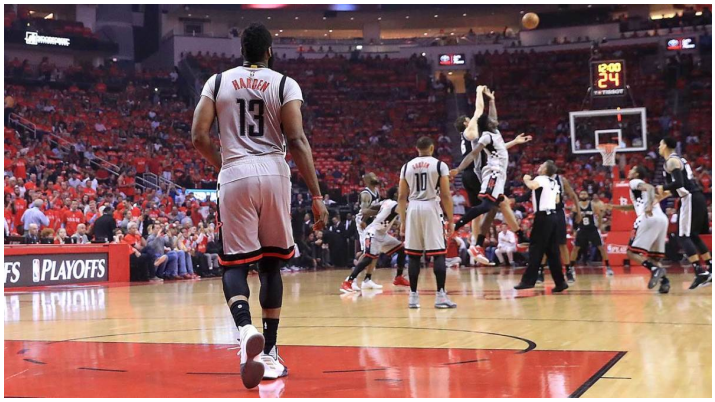

Figure 2: The Rockets lost Game 6 by 39 points to a Kawhi-less, Parker-less Spurs team.

As previously stated, Harden's most signature playoff moments took place in the 2023 Eastern Conference Semi-finals against the Celtics. He had that terrific Game 1 with no Embiid and a huge Game 4, both games featuring game-winning threes. However, once again, he just can't keep that bad taste out of your mouth:

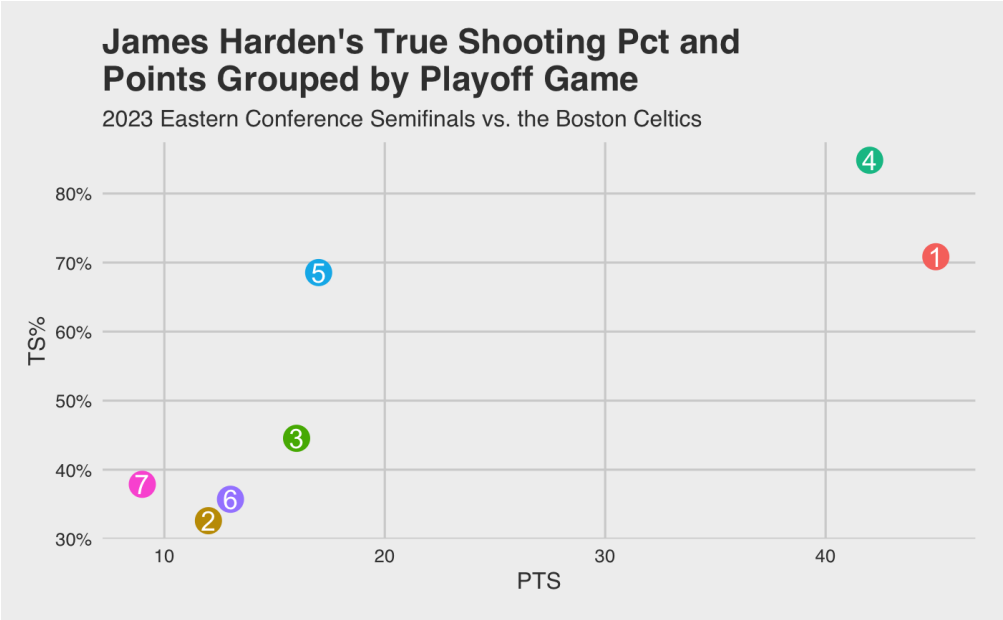

Figure 3

Harden had a phenomenal Game 1 and then shot a combined 5-28 in Games 2 and 3, where Philly lost by 34 and 12 points, respectively. He had a colossal bounce back in Game 4 and played a very solid Game 5. In a game where both Embiid and Maxey reached 30 points, Harden had an efficient 17 points (4-8 FG, 1-2 3PT, 8-10 FT), 10 assists (2 TOV), 8 rebounds and 2 steals. Embiid was the MVP that season, and Harden played his role very well while Joel did MVP things. The Sixers had a great chance to stomp out the Celtics: Game 6 in Philadelphia leading 3-2. Harden responded with a 13-point, 5-turnover effort in a 86-95 loss, where he shot 4-16 and 0-6 from deep. Three days later, he did it again: 9 points, 3-11 FG, 7 assists, 5 turnovers, 24-point defeat.

His time in Philly did not do any favors for his Houdini allegations. Since becoming a Rocket and minus the one hamstring games, Harden has 25 playoff games (out of 126)

in which he made less than five field goals; eleven of them took place while he was a Sixer. Harden was a Sixer for only a season and a half, and he took part in 23 playoff games, meaning he made less than five field goals in nearly half of them. The most infamous were the two closeout games against Boston and Game 6 against Miami in 2022. Harden sprinkled in some good performances within those series, but he couldn't sustain it.

Rap Sheet

In fact, nearly every playoff series referenced previously includes a uniquely terrible performance that hasn't been mentioned yet:

- 2013 1st Round vs. OKC G4: 15 points (4-12 FG, 0-4 3PT) [0 points in the fourth quarter], 3 assists, 10 turnovers, 5 steals, 5 fouls
- 2014 1st Round vs. POR G2: 18 points (6-19 FG), 4 assists, 5 turnovers, 6 fouls
- 2015 WCSF vs LAC G6: 23 points (5-20 FG), 3 assists, 1 turnovers, Rockets' historic comeback occurred entirely with Harden on the bench (-21 +/-)
- 2016 1st Round vs. GSW G1: 17 points (7-19 FG, 0 FTA), 2 assists, 6 turnovers
- 2017 WCSF vs. SAS G2: 13 points (3-17 FG, 2-9 3PT), 10 assists, 7 rebounds, 4 turnovers
- 2018 WCF vs. GSW G5: 19 points (5-21 FG, 0-11 3PT), 4 assists, 6 turnovers
- 2020 1st Round vs. OKC G7: 17 points (4-15 FG, 1-9 3PT), 9 assists, 4 turnovers, 3 blocks (game-sealing block against Dort)
- 2025 1st Round vs. DEN G7: 7 points (2-8 FG) [0 in second half], 13 assists, 5 rebounds, 2 turnovers

That 2015 Game 6 against the Clippers was particularly awkward. The Rockets were dead near the end of the third quarter when Coach Kevin McHale pulled Harden out of the game. Led by Josh Smith, Corey Brewer, and Jason Terry, the Rockets orchestrated one of the greatest single-game playoff comebacks ever seen. They went from losing 70-89 to winning 119-107. Looking at the box score makes it glaringly obvious with Harden being the only player who played 20+ minutes with a negative plus-minus:

Player	MIN	PTS	REB	+/-
Trevor Ariza	45:06	13	5	+11
Dwight Howard	40:07	20	21	+15
Jason Terry	33:09	7	7	+12
James Harden	29:56	23	2	-21
Josh Smith	25:58	19	6	+11
Corey Brewer	24:46	19	10	+32
Terrence Jones	21:55	16	5	+1

Table 10: Rockets' Box Scores in 2015 WCSF G6

In this section, we've seen three of Harden's five Game 7 appearances show up. His Game 7 performances in 2015 and 2018 were respectable enough, but his three since

then have left a lot to be desired. If he didn't get that outstanding block on Dort in 2020, Harden would be 1-4 in Game 7s with three of those performances being extremely ugly.

There are a couple of other performances that I think bear mentioning[2]:

- 2018 1st Round vs. MIN G2: 12 points (2-18 FG, 1-10 3PT), 7 assists, 3 turnovers
- 2022 ECSF vs. MIA G6: 11 points (4-9 FG, 0 FTA), 9 assists, 4 turnovers
- 2023 1st Round vs. BRK G2: 8 points (3-13 FG, 2-8 3PT, 0 FTA), 7 assists, 5 turnovers, 4 steals
- 2024 1st Round vs. DAL G5: 7 points (2-12 FG, 1-7 3PT), 7 assists, 4 turnovers

In total, I've laid out a combined seventeen playoff games that range from bad to all-time terrible. That is a hideous track record for a future first ballot Hall-of-Famer to have. Harden will be first-ballot, but he will definitely go down as one of the most notorious playoff shrinkers in NBA history.

Statistical Analysis

This feels like overkill, but I'm going to perform the same statistical analysis as before, but this time, I will be asking different questions.

First, there are few shooting stats in which Harden has a significant difference between his regular season and postseason output.

	Rates/Percentages		Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	LB	UB	Verdict
$TS\%$	.582	.609	0.9178	0.9950	Significant
FTr	.444	.501	0.8023	0.9812	Significant
$eFG\% < .40$	.294	.202	1.0263	1.9372	Significant
$FG < 4$ & FG missed > 10	.0476	.0097	1.511	10.913	Significant

Table 11: Rate Bootstrap Interval Results in favor of the narrative

There are also a few counting stats that have significant differences between them. It's also noteworthy that two of the counting stats (FG missed and FTA) in Table 7 are extremely close to clearing the threshold for rejecting H_o. I can't conclude that there's a significant difference explained by the time of the game, but it's very close.

	Averages		Mann-Whitney	Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Playoffs	Regular Season	p-value	LB	UB	Significant
AST	7.63	8.69	0.0003	-1.6288	-0.4821	2/2
$GmSc$	19.51	21.57	0.0236	-3.7266	-0.3331	2/2

Table 12: Mann-Whitney, Bootstrap Test Results in favor of the narrative

I want to highlight how Harden performs in those big playoff games: Instead of comparing Harden's performance in regular season games vs. playoff games, I'm going to highlight Harden's difference in performance in Games 1-4 vs. Games 5-7.

[2]Harden had a miserable 3-20 night in Game 3 against the Jazz in 2019, but he notched 14 points in the fourth quarter along with 6 steals to help the Rockets secure the win

Given the truncated dataset (Playoff games from 2013 and beyond, minus the Nets-Bucks series where Harden played on a severe hamstring injury), he's played 88 games 1 to 4 and 38 games 5 to 7. Given the large difference in sample size, I decided to test the rate at which horrible game stats occurred. From the examples, this included instances where Harden shot poorly, turned the ball an extreme amount, scored very little, and even times when he didn't attempt very many shots.

	Rates/Percentages		Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Games 5-7	Games 1-4	LB	UB	Verdict
$3P\%$	.292	.360	0.6478	0.9909	Significant
$PTS < 20$	.205	.421	1.518	3.171	Significant
$FG < 5$	.290	.159	1.264	3.016	Significant
$FG\% < .30$	.237	.136	1.152	3.039	Significant
$3P\% < .20$	.316	.148	1.470	3.582	Significant
$FGA < 10$	.105	.0114	3.093	$+\infty$	Significant
$GmSc < 10$	.263	.136	1.307	3.346	Significant
$TOV > 5$	.263	.182	1.031	2.281	Significant
$eFG\% < .40$	.368	.261	1.069	2.022	Significant
$TS\% < .50$	.447	.182	1.756	3.873	Significant

Table 13: Rate Bootstrap Interval Results within Playoffs in favor of the narrative

There is a lot of information here, so here's a summary of what this table is saying. There is significant evidence to show that James Harden has a higher chance of doing the following in Games 5-7 compared to Games 1-4:

- Scoring less than 20 points
- Making less than 5 field goals (initial narrative brought up)
- Shooting extremely poorly
- Having terrible advanced shooting stats, even true shooting, which is tailor-made for a foul-drawing machine like Harden
- Becoming gun shy
- Having more than 5 turnovers
- Overall, having a very poor box score (less than 10 Game Score)

This aligns with my desired point after referencing Klay Thompson's "Game 6" nickname. It's the extreme examples that are remembered most; it's the games that define legacies and cement narratives that are most relevant in these player discussions. Harden's entire body of work within the playoffs is important, but he has been hunting for a signature playoff moment that silences all the ridicule and vindicates him. This is far too many categories to shrink during high stakes games in a playoff series. For what it's worth, I found significant differences within the overall distribution in three statistics.

	Averages		Mann-Whitney	Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Games 5-7	Games 1-4	p-value	LB	UB	Significant
PTS	22.97	27.11	0.0220	-7.482	-0.8241	2/2
$GmSc$	16.81	20.68	0.0179	-7.044	-0.7615	2/2
$3P$	2.34	3.17	0.0151	-1.456	-0.1834	2/2

Table 14: Mann-Whitney, Bootstrap Test Results within Playoffs in favor of the narrative

Conclusion

On two separate fronts, the narrative that Harden is a playoff shrinker is supported by both statistical analysis and examining his game log. To be honest, I always root for Harden and I would very much like to see him do well. I began this project with the implicit bias in favor of Harden, hence, the counterargument section. However, faced with a complete list of Harden's playoff duds and significant differences in several statistical areas, it is much more difficult to argue in his favor. The height of his playoff powers came in the first half of the 2023 series against Boston, but he squandered any goodwill with his performances in games six and seven. He is still defined by his performance in Game 6 of the 2017 Semis against the Spurs, and his most recent Game 7 against Denver was yet another disaster to add to the list.

Full Unreported Testing Results

For transparency's sake, these are the tests I performed for Harden's performance in Games 1-4 compared to Games 5-7 that were not significant and not highlighted in the previous section.

	Rates/Percentages		Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Games 5-7	Games 1-4	LB	UB	Verdict
$eFG\%$	.477	.512	0.822	1.046	Not Significant
$TS\%$	.556	.593	0.860	1.021	Not Significant
FTr	.434	.449	0.796	1.173	Not Significant
FG missed > 10	.474	.500	0.789	1.157	Not Significant
$FG < TOV$	.211	.125	0.662	3.970	Not Significant
$AST < TOV$	.158	.102	0.463	4.632	Not Significant

Table 15: Rate Bootstrap Interval Results within Playoffs

	Averages		Mann-Whitney	Bootstrap Intervals		
Stat	Games 5-7	Games 1-4	p-value	LB	UB	Significant
AST	7.40	7.73	0.2633	-1.409	0.7668	0/2
TOV	4.53	3.78	0.0487	-0.1107	1.590	1/2
FTA	7.53	8.57	0.1114	-2.540	0.4672	0/2
FGA	17.34	19.10	0.0749	-3.805	0.3374	0/2

Table 16: Mann-Whitney, Bootstrap Test Results within Playoffs

References

[1] Martinez, Ronald. "The Inexplicable Meltdown Of James Harden," 12 May 2017, SI.com, URL.

[2] justusinreddit. "James Harden tonight as the Clippers get elminated by the Nuggets: 7 points on 2/8 FG, 1/4 3PT and 2/2 FT." *Reddit*, 3 May 2025, URL.

[3] Data visualizations were done in R.

[4] Data aggregation was done using Python packages Beautiful Soup and Pandas to scrape Basketball-Reference web pages.

[5] Data manipulation and analysis was done using R.