THE RISE OF THE THREE-BALL: BASKETBALL’S THREE-POINT SHOT AND WHY IT TOOK SO LONG TO CATCH ON

In 1979, the National Basketball Association (NBA) debuted the three-point line. Early on, most three-point attempts were last-second heaves toward the hoop rather than strategic scoring attempts. By 2016, NBA teams shot nearly 30 three-pointers per game. What explains the rise in popularity of the long-range jumper and why did it take so long?
In 1979, the National Basketball Association (NBA) made a dramatic change. The League instituted a three-point line—a black arc 23.75 feet (7.24m) away from the basket. Scoring a "bucket" from behind that line earned three points instead of the usual two. During the debut 1979-80 season, only three out of every 100 shots were three-point attempts. The three-point shot was an oddity, a sideshow, a little-used gimmick.

By 2015, three of ten shots in the NBA were three-pointers. Much of the dramatic increase occurred during the last few seasons (See Figure 1). Stephen Curry, a guard for the Golden State Warriors, epitomizes the trend. Of his 1,598 shot attempts during the 2015-16 regular season, 886 were three-pointers. Of the three-point attempts, he made 402 of them—or nearly 50%.

Crazy at it seems, shooting "the three-ball" makes sense for Curry. His strategy has yielded more points per shot attempt (1.2) than the most famous big man of all-time, Shaquille O’Neal (1.1). Shaq dominated the NBA for much of the 2000s with his towering 7’1” frame, but he struggled from the free throw line, putting Curry ahead.

In short, if a player can make threes at a reliably high rate, a three-point strategy makes sense. Teams seem to have embraced the strategy, but only of late. Why hadn’t teams exploited this strategy before? To see why we need to go beyond basic math. We can blame established interests, lack of competition and the difficulties of challenging the conventional wisdom for the slow adoption of the three-ball.

"WE HAVE A BALL AND A BASKET: WHY DON’T WE CALL IT BASKETBALL?"

To understand the game today it is helpful to go back to the beginning. The game of basketball debuted in America on a rainy day in 1891 at a YMCA gym in Springfield, Massachusetts. Dr. James Naismith
walked into the gymnasium for his physical education class, nailed a peach basket to the wall up 10 feet above the floor and defined the original 13 rules of the game.”3 Those original rules dictated that each “bucket” earned just one point (no three-pointers!). When prompted to name the new game, Naismith remarked, “We have a ball and a basket: why don’t we call it basketball?”

Basketball spread across North America via physical education instructors at YMCAs. Players were taught to shoot with two hands on the ball, “feet nailed to the floor, metaphorically only because the law didn’t allow coaches to take a hammer out on the court.”4 The “set shots” were the time-honored, proven, textbook way to play the game for decades.

**LONG BEFORE THE THREE-BALL THERE WAS THE HATED JUMP SHOT**

Long before the three-point shot, another innovation upended the game of basketball: the jump shot. Instead of shooting “set shots” with feet firmly planted on the floor, some players began to experiment with shooting the ball with their feet rising off the court: a jumper or jump shot as it came to be known.

Originally viewed as “something of a gimmick” after its invention in the 1930s, a man named John Cooper popularized the novel idea: after all, who would think of shooting and jumping, at the same time? Of his first shot Cooper said, “My feet left the hardcourt surface, and it felt good. It was free and natural, and I knew I had discovered something.”5

Cooper’s innovation was met with vitriol from players, coaches and sports writers. While “the jumper” did not violate the rules of the game, predictably, Cooper’s college coach at the University of Missouri frowned at the shot and sent Cooper to the bench. Teammates were confused by the shot and reluctant or unable to replicate it.

Forrest “Phog” Allen, a student of Dr. Naismith, “spoke about the unfairness of the shot.” As these naysayers saw it, “the jump shot... require[d] no team effort. Just a guy who can jump and shoot with made-in-a-laboratory accuracy. It [drove] basketball’s main feature almost out of the game. That’s the give-and-go play, the sport’s version of the hit and run.”6

Except the much vaunted give-and-go wasn’t very effective. Before the jump shot, the average game saw only 20 to 30 points scored. The jump shot altered the way the game was played. The jumper freed up players to invent, to innovate. The game loosened up, no longer constricted by weaves and passing schemes imposed by coaches on the sidelines. Since then, the average point total of an NBA game has skyrocketed. Last year, the average NBA game saw 204 points scored—jump shot and all.

Despite protestations against the jumper, a slow but steady adoption occurred during the years leading up to World War II. In a final stroke of luck, it may have been World War II that set the game of basketball on fire, bringing players from all over the country together. Soldiers would “shoot hoops” in their downtime. The mixing of styles meant that “the jumper” was no longer an isolated technique confined for use at a basket nailed to a dusty barn out in the country.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The 1979-80 NBA season was historic for two other reasons besides the inauguration of the three-point line: Larry Bird and Magic Johnson made their NBA debuts that year. In his first season, Magic attempted 31 three-pointers, making seven. That’s his total for the entire season. Bird, always known more as a shooter than Magic, attempted 143 three-pointers, making 58. While Magic and Bird transformed the League, the third newcomer that year—the three-point shot—took much longer to impact the game.

It took almost 60 years after the creation of the game, but the jump shot became a common tool in the player arsenal. The initial disgust among the sport’s cognoscenti, the slow adoption, and the lucky happenings which took the jump shot to new heights in many ways prefigured what would occur half a century later with the three-pointer. First, though, basketball needed a three-point line.

**COMPETITION BREEDS CHANGE**

After WWII, two struggling professional leagues, the Basketball Association of America and the National Basketball League, merged to form the NBA. “Professional basketball,” such as it was, would still be unrecognizable to fans today. The NBA featured six money-losing teams, no shot clock, no three-point line, and was so modest that its players took summer jobs to just make ends meet.

But competition breeds change. In the case of the NBA, competition arrived in 1967 in the form of an upstart league, the American Basketball Association (ABA). The brain trust behind the ABA was a ragtag group of founders and owners whose only common desire seemed to be owning a professional sports team—in any sport. Basketball was the cheapest option.
The early ABA sought a character to lead the league as commissioner. George Mikan, a former NBA legend, got the call. Mikan had a few quirky demands before he agreed to take the helm as league commissioner, though.

For starters, Mikan insisted the ABA use a red, white, and blue ball instead of the standard brown ball used in the rival NBA. It was easier to see on TV, he argued.

And, importantly, the ABA would have a three-point line. In the words of coach and commentator Hubie Brown, “The three-point play forced ABA coaches to be more creative and to give their players more freedom.” To stand apart from the NBA, the ABA needed creativity.

By all accounts the ABA dazzled fans. The ABA even included its very own Steph Curry—a shooter named Les Selvage who stood 6’1” and launched 461 three-point shots during the first season. Unfortunately, the ABA lasted only from 1967 to 1976. Upon its dissolution, the NBA absorbed four ABA teams (Indiana, San Antonio, Denver and New York). Some of the ABA’s best players (and ideas) lived on in the NBA. Four of the top 10 scorers in the NBA in the season after the merger were ABA alumni. And within four years of the upstart league closing its doors, the NBA adopted the three-point shot.

EXPERTS, OWNERS, COACHES AND TRADITION: “LIVE BY THE THREE, DIE BY THE THREE”

Despite the adoption of the three-point line, established interests still opposed its use. Red Auerbach expressed his distaste early on. “I don’t like the three-point shot,” the legendary Celtics coach said, “It took some of the control I felt I had on the outcome of the game.”

Eddie Gottlieb, the head of the NBA rules committee, in 1967 remarked: “What is it [adding a three-point line] but an admission that you are dealing with inferior players who can’t do anything but throw up long shots? You encourage mediocrity when you give extra credit to this sort of thing.”

Many of the most respected names in basketball today still despise the three-pointer. Gregg Popovich, coach of the San Antonio Spurs, says of the three-pointer, “I still hate it. I’ll never embrace it. I don’t think it’s basketball. I think it’s kind of like a circus sort of thing.”

Just like with the jump shot, sportswriters don’t like the three-point shot either. Bernie Lincicome of the Chicago Tribune made the case plain: “The three-point shot was created for people who couldn’t play basketball. It was made for people who couldn’t grow tall enough, dribble well enough, drive hard enough or move fast enough. It was for the last kid picked on the playground.”

It’s not just coaches and sportswriters who frown on the use of the three-ball, it’s still rampant across the league. Using six years of play-by-play data, economists showed that trailing teams “shoot three” while leading teams had the incentive to take a more conservative shot, especially as the end of the game approached. In other words, “shooting the three” was still used as a last-ditch effort.

Curry’s approach, where three-pointers are not used as last ditch, last-kid-picked shots (like Les Selvage), shows the return of going against the conventional wisdom. Whether or not the strategy becomes an enduring feature of the NBA we can’t be sure. What we can say is soon, somewhere a sportswriter will lament its absence if it goes away.

HOW GOOD IDEAS SPREAD: WHAT BASKETBALL TEACHES US

As with the jump shot, adoption of the three-point shot was slow due to entrenched interests, absence of competition and the difficulties of challenging the status quo. The evolution of basketball teaches us that the experts rarely pick or understand critical turning points. Even the founders or creators of a game have limited vision for what may come. Incumbents are often afraid of change, fearing the loss of control. Rules and the lack of competition stifle innovation.

Innovation itself has many fathers, often working bottom up and toiling in obscurity or facing ridicule for years before—flash—they are heralded as geniuses. Meanwhile, fans often yearn for bygone eras that were never quite what they are remembered to be.

That’s the story of the rise of the three-point shot.
1. Technically the NBA three-point line is 23.75 feet away from the basketball at the top of the key (directly in front of the basket but on 22 feet away from the basket in the corners of the court.

2. Based on Payden calculations using data from Statmuse for career regular season games.

3. nba.com


8. si.com


10. chicagotribune.com

11. Live by the Three, Die by the Three? The Price of Risk in the NBA, Matthew Goldman, Justin M. Rao