

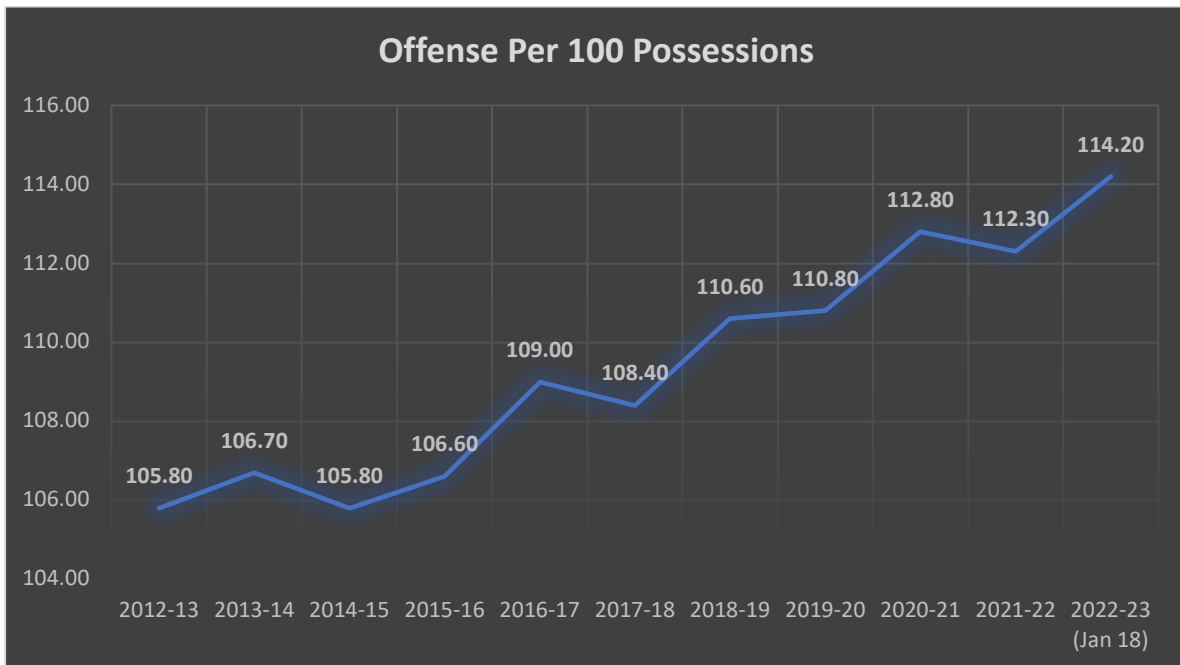
2022-23 NBA League Trends

The game of basketball and skills of players elevate over time. The game gradually evolves each year as young players enter the league with skills, tools, and talent unlike that we have seen. However, there seem to be generational leaps that occur, that alter the game more rapidly than traditional annual growth. We seem to be amid one of those leaps right now as we see the young NBA stars emerge with capabilities that are shattering NBA records.

Indicators of Change

Having young scorers within the top 5 in PPG has been a great indicator of a shift in the league. In the past 20 seasons, there are only on 3 occasions where 3 of the 5 top scorers in the league were younger than 25. The first was 2005-06 (LeBron, Wade, and Arenas), and the second was 2011-12 (KD, Kevin Love, and Russell Westbrook). Both years the league experienced a shift in play style. This season, like '05 and '11, there are 3 players under 25 in the top 5 in PPG. However, this season stands out from the others. In the past 20 years, only 4 players total have averaged 30 PPG on the season younger than 25. This season, all 3 are averaging over 30 PPG (Luka, Tatum, SGA). The level of offense in the league has escalated dramatically this season. Only halfway through, this season already ranks 9th all-time in 40-point player performances with 92. Moreover, the league is averaging 114.2 points per 100 possessions, which is nearly 2 points higher than last year's record-setting season. The league leading Boston Celtics currently have an offensive rating of 117.8, which would be another league record if sustained. Teams don't seem to be slowing down either. In January, the Sacramento Kings have an astounding offensive rating of 126 through 8 games.

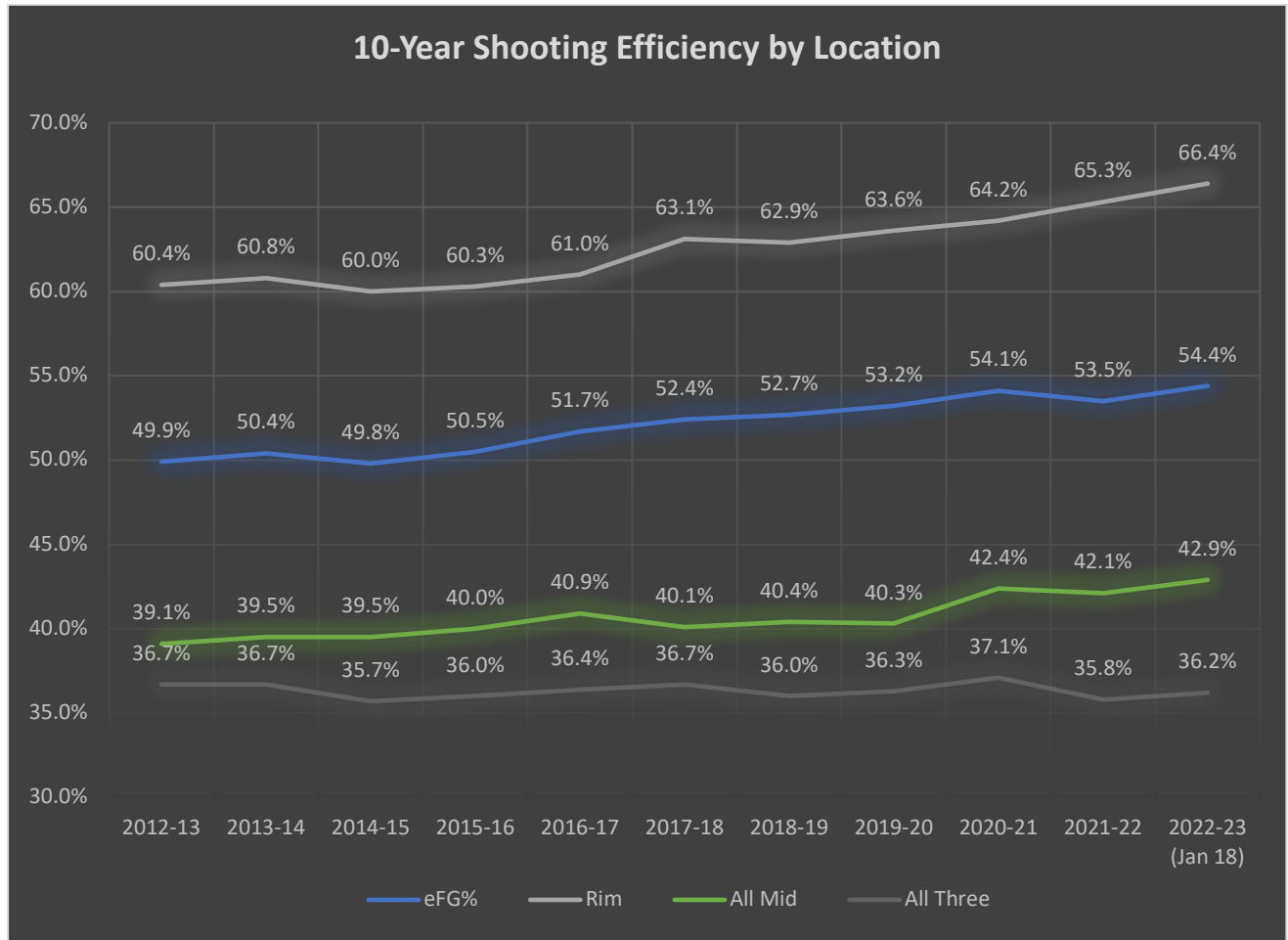
(Per NBA.com)



(Per Cleaning the Glass)

What are players getting better at?

The modern NBA revolves around 3-point shooting. Initially, I would have pegged 3-point shooting efficiency as one of, if not the main driver of the scoring escalation we have seen in the past decade. Surprisingly, 3-point efficiency is the only shot category that has declined, albeit minimally, in the past 10 years.

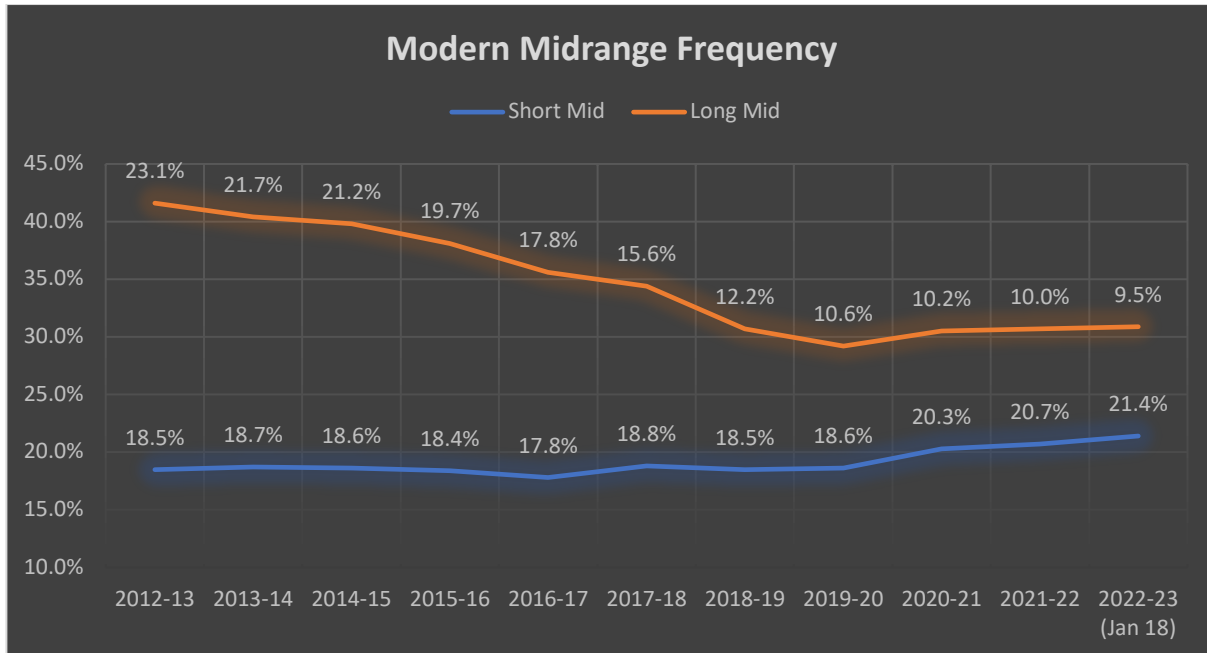


(Per Cleaning the Glass)

While 3-point efficiency has remained somewhat stagnant in the past decade, I believe 3s are still the driving force of the increased offensive efficiency. The likely explanation for the mid-range and rim efficiency increases is likely due to higher quality 2-point attempts as a result of better spacing creating easier shots for stars. Obviously, players get better over time, but now players are getting better, *and* they are getting easier looks. The median 3-point-percentage has increased from 31% in 2012-13 to 34% in 2022-23. It's likely that star players can get easier looks inside the arc due to the increased threat of a 3 from a role player. The combination of an increase in 3-point frequency, an increase in 3-point range, and an increase in the amount of quality shooters in the league are likely some of the primary drivers of the offensive boom the league has been experiencing.

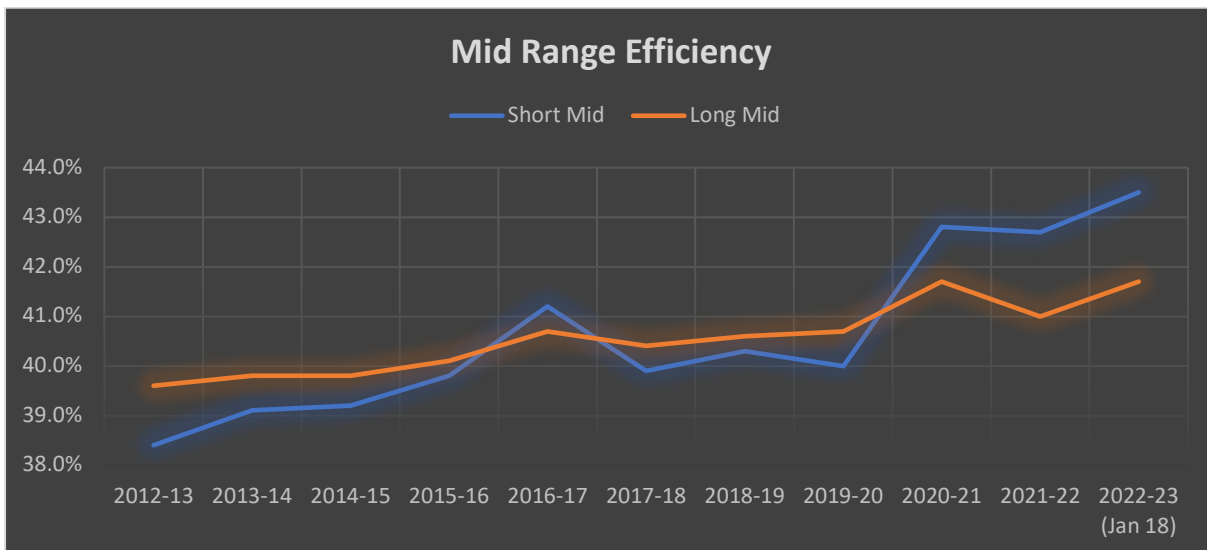
The Return of the Mid-range

The most substantial drop in frequency of any shot category in the past 10 years is the over 10% decline in long mid-range jumpers. One of the more interesting trends in the league is the decline of the long mid-range and increase of the short mid-range.



(Per Cleaning the Glass)

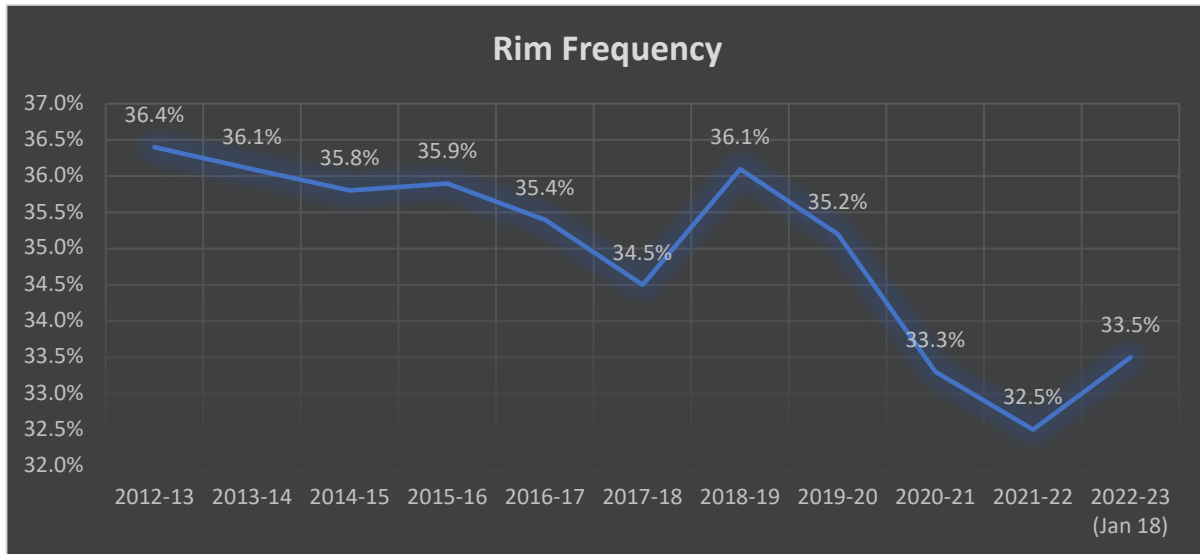
Despite the heavy decline in long mid-range jumpers, the increase in short mid-range may continue to grow. 3-point frequency seems to finally be leveling off after skyrocketing from 22% of all shot attempts in 2012-13 to 35.5% in 2019-20. In the current league year, 3-point frequency has declined for the first time since 2010-11. While the decline is minimal, it might be an indicator of an increase in the short mid-range. League-wide short mid-range efficiency has increased from 38.4% in 2012-13 to 43.6% so far this season.



(Per Cleaning the Glass)

Decline in Shots at the Rim

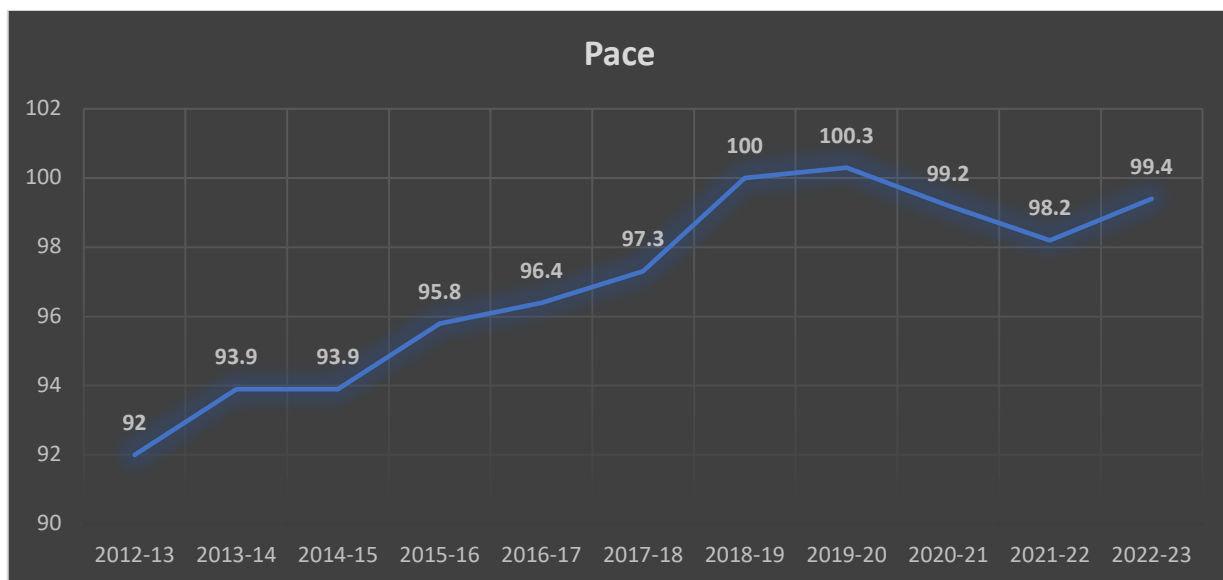
Teams are getting better at identifying the most efficient scoring areas. The increase in the short mid-range efficiency seems to have sparked slight declines in the frequency of shots at the rim, perhaps a result of younger players taking more floaters. Regardless, whatever teams are doing seems to be working as we watch this historical offensive season unravel.



(Per Cleaning the Glass)

Transition/Pace

The pace of the game could be another source of the offensive barrage we've seen so far. Points per possession in transition has jumped from 105.8 in 2012-13 to 114 in 2022-23 (league record). While the frequency of plays that start in transition haven't changed drastically (1% increase since 2012), the number of possessions per game has seen significant growth in the past decade. We also may see an increase in transition plays with the new take foul. While it hasn't had a substantial impact yet, it can often take some time before we see the long-term results of a rule.



(Per Basketball Reference)

Slowing Offensive Production

It seems likely that the level of offense will continue to increase. The only things I could imagine might slow the offensive incline would be a major rule change or defensive improvement among draft prospects. The league will probably feel no need to limit offense so long as viewership continues to increase, but it is interesting to look to what a potential rule change might look like.

There are three rule changes that I believe might have the effect of limiting or at least slowing the growth of scoring in the league. I'm not sure the league should make any of them, but they are interesting to explore.

1. Extend the 3-point line: For the best shooters in the league, there probably wouldn't be a significant impact. However, the impact would come in the form of decreasing the efficiency of 3-point-shooting from role players, which I believe is the main driver of the increase in scoring. This then bodes the question of what to do with the corner 3; is it eliminated entirely? The corner 3 is already the closest 3-point location, so there could be unwanted results if the corner 3 stays and the rest of the arc is extended. The league could increase the width of the court, but that would create even more room for the increasingly athletic young generation to get the efficient looks that are propelling the scoring outburst. This substantial a rule change would need to be thoroughly thought out and implemented to make sure it produces the desired result.
2. Increase the shot clock: Increasing the shot clock would have the effect of encouraging half-court scoring. The shot clock is intended to speed the game up, but with pace at an all-time high, the league could consider extending the shot clock a few seconds to encourage more half-court sets. Teams would have more opportunity to run complex plays for better shot selection. We might see an increase in efficiency, but the game would slow down. With the new take foul implemented, the league should maintain the entertainment value of transition. In fact, the league has seen a significant increase in the frequency of fastbreaks off of both steals and rebounds. 67.8% of steals this season result in a fastbreak and 29.4% of live rebounds turn into a fastbreak (compared to 58.2% and 26.6% in 2012-13).
3. Adjust physicality of fouls: There could be significant push back from the players for this option, but the league could go back to the smash-mouth style of ball and eliminate things like the hand-check rule. Increasing the physicality of the game could end up increasing the amount of 3s taken by teams, but it would increase demand for physical and athletic playmakers. However, it could have the effect of increasing offense as more no calls would lead to greater pace.

A Few Remaining Questions/Topics

- Heliocentrism: Will the NBA continue to be driven by high usage superstars or will we see a shift to flattened team usage at some point?
- Defensive skill sets: Will the new generation of players begin to set themselves apart through greater emphasis on developing defensive skill sets that can counteract the insane offensive abilities we have been seeing?
- Wembanyama: Could the emergence of the 7'4 generational-talent force the league into adopting a rule change if he asserts the dominance over the game that so many expect?