

Joe Thornton: The Bearded Legend

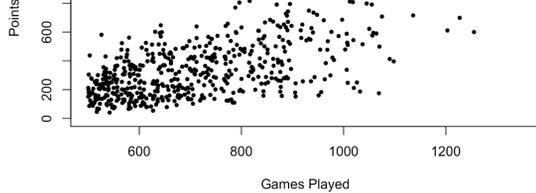
By [Alex Veroulis](#) and [Joey Maurer](#) • 28 Feb 2018 • 11 min read



Ray Jara News Center

Throughout his 20 years in the National Hockey League (NHL), Joe Thornton has proven time and time again that he is one of hockey's best players. Drafted first overall in the 1997 NHL Draft by the Boston Bruins, Thornton was highly-touted, but nobody thought he would turn out to be such a legendary player. With a large frame and an insane ability to distribute the puck to his teammates, he has been and continues to be remarkably consistent. As a result, he has won numerous awards, including the Hart Memorial Trophy (League MVP), the Art Ross Trophy (Most Points), 6 All-Star Team nominations, and a gold medal at the 2010 Olympics with Team Canada. Plus, he has been on a playoff team in sixteen seasons, and he made his first Stanley Cup appearance in the 2016 season with the San Jose Sharks. Aside from his skill, he is near the top in terms of toughness. Despite suffering a severe MCL and ACL injury to his left knee before last year's playoffs, Thornton still participated in a playoff series against the Edmonton Oilers. Even after surgery in the offseason, he returned to the ice only five months later. As a result, he has come back and played well this season for the Sharks, but another knee injury in January has sidelined him for the foreseeable future. Although it's unfortunate that Thornton is out, his absence provides a good opportunity to realize how important he is to his team and how good the 38-year-old has been throughout his career.

Joe Thornton: One of the Greatest of his Generation (2000-2018, min 500GP)



Speaking to his consistency, Thornton has continued to produce scoring numbers even into the later stages of his career. Ever since his career-best 2005-2006 campaign when he was traded to the San Jose Sharks, Thornton has averaged an amazing 1.01 points per game for San Jose over his 13-year career with them, the best rate in franchise history. His franchise-best 745 assists has largely propelled his amount of points, as his ability to share the puck is uncanny. To add, Thornton's latest all-star selection came in the 2015-2016 NHL season, where he put up 19 goals and 63 assists for 82 total points and added a plus-minus of 25, his second-best mark in a season, all at the age of 36. Looking more broadly, Thornton has had one of the best individual statistical performances in all of the league since 2000. Seen by the scatterplot above, Thornton has amassed 1319 points over 1276 games since the turn of the millennium, good for a cumulative total of 1.03 points per game. Amazingly, he possesses the most total points out of anyone to play at least 500 NHL games since 2000, and during that span, he has played the 4th most games in the NHL. This ability to stay on the ice is impressive considering the physical nature of the sport, yet Thornton is one of the toughest guys you will find. After all, he has played in at least 85% of his team's games in all but his rookie season, when he was only 18 years of age. It looks like this will be his second year without participating in 85% of the games, but his dedication to the sport and his willingness to compete should have him back on the ice come playoff time.

Rank	Player	Years	A
1.	Wayne Gretzky*	1979-99	1963
2.	Ron Francis*	1981-04	1249
3.	Mark Messier*	1979-04	1193
4.	Ray Bourque*	1979-01	1169
5.	Jarome Iginla*	1990-18	1135
6.	Paul Coffey*	1980-01	1135
7.	Adam Oates*	1985-04	1079
8.	Steve Yzerman*	1983-06	1063
9.	Giordano Howe*	1946-80	1049
10.	Marcel Dionne*	1971-89	1040
11.	Henrik Lemieux*	1984-06	1033
12.	Joe Thornton	1997-18	1030

Rank	Player	Years	PTS
1.	Wayne Gretzky*	1979-99	2857
2.	Jarome Iginla*	1990-18	1921
3.	Mark Messier*	1979-04	1867
4.	Giordano Howe*	1946-80	1850
5.	Ron Francis*	1981-04	1798
6.	Marcel Dionne*	1971-89	1771
7.	Steve Yzerman*	1983-06	1736
8.	Henrik Lemieux*	1984-06	1723
9.	Joe Sakic*	1988-09	1641
10.	Phil Esposito*	1963-81	1590
11.	Ray Bourque*	1979-01	1579
12.	Mark Recchi*	1988-11	1533
13.	Paul Coffey*	1980-01	1531
14.	Stan Mikita*	1958-80	1467
15.	Teemu Selanne*	1992-14	1457
16.	Joe Thornton	1997-18	1427

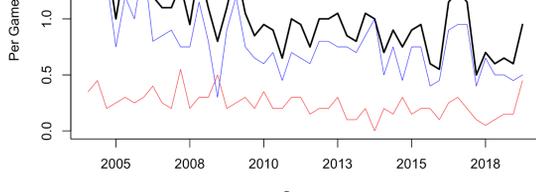
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3.	Jarome Iginla*	1990-18	1733
4.	Ron Francis*	1981-04	1731
5.	Mark Recchi*	1988-11	1652
6.	Chris Chelios*	1983-01	1651
7.	Steve Anderson*	1982-08	1639
8.	Scott Stevens*	1982-04	1635
9.	Larry Murphy*	1980-01	1615
10.	Ray Bourque*	1979-01	1612
11.	Nicklas Lidstrom*	1991-11	1604
12.	Patrick Marleau	1997-18	1557
13.	Jarome Iginla	1996-17	1554
14.	Alex Delvecchio*	1960-74	1549
15.	John Bucchi*	1955-76	1540
16.	Shane Doan	1995-17	1540
17.	Brendan Shanahan*	1987-09	1524
18.	Steve Yzerman*	1983-06	1514
19.	Mike Modano*	1989-11	1499
20.	Phil Housley*	1983-03	1495
21.	Joe Thornton	1997-18	1493

hockey-reference.com

Looking at Thornton from the perspective of an NHL historian years from now, Jumbo Joe would be considered an all-time great. First of all, Joe is in 21st place for total games played all-time in the NHL with 1493, so he's approaching the 1500 milestone. That puts him in 3rd position among active players, trailing only former Sharks teammate Patrick Marleau (1557 as of 2/25), and former Calgary Flames great Jarome Iginla (1554). Also, he ranks 12th in assists on the all-time NHL assist leaders list with 1030 of them, only three behind Hall of Famer and Pittsburgh Penguins legend Mario Lemieux. Hopefully he can come back in time this season to beat Lemieux's mark, as it will only be a few games before Thornton eclipses him. Among active players, Thornton's assist total is unmatched, as he is far ahead of the next highest total of 821 from Henrik Sedin. And when you take into consideration adjusted assists, a stat that normalizes statistics from different eras to make to players from different generations more comparable, Thornton jumps even higher on the list, going to 5th place with 1135 career adjusted assists. He places 1st among active players in this category as well, with the nearest competitor also being Henrik Sedin with 912 adjusted assists. Plus, Thornton ranks 16th in career points with 1427 of them, as he trails Hall of Famer Teemu Selanne by 30 points for 15th place. In fact, in all of the above categories, the people Thornton trails are either Hall of Famers or Future Hall of Famers, so Jumbo Joe will most certainly be a lock for the Hall once he hangs up his skates.

The consistency of Joe Thornton cannot be overstated. In addition to being one of the NHL's most durable players, his production has been remarkably steady over the last decade-plus:

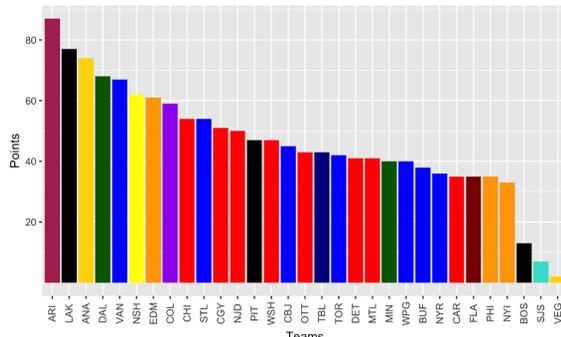
Joe Thornton 20-game rolling averages (2005-2018)



Primarily a playmaker, Thornton's assist numbers per game have almost always been higher than his goals per game. What stands out in this plot is that the black line, his points per game, has never dipped below 0.5 in any of these 20 game stretches of his career since the 2004-05 lockout. Every player goes through ups and downs; whether it's a slump caused by bad luck/off-ice distractions, or an increase in scoring after being placed on a new line that meshes well. The fact that Thornton has been able to remain consistent for so long speaks to a longevity attribute that very few players in NHL history can claim to possess. The slight downward trend can be explained by his aging, but it is nowhere near the drop off most players experience in their early-30s. At 38, Joe Thornton is still a top-6, first powerplay unit quality player.

Another testament to Thornton's consistency is an examination into the points scored against all NHL teams.

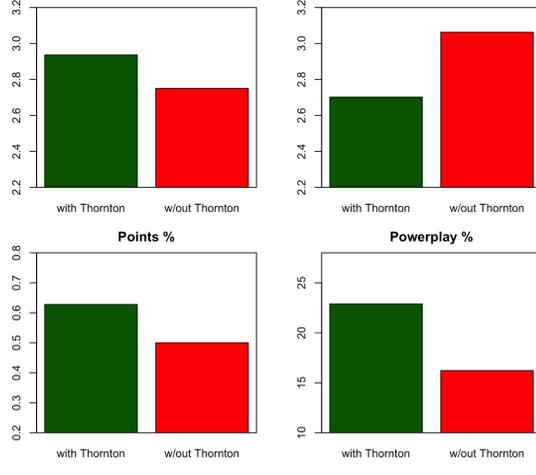
Joe Thornton - Career Points vs Every NHL Team



Now, three teams in particular shouldn't be paid much attention; Thornton has played his entire career with the Boston Bruins and the San Jose Sharks, and the Vegas Golden Knights are a new expansion team who are in their inaugural season. When you exclude these three teams, Thornton has scored at least 30 points against every NHL team. This is quite impressive, given that each team in the league plays the majority of their games in their respective conference. However, the recent realignment of the divisions and conferences in 2014 puts some of the data out of context, but the scheduling distribution is still roughly the same. For instance, according to NHL.com, teams in the Pacific Division, like the San Jose Sharks, have to play 29 games (35.37%) within their division, 21 games (25.61%) within the Western Conference, but outside of their division, and 32 games (39.02%) in the Eastern Conference. This arrangement, of course, is due to traveling convenience, so teams in the East Coast don't square off against the Sharks as often. Therefore, it makes sense that Thornton has racked up over 70 points against longtime division rivals like the Arizona Coyotes, the Los Angeles Kings, and the Anaheim Ducks, but has "merely" put up just under 40 points against cross-country foes like the Florida Panthers, the Philadelphia Flyers, the Carolina Hurricanes, and the New York squads (Islanders and Rangers). Now, to be fair, Thornton did spend some time with the East Coast Boston Bruins, but he has only played 532 games, or 35.63% of his NHL career, with them. This is why his totals are weighted more towards his time with the Sharks, who he has played for in the other 961 games. In summary, despite the changing nature of the game with realignments and what not, Thornton has produced against every team he has faced, regardless of how frequently he plays an opponent.

How has he been able to remain at an elite level for so long? The answer lies in the type of player he is. Hockey IQ is a characteristic that defines how well one can 'see' and understand the game. Skaters with high hockey IQ think two or three steps ahead. They know what they are going to do with the puck before it comes to them. They know where everyone is on the ice, and where they will be. Joe Thornton is the epitome of a high hockey IQ player. Because it is largely a mental quality, the effects of aging may be less impactful on him than a similar-caliber talent who relies on speed and quickness, traits that deteriorate significantly with age. Combine this sense for the game with innate physical tools and toughness, and you begin to see why Thornton is such a special player. Unfortunately, no one is immune to injury, and Jumbo has suffered a couple significant ones over the past year.

In early April of 2017, near the end of last year's regular season, Joe Thornton was injured in a collision with Vancouver forward Michael Chaput. He sat out the final few games before returning for Game 3 of San Jose's first round series against Edmonton. The Sharks lost in 6. It was later revealed that Thornton had played through a torn ACL and MCL in his knee. Head coach Peter DeBoer noted it was as "courageous an effort as I've ever seen." Jumbo had knee surgery over the summer and was back on the ice for the start of this season. Fast forward three months to a home game against Winnipeg. He got tangled up with teammate Mikkel Boedker and fell awkwardly, sustaining an MCL injury to his other knee. There is no timetable for his return. The Sharks are heading into the final stretch of the season fighting for their playoff lives. They are second in the Pacific division, but also just two points ahead of 9th place Calgary. With 19 games remaining (as of Feb. 26), every point is critical. How have the Sharks fared in their last 16 games without Thornton compared to their first 47 with him?



Objectively worse. Their offense is suffering, as goals per game has dipped a few tenths, and they are allowing more goals per game without him. Even worse, the Sharks' powerplay percentage has gone way down as well. Of course, we cannot attribute every significant difference to the absence of Thornton. 16 games is a rather small sample size, and there are a myriad of other factors to take into account, such as strength of schedule, puck luck, other lineup changes, and more. But San Jose is playing .500 hockey without their anchor, and that will not be good enough if the team hopes to return to the playoffs for the 12th time in 13 years. GM Doug Wilson may have realized this, as the franchise traded for Evander Kane at the trade deadline. Kane is a 26 year-old winger in his prime whose 20 goals and 40 points place him second and third, respectively, on the Sharks roster. Perceived 'character issues' have followed the Vancouver native throughout his career, but you cannot deny his talent. He should be able to thrive both on and off the ice in a blue-collar organization like San Jose. Additionally, playing without Thornton for a long stretch like this allows management to see what the team might look like in the post-JT era. After all, age gets the best of everyone. With two significant knee injuries in the past year, Thornton has likely been evaluated just how much longer he can go. An unrestricted free agent this summer, he's not even guaranteed to come back to the Sharks for another season.

But the legacy he has crafted in San Jose, and throughout his career for that matter, is substantial. He's a six-time All-Star, Olympic Gold medalist, Hart Trophy recipient, and future first ballot Hall of Famer. The only thing missing is a Stanley Cup, and unfortunately this draws the attention of the all-to-familiar crowd who judge players based on the number of championships they have won. There is still time for him to bring the city of San Jose its first, but the Sharks are not the same feared contender of years past. Thornton could opt to leave and chase a Cup in the twilight of his career, which would be a bittersweet ending for Sharks fans. When he finally does retire, he will be celebrated in San Jose. Number 19 will forever hang in the rafters.

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