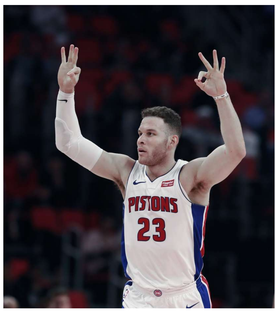
Blake Griffin: Sharpshooter or Bricklayer?

By Nikhil Sharma • 11 Mar 2018 • 5 min read



From a decorated high-school recruit, to Naismith College Player of the Year, to apparent resuscitator of the Dunk Contest, to slugger of an equipment manager, to highly controversial trade chip, Blake Griffin's basketball career has had quite the peaks and valleys.

Blake Griffin came into the league in 2009 (but was sidelined by injury until the 2010-11 season) as a supremely athletic, bullish brute who could overpower players in the paint. This style of play lended to some amazing highlight plays that will entertain fans for years to come, like this reel of his whopping 234 dunks during his rookie season.

As his career progressed, he started expanding his offensive repertoire, frequently performing some clumsy albeit effective post moves to score on defenders. After becoming teammates with pick-and-roll maestro Chris Paul during the 2011-12 season, Griffin assumed a hefty role in the pick-and-roll with Chris Paul. Not only did this partnership allow him to make some dazzling plays in the paint from perfect CP3 dimes, but it also opened up his game to learn how to knock down mid-range jumpers out of pick-and-pop situations.

However, the league has become drastically different since the early 2010s. After the sudden success of Steph Curry and the Steve Kerr-coached Golden State Warrior teams, the NBA as a whole has realized that long mid-range shots are nearly obsolete, since there is so much more value in stepping back a few feet to take a 3-pointer and scoring an extra point.

As this change happened, Griffin faced a significant conundrum. As he played more and more with Chris Paul, he was shooting more and more of those mid-range shots as he got more and more comfortable popping out from the pick-and-roll.

Seasons Griffin Played with Chris Paul	% of Field Goals Griffin Attempted from 16 ft.-3 Pt Arc
2011-12	22.3
2012-13	22.9
2013-14	26.7
2014-15	37.8
2015-16	45.8
2016-17	23.8

As seen in the table, Griffin clearly took less of those mid-range attempts after the 2015-16 season. In the offseason before the 2016-17 season, he spoke on wanting to shoot "confidently" from 3-point land as he saw some of his contemporaries, such as Anthony Davis and Lamarcus Aldridge, doing the same.

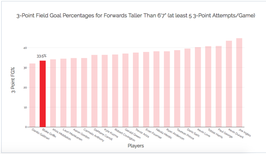
The numbers certainly reflect his desire to shoot more 3-pointers. The season after he made these comments (2016-17), Griffin increased his 3-point attempts per game to 1.9 per game from just 0.5 per game. This season, he has shot them even more, taking 5.5 per game. This graphic illustrates his offensive game stretching away from the basket as his career has continued.

In this chart, we can see that in the last two seasons, he has drastically increased the amount of 3-pointers he takes. As seen in the chart, Griffin has also reduced those shots from 10 to 16 feet and 16 feet to the 3-point arc, instead opting to shoot more 3-pointers. He has clearly seen the direction in which the league is headed, and has made adjustments to try and keep up.

However, while it is good that he is shooting more 3s, there is a more important question here: how well is he shooting these 3s?

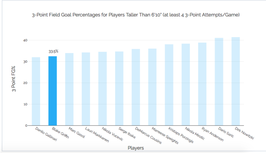
The answer, sadly, is a resounding "meh."

For this season, Griffin is shooting 33.5% from 3-point land, putting him below the league average mark of 36.2% from 3. On top of this, he is shooting about 5.6 3-point attempts per game. Let's look at how players of comparable size at the same forward position that Griffin plays shoot the 3.



This does not look pretty for Griffin. Out of these 21 players, Griffin is second-to-last in 3-point FG%, with only Danilo Gallinari trailing him. Some may say this comparison is unfair, as the classification of "Forwards Taller Than 6'7" (at least 5 3-Point Attempts/Game)" includes players like Paul George and Trevor Ariza: guys who could easily double as guards and predicate their games more on shooting. It can be easily argued that in today's NBA, the forward and the shooting guard positions are almost fluid, with many so-called "death lineups" featuring traditional shooting guards/small forwards occupying the power forward spot. Thus, it can be fair to compare Griffin to these players, especially when he is taking 5.5 3-pointers per game.

However, for argument's sake, let's just look at how Griffin compares to players that traditionally fill a role similar to his on offense in terms of 3-point accuracy.



The results are still ugly, as he is still second-to-last among these players, with only our returning friend Danilo Gallinari behind him.

Towards the beginning of the season, when he was still with the Clippers, there was a lot of hoopla surrounding his seemingly sudden pinpoint accuracy from beyond the arc. However, this was a classic case of looking at too small a sample size; while he might have been shooting 43.5% from 3 through 4 games, he is now shooting below league average after 60+ games into the season.

Teams are aware of his lackluster shooting, too. Take a look at this clip; even though Griffin makes the shot, note how his defender, Serge Ibaka, does not even try to fight through the screen to close out on Griffin. Players on opposing teams will let him take those all day, since he's shooting them at a low accuracy.

Perhaps in the offseason, he can work on developing a more fluid motion on his jumpers. As seen in these warm-up shots (and also in his in-game shots), his release is not quite fluid - he very sharply flicks his wrist, causing the ball to fling out of his hands rather than smoothly glide to the basket. Working on ironing out minute shooting mechanics such as these has helped players in the past, and can maybe elevate Griffin's 3-point game.

Overall, Griffin is going to have to improve on his 3-point shooting to sustain the latter years of his career. In addition to adapting to the new NBA, improving his perimeter shooting might help his durability as a player. At age 28, with a significant injury history behind him, his athleticism is waning, and he is not going to be able to make zany shots like these on a regular basis. While he is on the right track, Griffin will have to practice hard this offseason to become a superior outside shooter. Otherwise, the Detroit Pistons might regret taking on his $173 million contract for many years to come.

All statistics courtesy of stats.nba.com and basketball-reference.com. Image courtesy of Carlos Osorio, Associated Press.

Subscribe to our newsletter!
email address
Subscribe
© 2020 Bruin Sports Analytics. Follow us on Twitter!